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Correlates of Objective Historiography

A Review Essay on *Hierarchy, History, and Human Nature: The Social Origins of Historical Consciousness* by Donald E. Brown (University of Arizona Press, 1988)

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Hierarchy, History, and Human Nature by Donald E. Brown ought to be assigned in every course dealing with historiography for undergraduates and graduate students in history and read by all professional historians. When Brown's book was first published in 1988, it did not get the traction that it should have because of the emergence of postmodernism and its critique of Eurocentric approaches within the field of history.[1] Historians such as Hayden White (1973) were arguing that any kind of objectivity in history was impossible due to literary tropes and rhetorical narratives that influenced historical writing, a view that can be traced back to precursors of postmodernist history such as Friedrich Nietzsche in his *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1874). Through an early existentialist position Nietzsche argued that historians should use history to develop their own political will and destiny and that all history was always subjectively constructed for shaping one's destiny. This existentialist position resonated with many historians during the development of identity politics in the 1960s and eventually became incorporated into the postmodernist position of the late 70s and 80s.

However, most scholars in history and elsewhere tend to agree that postmodernism has reached an impasse.[2] Brown's thesis is a pragmatic modernist perspective that offers a useful corrective to postmodernist thinking. His epistemological position is grounded in the pragmatic tradition

[1] Later Brown wrote the widely-cited book *Human Universals* (University of Arizona Press, 1991) that has subsequently been translated into Japanese.

[2] See Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt & Margaret Jacob's *Telling the Truth About History* (W.W. Norton, 1994) for a very balanced critique of the influence of postmodernism as it pertains to the discipline of history. Another book by Georg G. Iggers *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Wesleyan University Press, 1997) offered another balanced critique of postmodern historical methods.

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that suggests human perceptions of the world have some correspondence with the world and historians and other social scientists can discriminate between valid and invalid claims substantiated by verifiable evidence. The thesis of the book is that regularities in social structure produce regularities in historical discourses, a challenge to the postmodernist perspective. Arguing that the history of Islam by a member of the Saudi *ulama* is just as valid as a Western historian of Islam does not have the resonance it once did in the heyday of pomo history, despite its legacy in some areas of the humanities and the social sciences. Thus, now is the time for historians and students of history to discover the cross-societal research of Brown to illuminate why some societal factors are important in promoting more objective and critical forms of historiography than others. In Steven Pinker's recent *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* Brown's book is mentioned as an important work that examines why non-objective and objective histories develop in 25 different civilizations (2011: 640-641)

Brown is an anthropologist who initially specialized in the study of social and political change in Brunei, the small Malay oil-rich Sultanate in northwest Borneo. While doing his research, he had to explore Brunei's historical writing in order to understand aspects of social and political change. While doing so Brown became intrigued by the scarcity of historical writing and the lack of concrete details of individuals within Brunei's historical records. He concluded that Brunei's ascriptive (hereditarian-castelike) social structure made speculation about individual's characteristics or attributes superfluous and possible subversive in historical writing. Thus, much of Brunei's historical writing tended to be more hagiographic and myth-like rather than based on actual biographical details and empirical realities. At this time, Brown began thinking about the interconnections between social stratification and historiographical issues comparatively and broadly, which eventually developed into this cross-societal volume.

Taking his lead from Lévi-Strauss (1979), Brown agrees that myth and history are two ends of a continuum and there is no sharp boundary between them. However, he draws on the judgments of historiography authorities such as von Ranke (1884) and later historians to suggest that one can evaluate whole accounts of the past, or various parts of whole accounts, to determine sound from unsound history. Brown admits that all history is somewhat subjective based on personal judgments and styles of presentation. However, he asserts that an account of the past can be distinguished by 'historical criticism' and judgments based on criteria that alert historians to the dangers of ethnocentrism, inaccurate chronologies, untrustworthy sources, inadequate psychologies, or illogical and incoherent realities. Historical criticism can distinguish valid accounts of the past from legend, folktales, myths, or falsehoods. Thus, sound history is not wholly subjective. In addition, Brown

draws on the distinction between knowledge and ideology made by many social scientists including Maurice Bloch (1977). Knowledge tends to develop in relationship to universal human practical activities such as production and reproduction, whereas ideology (including ritual) is linked to instituted stratified hierarchies and is more mythical. Bloch argued that knowledge tends to be more developed in societies that are non-hierarchical, and ideology strongly correlates with those societies that are hierarchical or hereditarily-based. Refining Bloch's account, Brown argues that knowledge and ideology overlap with the history and myth demarcation. Sound or more objective accounts of the past are based on knowledge, whereas unsound accounts are more ideological and mystifying.

Brown's two major contrasting styles of historiography come from India and China developed in Chapter 2. Surveying the corpus of Indian historiography, Brown finds that prior to the arrival of Islam most of the historical writing was based on Sanskrit religious texts such as the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana* or folk history. With the exception of some medieval chronicles from Kashmir and Sri Lanka, there was no concern with accurate chronologies in Indian historical writing. Indian biographical writing was fanciful and genealogical links were usually traced from the royalty and upper caste individuals to the religious mythologies. Hereditary rank and the caste foundations of social structure in India tended to produce fabulous myth-like histories. In contrast to the caste-based inegalitarian ideology of India, Chinese Confucian philosophy and culture emphasized an egalitarian ethos with state institutions promoting social mobility and meritocratic ideals. Early Chinese historical records compare with favorably with Tacitus in the West. The Chinese maintained official historical documents with very precise chronologies and details of individual biography. In addition, these official historical records were more objective (non-supernatural) and were sometimes critical of the ruling establishment. In addition there were historical records outside of official sources that were often critical of the Emperors and the elite. The ideal meritocratic system of Chinese society marked by long periods of social mobility stimulated historical records that favored candor and more objectivity. Heredity stratification in India promoted unsound historiography, while Chinese ideals that fostered the view that any individual (male) from any socioeconomic background could study for the examinations to become high ranking government officials support more objective historiography. In China various works on historiography itself were developed to encourage less-biased, more skeptical, and objective forms of history. Precise genealogical records and an enormous biographical literature of specific individuals promoted more empirically-based historiographies throughout Chinese history.

Chapter 3 evaluates the various historiographical traditions in Southeast Asia. Brown assesses these traditions in Brunei, Malaya, Aceh, Java, Bali, Makassar/Bugis (Sulawesi/Celebes), Vietnam, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and old Nanchao (an early kingdom with links with Southeast Asia consisting of the Lolo and Minchia people in South China). Unreliable historiographies were linked to hereditary ranked societies in Brunei, Malaya, Achenese, Bali, and perhaps Cambodia. The Makassarest/Bugis, Vietnam (influenced by China) and Burma (influenced by an egalitarian Buddhist tradition) had both relatively sound historiographies and more open meritocratic traditions. The cases of historiography in Thailand, Laos, and old Nanchao, and Hindu Java were difficult to assess, whereas in later Muslim Java there was more meritocracy and improvements in more scientifically-based histories.

Chapter 4 assesses the historiography of the ancient Near East, and classical Greece and Rome. Ancient Egypt evolved from an open society with the possibility of sound historiography in its early stages to a castelike heredity stratification system during the late period of the Old Kingdom linked with mythologically-oriented histories. The ancient Israelites, Assyrians, and Mesopotamians such as the Babylonians all had more open systems than the Egyptians with more accurate historiographies and individual biographies. However, both Greece and Rome developed much better historiographies than these earlier civilizations. Greek historiography (particularly the Athenian) develops from the myth-like ancient epic poetry of Homer and Hesiod to the more accurate and scientifically-based histories of Herodotus and Thucydides that coincides with the evolution from a more castelike system to a more meritocratic social structure. In contrast, Sparta had less social mobility and was not historically minded. In the second and third century B.C. Roman history emerged with historians such as Cato who borrowed from the Greek tradition and later Cicero, Livy, and finally Tacitus whose scientific and secular orientation rivaled that of Thucydides. Social mobility fluctuated during different periods of republican and imperial eras in Rome. However, since the time of Constantine the eastern part of the empire had much greater openness than the western part. The western part of Rome developed a closed, feudal castelike system that later influenced both historical writing and the lack of social mobility that marked medieval Europe.

In Chapter 5 Brown weighs the evidence for strong or weak historiographies in the medieval world of Europe, Byzantium, and the Islamic civilizations such as the Abbasid dynasty and Sassanid Persia. Hagiography and myth-making characterized most of the histories in medieval Europe, which was sponsored by the reigning nobility and written by religiously enthused churchmen. Aside from the historical writing of Gregory of Tours or the Venerable Bede, medieval European history neglected the history of the

classical age of Greek and Rome and produced mainly fictive religious-based histories that glorified the Christian charisma of the nobility with fabulous genealogies. With the exception of England, most of continental Europe was hereditarily stratified and its political and economic foundations were based on the medieval estates. Authoritarian and castelike hierarchical ideologies based on conceptions of the 'Great Chain of Being' were strongly correlated with the absence of empirically-based history. In contrast to Western medieval Europe Byzantium historiography was generally more accurate and was connected with a less castelike hereditarian and open political and social structure. Similarly Muslim historical writing, accurate biographies, and sound historiographies developed in medieval Islamic civilizations culminating in works such as the *Muqadimmah* of Ibn Khaldun. As the non-Arab Abbasids took control over the Arab Umayyad dynasty, social stratification became less castelike and more open with a more egalitarian ideology.

Western Renaissance historiography as it developed in Florence and Venetian Italy are evaluated by Brown in Chapter 6. Although some elements of an improved historiography began to emerge in medieval Europe, with the rapid expansion of global trade and exploration during the Renaissance and the rise of new classes of merchants and entrepreneurs who challenged the role of the nobility, humanists such as Petrarch, Bruni, and Machiavelli began to produce secular biographies and realistic and accurate histories with a renewed appreciation of classical Greek and Roman writings. High rates of social mobility and waves of bankruptcies among the wealthy nobility of Florence represented the fracturing of the old medieval estate system. Relying on the evaluation of contemporary Renaissance historians such as Momigliano (1966, 1977), Brown concurs that the historical methods and valid historical criticism used in the modern West developed in Renaissance Italy. History was not viewed as the unfolding of a divine plan, but rather as the result of universal human emotions, rationality, and actions. Brown compares the historiography and concomitant social structures of Florence with that of Venice to reinforce his hypothesis. Venice was much more patrician and aristocratic and less democratic than Florence. Despite the fact that the Venetians did keep good statistical records and archives, the histories were centered on antiquarianism rather than accurate and detailed history. Venetian secular humanism and historical criticism developed much later than in Florence. Brown concludes the chapter by stating that the onset of rapid social mobility of the Renaissance, followed by the industrial and political revolutions that removed most of the privileges of hereditary rank spread throughout Europe, the U.S., Australia, and Canada, which led to modern forms of critical historiography.

In the final chapter Brown gauges the validity of alternative explanations that are proposed to explicate the lack of accurate history such as a subsistence

system based on agriculture, civilizational decline, defective means of measuring time, cyclic concepts of time, illiteracy, poor economic conditions, lack of urbanization, war, peace, otherworldly religions, etc. He provides a summary and critical evaluation of why these explanations may illuminate some variation, but overall they are inadequate. In addition, Brown discusses different conceptions of human nature that have a bearing on patterns of historiography. The castelike stratified closed societies maintain racialist and hereditarian conceptions of human nature, and assume that there are multiple forms of human nature that differentiate individuals into various strata. This is obvious in the case of India and medieval Europe. These conceptions of multiple human natures are linked with unsound and myth-like historiographies. In contrast, conceptions of human nature that assume that the hereditary transmission of gross behavioral, mental, and spiritual traits are not the basis of social strata are connected with more open societies. In China, the Confucian tradition assumes that one's character and social position are a result of education and loosely environmental factors. Similarly, during the Renaissance in Florence, individuals outside of the hereditary nobility could achieve upward social mobility despite their birth status. In these open societies, more realistic, accurate, and empirical forms of historiography become apparent as is shown in China, Florentine Renaissance, and the modern West.

One of the challenges for contemporary historians is to evaluate and test Brown's hypothesis based on the various characteristics associated with sound versus unsound historiography. Brown identifies other traits aside from a uniform concept of human nature that are associated and correlated with sound historiography as in Florentine, Italy including individualism, realistic portraiture in art, uniform education, humanistic-secularism, political science, social science, natural science, and surprisingly divination. He argues that divination is related to the uniform concept of human nature, and that when social position is no longer limited by descent, divination techniques flourish alongside the sciences to conduct and predict human affairs. For those interested in evaluating and testing Brown's hypothesis, a tabulation with numerical scores may be useful (Table 1). By comparing the absence or presence of these different traits associated with sound or unsound historiography, one can develop testable hypotheses that can generate cross-societal conclusions.

Table 1 (next page). Traits associated with sound or unsound historiography. *Notation:* + = present (1 point); – = absent (-1 point); ( ) = weakly (+/- .5 point); blank = not known; 0 = ?.

Society	Sound historiography	Uniform human nature	Individualism	Biography	Realistic Portraiture	Uniform education	Humananistic-secularism	Political Science	Social science	Natural Science	Divination	Cumulative Score
Renaissance Florentines	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	11.0
Early Romans	+	+	+	+	+	(+)	+	+	+	+	+	10.5
Ionic Greeks	+	+	+	+	(+)	+	+	+	+	+	+	10.5
Chinese	+	+	+	+	(+)	+	+	+	+	+	+	10.5
Post Umayyad Muslims	+	+	+	+	(+)	+	+	+	+	+	+	10.0
Byzantines	+		(+)	+		+	(+)	+			+	6.0
Vietnamese	+			+	–		+	(+)			(+)	4.0
Burmese	+	+			–	+		(+)				2.5
Assyrians	+	(+)	(+)	0	–		(–)	0	0	(+)	+	2.0
Babylonians	+	(+)	(+)	(–)	–		(–)	0	0	(+)	+	1.5
Makassarese	+			(+)	–		(+)					1.0
Kashmiris	+				–							0
Ceylonese	+				–							0
Hebrews	+	(+)	0	(+)	–	+	–	(–)	(–)	–	0	–1.0
Venetians	(–)	+		(–)	(+)	+						+0.5
Sassanid Persians	–			(–)	–						(+)	–2.0
Late Romans	–			(–)	–		(–)			–		–4.0
Homeric Greeks	–	–	(+)	(+)	–			–	–	–	(–)	–5.5
Balinese	–	–	–	–	–		–					–6.0
Late Egyptians	–	0	–	(+)	(–)	0	–	–	–	–	–	–7.0
Malays, Bruneis, Achenese	–	–	–	–	–	–	(–)	(–)	–	–	(+)	–8.5
Spartans	–	–	–	–	–		–	–	–	–	(+)	–8.5
Hindu Indians	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0	(+)	–8.5
Medieval Europeans	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	(–)	–	–10.5

Most of the traits itemized within Table 1 are self-explanatory, however, a number of them require more detailed description. Sound historiography, uniform human nature, and divination have been described above. The trait specified as 'individualism' refers to the expression of individuality within the historical written traditions of a society. The repression of individuality by historical texts that focused upon the symbolic attributes of a ranked categories or religious office is strongly correlated with unsound historiography. Individualism also refers to the ability of persons to pursue their goals with minimal social regulation and the freedom to move from one status to another in accordance with personal desires and interests (Brown 1988: 316). The trait 'biography' denotes the literary genre found in historical writing that is associated with precise descriptions of an individual's background and characteristics connected with social statuses that are achieved rather than ascribed. Biography is closely linked with realistic portraiture in art and is usually found together in open societies with sound historiography. The trait 'uniform education' indicates a pattern of egalitarian education that is not tied to a particular status such as a specific caste. Uniform education is found in open meritocratic societies as a means of achieving social mobility. Humanistic-secularism is found in historical writings that do not emphasize spiritual or divine intervention in the determination of historical processes. The development of political science, social science, and natural science are integral concomitants of open societies with sound historiographies.

This is the time for students of history and professional historians to reflect upon Brown's hypotheses and determine why some forms of historiography become more objective and why historical criticism needs to be appreciated as a means of establishing more accurate views of the past. In evaluating Brown's hypothesis with its correlated and enumerated traits, one could also employ Ian Morris' recent quantitative index of social development including energy capture, social organization, war making capacity, and information technology (Morris 2010, 2012). As most have abandoned the solipsistic accounts of history promoted by postmodernist epistemologies, historians need to engage themselves in evaluating the conditions that encourage more reflective and critical historiography that results in evidence-based historical discourse. Also, a follow-up book needs to be written about why some historiographical traditions in areas such as India or the Islamic world have become the sites for competition between mythological or religious traditions and more objective histories imported and influenced by the West.

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