



GSJ: Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019, Online: ISSN 2320-9186
www.globalscientificjournal.com

THE LIMITS AND CONCEPT OF SCIENTIFIC HISTORY

OCHU Cinderella Temitope

Department of History and Strategic Studies,
University of Lagos, Akoka, Yaba,
Lagos State, Nigeria.
Email: cindyamos1@yahoo.com
Tel: +234 81 325 63958

Abstract

The concept of scientific history sprang up in the early 19th century by French and German historians who believed that scientific method could be applied to historical writings. They opined that one was being scientific if one aspired to the highest degree of objectivity. Overtime, the notable inventions which scientists had made had not only contributed significantly to man's knowledge of the universe but also to the improvement of the material lot of humanity. Scientific and technological advances fired the imagination of historians and fuelled arguments by those who opposed that scientific method in history could ensure absolute objectivity. Hence, this paper explored the evolution of scientific history, its decadence and rebirth in the 19th Century. Furthermore, the work examined the concept of scientific history, its features and practices in modern times. The study however drew the curtain with the relationship between history and science.

INTRODUCTION

The study of history offers to individuals major utilitarian learning outcomes. The discipline enhances skills in analysing, evaluating, and interpreting both secondary and primary sources. It also develops the ability to distinguish between pieces of writing which are well-substantiated and logical, and those which simply express theory, hypothesis, or opinion, a method associated with sciences. This explains why some historians such as Collingwood argued that scientific method in history cannot entirely achieve objectivity. An attempt to assert the scientific status of history led to the emergence of heated debates as to whether history is a science, an art or both. Albeit objectivity is desired in historical accounts, it is somewhat unrealistic. Marwick affirmed that most historians like, scientists, are motivated by the urge to *find out*. In an attempt to do this, historians have been accused of being subjective.

The issue is that, being mere human beings, they are fallible, and subject to many kinds of career and social pressures, or common incompetence¹. Historians do disagree with each other in their interpretations, as do scientists. But history deals with human values, in a way the sciences do not, so there is more scope for differences in evaluation. Historical evidence is fragmentary, intractable, and imperfect. Individual books and articles may clash with each other; there will always be areas where uncertainty persists, but steadily agreed knowledge emerges in the form of works of synthesis and high-quality books. History, like the sciences, is a co-operative enterprise.

Against this background, this research explores the relationship between both disciplines, providing analyses by different scholars to ascertain the harmony, contrast and limitations of the focus of study.

THE EVOLUTION OF SCIENTIFIC HISTORY

The idea of scientific history is attributed to Herodotus, the father of history and Thucydides, his later counterpart who both took historical writings into the new world. They both recognised that since history has to do with human actions, then it could be science. Greek history to them was not legend, it is research, and it is an attempt to get answers to definite questions about matters of which one is ignorant of. Furthermore, history is not mythical, the events inquired into are not event of dateless past, they are of dated past².

During this period and in the preceding epoch, there was a kind of history that existed. It is significant to point out that the decadence of this kind of history led to the concept and practice of scientific history in the early 19th century. To assess the importance and contribution of the various periods to the training of historians, it is imperative to succinctly explore the fundamentals of these eras.

The western historical tradition goes back to Herodotus (c. 484 B.C- C. 425 BC), Thucydides (C.455 B.C. 400 B.C), Polybius (198 BC – 117 BC) all Greek and Livy (59 BC – AD 17), Tacitus (A.D 55 - 120) and Plutarch (AD50 - 120), all Romans³. The interest of these historians was the recording of important and memorable deeds about nations, communities and families. For instance, while the major interest of Thucydides was the Peloponnesian war, Livy on his part engaged in the glorification of Rome. The next era was that of Christian historical writing. As would be expected, its hallmark was a rejection of paganism with a simultaneous glorification of God and heavenly things. Most medieval historians were monks and in most cases official of monasteries. Their writings somewhat lacked analysis and there was always this inability to distinguish between sacred and profane matters as event were easily explained or interpreted as

judgments of God³. In this regard, they were generally influenced by St. Augustine's "City of God" in which Augustine portrayed the history of the world as the long unfolding of God's will.

After the medieval period came the Renaissance era, also known as the humanist period. Humanism could in fact be regarded as a revolution against medieval historiography as man instead of church became the focus of attention.

It is important to note here that even though the humanist era impressed tremendous advancement in terms of the adoption of the important historical tools of interpretation and analysis, yet up to the 18th century, history that was written was still deficient in certain respects. In these writings, there seemed to be no notion of human development and change. Secondly, there was a general lack of details and analysis. All these were to be jettisoned by the beginning of the 19th century principally as a result of the works of people like Leopold Von Ranke⁴. Indeed, it was from the simultaneous attack on these deficiencies that modern history as an academic discipline emerged. Thus, the 19th century revolution in historical scholarship provided the basis for the modern study of history using scientific methods.

CONCEPT OF SCIENTIFIC HISTORY

Logically, to elucidate the concept of scientific history, it is necessary to define history and deduce from its definition if there is a linkage between history and science. To provide a particular definition to history is an unending task. History over the years has been defined in terms of time and space. The practice and belief of an era has moulded its definitions. Thus history is defined in time perspective, from the Greco-Roman period down to the Renaissance. Nevertheless, some scholars in the 19th century have attempted to define history.

History, according to Aristotle, is an account of what individual human beings have done and suffered. In a wider sense, history is what historians do. To Marwick, history is defined on three levels. Firstly, that history connotes the entire human past as it actually happened. Secondly, history connotes man's attempt to describe and interpret the past and thirdly, that history is a systematic study of the past⁵. Barraclough defines history as the attempt to discover on the basis of fragmentary evidence, the significant events about the past. Carr viewed history as a continuous process of interaction between the present and past. Walsh wraps it all by ascertaining that the word "history" is itself ambiguous⁶. It covers the totality of past human actions and the narrative or accounts that we construct of them now. He stated that the ambiguity is important because it opens up at once two possible fields for philosophy of history. First is the actual cause of events and the second is the process of historical thinking of why events happened the way they did.

With this broad definition of history, one may then ask, is history a natural science, as physics, biology or psychology are sciences? And if not, should it seek to be one? And if it fails to be, what prevents it? Is this due to human error or importance, or to the nature of the subject or does the very problem rest on confusion between the concept of history and that of science?

Many historians have suggested that history be studied within the framework of the Cartesian criterion of what constitutes rational method such as: providing clear definitions, the logical transformation rules, the rules of preference and the rigorous deduced conclusions.

Thus, the debate about the nature, method and scope of history has revolved around the key aim of placing the discipline within its deserved context. Those who have thought about the nature of historical studies have tried to show that history could be assimilated to one of the natural

sciences; others declared that history was indeed a science, but a science in some different sense, with its own methods and canons, no less exacting, perhaps, than those of the science of nature, but resting on foundations different from them. There were those who defiantly declared that history was indeed subjective, impressionistic, incapable of being made rigorous, a branch of literature, or an embodiment of a personal vision; it laid no claim to universal and eternal objectivity and preferred to be judged as an interpretation of the past in terms of the demands of the present, or a philosophy of life, not as a science⁷. Still others have tried to draw distinctions between sociology, which was a true science, and history, which was an art or, perhaps, something altogether unique, neither science nor an art, but a discipline with its own structure and purposes, misunderstood by those who tried to draw false analogies between it and other intellectual activities⁸.

FEATURES OF SCIENTIFIC HISTORY

A scientific study is that body of knowledge which is:

- a) Distinct from a mere collection of random bits of information
- b) Made up of systematically connected propositions that can be distinguished from a mere agglomeration
- c) Made up of knowledge acquired in a methodological manner and following a set of determined principles
- d) A conducted inquiry to get a background of a definitive set of presuppositions
- e) A body of knowledge which is objective and acceptable to any inquirer, irrespective of his personal inclinations or views

f) A body of knowledge which contains universally accepted and verifiable truths

g) A body of knowledge that enables us to make predictions⁵

SCIENTIFIC HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

As noted earlier, the concept of scientific history is relatively new. Given the problems associated with the identification and collection of source-material and the need to achieve some level of objectivity in historical writings, the methods of scientific research was proffered to mitigate the problem of historical subjectivity. In the 19th century, history was boldly called science in so far as it possesses recognised and reliable method for deciding what in particular occurred. It should be noted that in the 19th century, historians made fruitful use of ideas of scientific hypothesis, this era saw enormous advances in the techniques for findings and exploiting historical evidence. As such, historians were in a position to claim scientific status for their results, that is, the ability to make definitively true statements about the past. And when he had arrived at results of that kind, the historian had finished his task; his concern was with the truth and nothing but the truth. This explains why Bury said history is no less than a science, the second why he added no more than one¹⁰. To Bury, history was no longer an affair of guess work, but a field in which certain knowledge was arrived at on a daily basis. He further advised contemporary historians to strive for perfection when he said: *“We are heaping up material and arranging it according to the best methods we know, if we draw what conclusions we can for the satisfaction of our own generation, we never forget that our work is to be used by future ages. It is intended for those who follow us rather than ourselves, and much less for our grandchildren than for generations very remote”*¹¹ During this epoch, the advancement made in historical research ensured that history had transcended its earlier limitations. By this time, Bury’s

assertion was confirmed. However, the scientific techniques used in historical studies have improved even further since Bury's time.

In further pursuit of objectivity in history, some German and French scholars proffered scientific method into historical enquiry and evaluation. They suggested that the method by which science studies the world could also be applied in the study of human pasts. Thus, throughout the 19th century, German and French scholars frequently referred to "historical science" when they meant no more than idea of a systematic intellectual discipline. They believed that one was being scientific if one aspired to the highest degree of objectivity. This brings to mind the concept of scientific objectivity. Scientific objectivity is a body of knowledge in which there is separation between the investigator and the object of investigation thereby making it possible for all investigators of the same object to arrive at the same conclusion¹². Thus, one may ask here, is scientific objectivity possible in history?

The question raised above led to the emergence of some further historical writings in the 20th century. At this time, some philosophers and historians like E.H Carr, R.G Collingwood, W. H Walsh, amongst others have given a different tone to historical writings. In an attempt to attain some level of objectivity, they have expanded historical thinking and contributing immensely to historical knowledge. In as much as these scholars admitted that scientific objectivity in history is like a dream of a dead man, they however expanded history through scientific enquiry, applying scientific methods to ascertain historical validity and objectivity.

In furtherance of this, Carr describes scientific history as a process of adopting scientific methods of explanation, interpretation and facts to historical events.

The 20th century witnessed new trend in historical scholarship. It transformed history by not only dealing with factors that have influenced changes over time but also the relationship of those factors with each another. This is done by comparing events of similar nature in the past as it is impossible to actually know what happened in the past. The historian who now attempt to reconstruct that past was not there when it took place. How then can he claim to know what happened, here Bury asked, Do you want to resurrect the dead? The past is dead and forgotten and the future is unknown.

This gave rise to the application of scientific methods in historical writings. So far, scientific history has advanced historical discourses. Consequently, we now know that a historian must necessarily reflect and also possess a strong analytical mind. We also know that there cannot be a mono causal explanation of any historical phenomenon as was the case in the medieval era. Most importantly, it is now clear that a historian must not attempt to go beyond his evidence, as Collingwood puts; genuine history has no room for the merely probable or the merely possible; as it permits the historian to assent what the evidence before him obliges him to assent. Genuine history in this case talks about objectivity in history. By objectivity, we mean the dissociation of the investigator from the object of investigation so that same conclusion can be reached by independent investigation. According to Walsh, objectivity in history distinguished history from propaganda and condemns those writers who allow their teachings and personal preconception to affect their reconstruction of the past. Walsh further stated that objectivity is one of the characteristics which according to common belief must be present in any knowledge which can claim scientific status¹³. And by describing a body of propositions as 'objective' in this context, we mean that they are such as to warrant acceptance by all who seriously investigates them.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN HISTORY AND SCIENCE

In the 18th century, as a result of the scientific movement, new knowledge of various kinds began to emerge which rendered the traditional view of historical enquiry untenable. As a result, by the end of the 18th century when science had made great contributions both to man's knowledge of his own physical attributes, it began to be wondered whether science could not increase man's knowledge of his society.

Thus historians began to embrace other disciplines. This interdisciplinary approach to scholarship in history has opened to the historian a world of new ideas, evidence and opportunities. It evolved an increasing insistence upon exactness, accuracy and objectivity in the historian's work. It is pertinent to note that this embrace began fully in the 19th century. As Carr puts in his book written in the 19th century, "The historian has some excuse for feeling himself at home in the world of science today than he could have done a hundred years ago"¹⁴.

However, in this era, there were other historians who believed that science and history are far apart. This gave rise to debates as regards whether history is science or art. The word science already covers so many different branches of knowledge, employing several methods and techniques that the onus seems to rest on those who seek to exclude history rather than those who seek to include it. It is significant that the argument for exclusion comes not from scientists anxious to exclude history from their select company, but from historians and philosophers anxious to vindicate the status of history as a branch of humane letters. As such, it was contended by different scholars of this era that history should be secured against the encroachment of science.

Thus, Collingwood lay it down that history and science are two different disciplines, each with a method of its own. Science he explained had as its purpose the formulation of general laws: history the description of individual facts. And as such, the fundamentals of history are unique.

What comes to mind here is the definition of both terms. What is science? What is Art? As defined by Walsh in its simplest form, science is a body of knowledge acquired as the result of an attempt to study a certain subject matter in a methodical way, following a determinate set of guiding principle. Art is the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination.

From the above definitions, it is lucid that both disciplines are related. The question of whether or not history is science seems to be confusion in nomenclature because in all languages except English, the word history is expressed as enquiry. By this it would appear to mean that the major task of the historian is to make inquiry into the remote past or obscure present of human actions. In so doing, the inquiry will lead to discovery; this can be linked with the goal of science, since science is all about discovery.

Even though one may accept that history could be science, it should be noted that it is not an easy science; its subject is infinitely complex, one day of synthesis requires years of analysis. In a quest which demands huge patience, prudence and boldness, the chances for error are countless and none can hope to escape them. As evinced by Frizstel, *“If we have not been discouraged by the deep awareness of the difficulty of our tasks, it is because we believe that the honest search for truth is always rewarding. If we accomplish nothing else but to throw some light on hitherto neglected points or to call attention to some obscure problems, we shall not have laboured in vain, and we should moreover feel justified in saying that we have contributed our share to the progress of historical science and to the knowledge of human nature”*¹⁵. In modern historical

study, more accurate testing of sources have been developed ensuring much better correlation of evidence. New subject areas for historical studies have emerged allowing for the study of specialised areas that were unknown in the past. Thus, fields like palaeography aid the historian's study of human activity, primarily through the recovery and analysis of the material culture and environmental data that has been left behind. Also, where the historian tries to find evidence for the actions of men, disciplines, such as sociology, have helped in explaining social phenomena that can assist the historian in finding the causes of certain human actions. Let's take for instance that there are no historical document invalidating or re-establishing the facts on the Bini patriarchal or monarchical affiliation to Ife. The declaration that the Bini's migrated from nowhere and that they had been in their present settlement since creation, whether true or false, this legend would strike the trained historian's scientific inquiry by considering the significant factors that undermine the validity or paucity of the belief. If attempts are made by scientifically appealing to evidence adduced from archaeology, anthropology and geography, the facts will not be farfetched.

Scientific history has been richly enhanced by the development and use of oral tradition in history. Since oral traditions have become relevant sources for information in historical studies, the attempts to verify the accounts in oral history has undoubtedly been further aided by the use of the scientific tools, such as radio carbon dating, to establish dates, linguistic and social anthropology, to study cultural phenomena that reflect the knowledge and meanings guiding the lives of cultural groups. This explains why Alagoa opined that historians seek assistance of other disciplines in order to obtain full benefit from unusual documents.

The scientific approach to historical study has also fostered what scholars call "Big History". Big History views the world and humanity as a whole, beginning deep in human pre-history. It

includes primate evolution and paleoanthropology; cognitive evolution and language development; early tool-making and creative expression; the migrations of hunter-gatherers around the world; the domestication of plants and animals; the rise of agriculture and the spread of diseases; the growth in permanent settlements, trade networks and the use of money; technological innovation and energy consumption; the use of natural resources; and population growth¹⁶. Exploring Big History requires that we study history first as science, harnessing numerous physical and biological disciplines-archaeology, genetics, neuroscience, linguistics, engineering, economics, demography and to systematically collect and analyse information about the past from an evolutionary and global perspective. National and religious histories are all contextualised inside this larger framework.

The interdisciplinary approach to scholarship in history has opened to the historian a world of new ideas, many of which are yet to be fully tapped. Meanwhile, historians are now receptive to ideas from other disciplines and they readily collaborate with their colleagues across disciplinary borders. Such cooperation has yielded an abundance of knowledge well beyond the competence of a single discipline. As much as the historian can borrow from other disciplines when carrying out research, the genetic application of these processes means that the historical method has also become relevant to the sciences as well. This explains why Croce asserted that history is secured against the encroachments of science not because it already contains science as an element within itself, but because it must be complete before science begins¹⁷. For without historical investigations, enquiries and writings, there would be no material for the scientist to handle. When a scientist tells us that his theories are based on facts, observations and experiments – he means that they are based on history because the idea of facts and the idea of history are synonymous. Adeboye then added that the rapport of history with other disciplines is mutually

beneficial to all parties concerned. Thus, the sociologist that is faced with researching social phenomena in order to build a sequence must apply the historical method. Also, the economist in his research cannot divorce qualitative method from his research; he would combine both methods to arrive at a logical conclusion. Moreso, historical events helps to create economic theories. This goes a long way to show that no discipline is an island¹⁸. To this end, historians of the 20th century have tended to be more scientific in their approach to historical research. Scholars, such as Aydellotte, have written extensively on the benefits of such scientific fields as statistics to historical studies. He points out that quantitative method produces original data and can be used to test historical generalisations of some scope on which there have hitherto been scholarly disagreements.

Thus, the contemporary historian has become better armed with techniques that can help in the presentation of factual accounts of events. Historians have now began to specialise in new fields of historical studies that have been made possible by the development of research techniques which was borrowed largely from the sciences but have become, also, essential parts of historical research methods.

The use of certain scientific approaches to solving historical problems meant that the historical method has been able to develop its own specialised rules and guidelines. As posited by Walsh, history can be described as scientific in one respect, namely, that it is a study with its own recognised methods, which must be mastered by anyone who hopes to be proficient at it. This knowledge would seem to be what prompted Bury's declaration that history is a science, no more, no less¹⁹. In all of these, one thing is essential, every true history must by its human and vital presentation of event force us to remember that the past was once real as the present and uncertain as the future. It can mould the mind itself into the capability of understanding

monumental affairs and sympathising with others. The information given by history is valueless in itself unless it produces a new state of mind.

THE LIMITATIONS OF SCIENTIFIC HISTORY

It is important to note that there is an extent to which science can go in solving historical problems.

There are several factors responsible for these limitations. The historian unlike the scientist studies events and human actions which led to those events. He goes further to analyse the human mind. This is a task that cannot be achieved by the scientist. In this view, Walsh stated, "As much as science can aid in the explanation of historical events, it cannot discover the causes and effects of those events". In dealing even with an affair of which the facts are so comparatively well known as those of the French revolution, it is impossible to accurately examine the psychology of twenty-five million different persons of whom except a few hundreds or thousands, the lives and motives are buried in the blacknight of the utterly forgotten. No one, therefore can ever give a complete or wholly true account of the causes of the French revolution. But several imperfect readings of history are better than none at all, and the historian, having discovered and weighed all the important evidence obtainable has the largest grasp of intellectual, the warmest human sympathy, the highest imaginative powers and as such, will give his best interpretation. Here Croce asked, How can History be a Science? You can dissect the body of a man and argue thence the general structure of the bodies of other men but you cannot dissect a mind; and if you could, you could not argue thence about other minds. You can know nothing scientifically of the twenty million minds of a nation. Then Croce concludes, the few facts we know may or may not be typical of the rest. Therefore, in the most important part of its

business, history is not a scientific deduction but an imaginative guess at the most likely generalisation²⁰.

Another limitation is the factor of selection. It is contended that historians cannot possibly write down everything on a topic, as such, the historian is forced to select from the total information available to him in records of all kinds and no matter how he may explain his choice, there is usually a personal factor involved. The greatest injury is done to those materials when the historian began to add and subtract to suit his own interpretation of the event. This is also done in oral tradition as the interviewer or the historian filter some words from his write-up. In the process of doing this, he may sift out relevant points. This challenge is unfolded due to human factor; the person writing is a human being and his object of enquiry is human events. This is different from the scientist who studies inanimate objects. According to Passmore, the human factor cannot be detached from history. He asserted that history can only be objective if the inquirer begins with a blank mind but this is often not so as the inquirer already has some beliefs and expectations before attempting the work.

Added to the problem of selection is that of interpretation of facts. Historians search for truth about what happened in the past but the past is not open to direct inspection. It means that historians must necessarily study documents which are available to them. These documents are called historical evidence. These evidences of the past are in different forms-oral tradition, language numismatics, archaeological artefacts e.tc. Pertinent to note here is that the importance of every fact depends on the interpretations given to it by the historian. Baraclough supported this view when he argued that for history to be scientific, it has to be based on facts. He however observed that the outcome of a historian's interpretation is not based on fact but the historian's sense of judgement. Carr seconded Baraclough's view when he stated that "Facts are Sacred,

Opinion is Free”²¹. In the same vein, Becker posits that “the fact of history does not exist unless the historian creates it”.

According to Windelband and Rickert, the facts of nature and the fact of history are not facts in the same sense of the word. The facts of nature are what the scientist can perceive or produce in the laboratory under his own eyes; the facts of history are not there at all; all that the historian has before him are documents and relics from which he has somehow to reconstruct the facts.

Consequently, the conclusion and inferences which the historian makes constitute an inhibition to the attainment of objectivity which is the quest of the historian. Thus, scientific methods in history have to an extent lost his essence as it could not solve the problem for which it was created for. The reason for this is because two or more historians will give different interpretations to the same evidence and this will be reflected in their final account. This could also happen when historians misinterpret documentary sources, a deficiency that many historians suffer from. However, while it is possible, to some extent, to avoid individual influence in the results of a scientific experiment, it is not so with history in the context of explanation of historical events. Thus, we find contradictory positions on the origin of the Nigerian first military coup: claims and counter-claims tend to shift causes between an ethnic element and a class element. As Walsh puts it, “every story contains an account of the facts as seen from a particular point of view”²². He went further stating that there is no “verdict of history” other than the private opinion of the individual. And no one historian can possibly see more than a fraction of the truth; if he sees all sides, he will probably not see very deeply into any one of them. The only way in which a reader can arrive at a valuable judgement on some historical period is to read several histories, whether contemporary or modern, written from several different points of view, and to think about them for himself.

For instance, several historians have attempted to explain the reasons for the fall of the Old Oyo Empire at the beginning of the 19th c. It is important to explore to an extent the divergent views given by various writers on the decline and fall of the empire.

Robin attributes the fall to the inherent weakness in the constitution of Oyo which later created enormous problems which the Alafin could not handle. This provided the occasion for other factors to come in. Atanda, however, enumerated different factors responsible for the fall. He also analysed the views of other scholars and went ahead to criticise those views.

Atanda opined that a number of factors contributed to the decline and fall of the Old Oyo Empire. He however stated that the size of the empire, which made it impossible to govern effectively in the face of inadequate means of communication, scarcity of tours to parts of the empire by the Alafin, tendency by the local rulers to independence, the tyranny of the Alafin's messengers, weak Alafins, the position of the Are Ona Kakanfo (Field Marshal) in the constitution of the empire, the rise of powerful neighbours like the Fulani and Dahomey and the disruption of the economic system and strength of the empire are factors responsible for the fall of the empire²³. To Rev. Samuel Johnson, the fundamental cause was the punishment of God for the sins of the nation. He said: *"The cup of the nation was full; cruelty, usurpation, and treachery were rife, especially in the capital; and the provinces were groaning under the yoke of oppression.....the nation was ripe for judgement, and the impending wrath of God was about to fall upon it; hence the trouble from every quarter, one after another"*²⁴. Atanda finds it difficult to agree with Johnson that the troubles which the Old Oyo Empire had in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and which led to its collapse were due to the wrath of God. After all, how God interferes in politics is not obvious to any, and, in fact, is a matter for religion rather than of history.

These divergent views confirm Walsh's assertion that historians write from a particular point of view. For anyone who wishes to undertake a research on the topic, "The Fall and Decline of the Oyo Empire", he must select articles, make further research on topics related to it, subject them to concrete analyses and attain some level of objectivity. The contradictory views go further to indicate that scientific objectivity in history is unrealistic.

Furthermore, while the scientists can state, with reasonable authority, that science attempts to uncover the systems underpinning our bodies, the material world and the universe beyond, it attempts to be predictive and prescriptive. Scientific knowledge provides the powers of prediction but in history, prediction fails. It cannot be prescriptive or predictive because the same set of circumstances never reoccurs. The popular saying that history repeats itself is false as no one can repeat the scenarios of the past. History is not cyclical; it does not repeat itself. The combination of factors known to have led to some event in the past will, most likely, not lead to the same outcome as it did in the past if repeated. As such, no one can predict historical events. Moreso, human actions cannot be predicted as no one knows the human mind. For example, we cannot say with certainty that if the same conditions that led to the Second World War occur today, there would be another world war.

Looking at the Barbarossa's attack on Russia, the greatest mistake made by Stalin was prediction. He tried to predict the mind of Hitler and this cost him a great deal. Stalin thought that if Hitler would decide to attack Russia, it would first present an ultimatum. Therefore, Stalin erred in three fundamental ways; he was too blinded by his own ideological biases to credit the veracity of truthful Anglo-American information; he attributed to Hitler a basically rational view of Russo-German relations and was unable to understand the nature of Hitler's irrational and mindless hatred for Russia. And finally, when the dreadful truth began to become clear to him,

Stalin found its implications so horrendous that he was simply unable to face the consequences¹⁸. Another instance was the Korean War. The crossing of the thirty-eight parallel and the drive towards the Chinese border at the Yalu River brought the United States close to an attack by China. MacArthur's mistake at this time was that he predicted wrongly as he underrated China. As Stoessinger puts, "he failed to respect his enemy and this disrespect was to cost him dearly". The crossing of the thirty-eight parallel led to China's attack²⁵. On the day of Chinese disengagement, MacArthur's estimate of total Chinese strength in Korea was between 40,000 and 60,000 men but surprisingly, he was faced with 200,000 soldiers. The Chinese troops had done what MacArthur had deemed impossible.

Again, often time, historical analyses are tainted with colouration of the authors. As Carr noted, "A historian cannot write beyond the mind of the author". The primary sources are also not exempted from this problem. According to Vansina, it can be assumed that the more a recital conforms to the standard model of excellence and the more it is admired by the public, the more it is distorted²⁰. The range of primary sources now scrutinised by historians are vast. Bone remnants, cloth samples, wood fragments and many others are all potential primary sources.

As a result of this, every historical material must be subjected to concrete analyses and validation. Only this can make an intellectual piece stand the test of time. However, when it comes to asking the important question, WHY? The historian has to creatively apply his or her critical thinking. The application of critical thinking is an important aspect of the historian's craft. As Berlin puts it "A man who lacks common intelligence can be a physicist of genius but not even a mediocre historian.

Another factor is that of methodology. We know that physical scientist have evolved generally acceptable and regular ways of tackling scientific problems, and not to accept these methods is to be biased or unscientific. In history, there is also a methodology but the methodology is not as rigid as that of science. Unlike in science there are no generally acceptable laws which govern historical thinking. As such, historians may not arrive at conclusions which all independent investigators will be ready to accept. Also, it is the business of a natural scientist to be a theorist; that is to formulate doctrines for natural science is nothing if it is not a systematic interlacing of theories and doctrines, built up inductively, or by hypothetical – deductive methods, or whatever other method is considered best by the most competent practitioners in the field. It seems clear that whereas in history we tend, more often than not to attach greater credence to the existence of particular facts than to general hypotheses, however well supported, from which these facts could in theory be deducted, in a natural science the opposite seems more often to be the case; there it is often more rational to rely upon a properly supported general theory- say that of gravitation than on particular observations. This difference alone, whatever its not, must cast *prima facie* doubt upon any attempt to draw an analogy between the method of history and those of natural science.

Also, the cultural background and ideological inclination of the historian may affect his interpretation of historical events. The historian's membership of a particular religion, race or ideological group will cast doubt on his ability to achieve scientific objectivity. History is an account of what men have done and of what has happened to them. Man is largely, some would say wholly, a three dimensional object in space and time, subject to natural laws and his environment. Thus, his environment has a great toll on him. Giving an instance of the September Massacre, a Nigerian from the Eastern Region will paint the event as to draw

sympathy from its readers. Take for instance the book written by Ojukwu on the Nigerian Civil war, “The Biafran War”, being an Easterner, it is assumed that the book will be biased, tainted with human factor in order to draw sympathy from its readers. Another instance is the opinion of Crowder and Mcphee on the impact of colonial rule in Africa. Mcphee contended that the infrastructures put in place by the colonial powers, the introduction of new cultures, the expansion of trade, and other activities introduced by the colonialist developed Africa. Crowder rebuffed this notion. To him, the infrastructures, trade and other activities by the colonial powers were for the purpose of exploitation and not for the development of the colony. He further stated that under colonial rule, any economic benefits that may have accrued to Africa resulted from accident and not designed. Thus, as Mcphee’s view tends to Eurocentric, that of Crowder is Afrocentric.

Generally, objectivity in history is different from that of science because of the divergence of data which are available to the historian as well as the social world which the historian deals with. This is not to say that history is incapable of any form of objectivity, it only shows that there can be no absolute objectivity. More so, the scientists also cannot prove to be objective in their experiments. It must however be stressed that since the historian is a student of change, his conclusion may not be valid for all time. In other words, objectivity in history may also be tentative in the sense that discovery of fresh evidence may affect historical reconstruction and therefore result in a re-evaluation of a once objective account. As Scott declares “there is no finality in history anymore than there is in natural or physical science. The purpose is to arrive at a perfection of knowledge. Ayoade points out that “the quality of scientific results is measured not by the fact that it does not change but by the fact that it has a long life and an explanatory

significance²⁶. This is to show that objectivity in science is also not absolute. With this understanding, one can appreciate why each generation writes and re-interprets its history.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is clear that for the purpose of achieving objectivity in History, scientific history was proffered. Even though absolute objectivity in history is desirable, it is not attainable. This is because the idea of complete dissociation or detachment from the object of investigation by the investigator is impossible. There is always an element of the human factor in historical writings.

The scientists in this case can narrate events, using hypotheses and generalisations. That is where his work ends, he cannot study the minds and thinking of those individuals. Also, the scientists make use of general laws but history does not have a general law which guides historical thinking. This explains why the conclusion of one historian is different from the other. However, scientific history envisages that all historians should arrive at the same conclusion in their work. If this is applied, historians are heading for a doom. The mistake of one generation is passed unto the other.

Despite the limitations of scientific history, it is the only valid method applied in modern history. Thus, to achieve some level of objectivity in historical writings, scientific methods are required. This explains the interdisciplinary approach to modern history. This approach to scholarship in history has opened to the historian a world of new ideas, evidence and opportunities.

ENDNOTES

1. Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, London, (Macmillan Press Ltd. 1983) p. 211
2. Robin. G Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press. 197) p. 18.
3. Oladipo.O Olubomehin, The Issue of Objectivity in History, in *Issues in Historiography*, ed. Oladipo.O Olubomehin, (Ibadan, College Press & Publishers Ltd, 2001) p. 38
4. Ibid
5. Isaiah Berlin, The Concept of Scientific History, In *Philosophical analysis and history*, ed. William H. Dray (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p.5
6. William .H Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1975) pp. 39-41
7. Ibid
8. Olubomehin, The Issue of Objectivity in History, p.45
9. Berlin, The Concept of Scientific History, p.10
10. Marwick, *The Nature of History*, p.215
11. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, p.46
12. Ibid
13. Ibid, p.169
14. Edward. H Carr, *What is History* (Middlesex, Penguin Books. 1984) p. 58
15. Fritz Stern, *The Varieties of History, From Voltaire to the Present*, (New York, Vintage Books. 1973) p. 231

16. The Concept of Scientific History.

<http://www.magnanamusblue.com/thesciencehistory124#4he/15> . Retrieved in June, 2013.

17. Fritz, *The Varieties of History*, 238

18. Olubomehin, The Issue of Objectivity in History, p.51

19. Carr, *What is History*, p. 91

20. Ibid

21. Ibid

22. Joseph .A Atanda, *The New Oyo Empire*, (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1973) pp. 28-36

23. Ibid

24. John .G Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go To War*, (New York, St Martins Press, Inc, 1971)
pg.59

25. Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition and its methodology, In Edt by J.Ki-Zerbo, *General History of Africa .1, Methodology and African Prehistory*. (London, Heinemann Publishers, 1995). p.148

26. O Olubomehin, *The Issue of Objectivity in History*, p. 55