

A Brief Analysis on Historian Judging Criteria

Fujie Zhang

Springfield Common Wealth Academy, Springfield, Massachusetts, USA

Keywords: Presentism, Sociality, Historicity

Abstract: Nowadays, the word “Presentism” frequently appears in our field of vision. No matter literary works or historical figures, many people tend to judge people and things in the past by the present standards. With the passage of time and the evolution of history, human moral standards have already changed. However, some people still habitually use the present moral standards to evaluate the past, and there are many controversies about this issue. Can we look at the past with the present? My answer is no. We should analyze specific problems and examine historical events in the context of a specific era, so as to realize things correctly. This article will prove this point from many angles.

1. Introduction

A society that is filled with ideology without acknowledging anything of the past, all standards is based on the time. We should not judge those from the past by the standards of today because we form our present knowledge based on the wisdom gathered by generations before us. To further this argument, I will first define presentism and apply it to the example of Tang Dynasty’s Government system to underscore the unfairness of judges those of the past based on the standards of today.

2. Presentism

Presentism is defined as judging past actions based on the standards of today, or an uncritical adherence to present-day attitudes [1]. Subscribers to this belief have the tendency to interpret past events in terms of modern values and concepts. We all too often color history with the lens of our current prejudices. Too often we forget that attitudes and cultural values have changed over time. Some modern historians seek to avoid presentism in their work because they consider it a form of cultural bias, and believe it creates a distorted understanding of their subject matter; as such, the practice of presentism is regarded by some as a common fallacy in historical writing [1].

The historian David Hackett Fischer in his book *Historian’s Fallacies, Toward a Logic of Historic Thought*, identifies presentism as a fallacy [2]. “It is the mistaken idea that the proper way to do history is to prune away the dead branches of the past, and to preserve the green seeds and twigs which have grown into the dark forest of our contemporary world” [3]. Fischer has written that the “classic example” of presentism was the so-called “Whig history,” in which certain 18th- and 19th-century British historians wrote history in a way that used the past to validate their own political beliefs [4]. This interpretation was presentism because it did not depict the past in objective historical context, but instead viewed history only through the lens of contemporary Whig beliefs. In this kind of approach, which emphasizes the relevance of history to the present, things that do not seem relevant receive little attention, which results in a misleading portrayal of the past. Presentism is also a factor in the problematic question of history and moral judgments [5]. Among historians, the orthodox view may be that reading modern notions of morality into the past is to commit the error of presentism [6]. To avoid this, historians restrict themselves to describing what happened and attempt to refrain from using language that passes judgment. For example, when writing history about slavery in an era when the practice was widely accepted, letting that fact influence judgment about a group or individual would be presentism and thus should be avoided. As a conclusion, our ancestors lived in an era with its standards and rules different than that of our own [7].

3. People Should Not Judge the Past from the Present view

Every idea and moral standard is the product of the times. In the long river of history, the moral standards of human beings are constantly changing. People are used to looking at people and things in the past with present eyes, but this is actually unreasonable. The evaluation criteria should be evaluated within the framework of certain history, humanities, social forms, legal systems and moral constraints. If we want to analyze specific problems, we must evaluate historical figures and events under their historical conditions, and we must never break away from the social reality at that time [8].

Take China's Tang Dynasty as an example: The Tang Dynasty was one of the most unified and powerful dynasties in China's feudal society [9]. The Tang Dynasty opened the emperor-bureaucratic political system, which not only provided institutional guarantee for the social, economic and cultural development of the Tang Dynasty, but also had a profound influence on the political system of the Tang Dynasty. In the early three provinces, six political institutions in the early Tang Dynasty basically inherited the system of the Sui Dynasty, but adjusted and changed, it improved to the three provinces and six systems of Tang Dynasty. The six-part system of the three provinces of the Tang Dynasty was located in the central government, with imperial power as the core [10]. The three provinces refer to the province of Chinese books, the province of men and the province of monks. Zhongshu Province set up the governor "Chinese book order" two people, another "servant" two people, "Chinese book house man" six people, etc. ; Shangshu Province set up the governor "Shang Shu order" one person, another set "left servant shot: "right servant shot" each one person, "left" "right" each one person and so on. This system further inherit and develop the national political system since the Qin and Han Dynasties, establish and perfect the "three provinces - county - township system", build from the central to the local level, up and down, clear division of labor, clear responsibilities of decision-making and administrative implementation mechanism, effectively guarantee the strong political executive power of national governance, contributed to the "chastity view of governance" and "the emergence of the yuan prosperity" has made an important contribution to the country. The Tang Dynasty was a perfect political system, which also provided a valuable institutional legacy and successful governance experience for the governance of later generations. This system brought great prosperity to China, address the burden on farmers, solve the problems of economic and health. As a result at that time this system of Tang was a powerful and successful by nasty dynasty even through this system isn't used anymore but at the time it was filled with glory [11].

4. Response to the Opposite Views

As it is biased to judge a person from a different era for not having the moral foresight to stand up to his or her peers and end the tyranny of injustice, that is also no excuse to celebrate attitudes and statements that go squarely against what we believe in now. A bad idea is like a virus. It can take hold and come back quickly, infecting millions. We have all seen that happen too often recently. Imagine if you were a Jewish person and had to pass by a statue of Heinrich Himmler, the Nazi architect of the Holocaust, every day on the way to work. As that scenario would be unacceptable, Germany does not have any Nazi statues or memorials around.

On the other hand, many white Americans were aware of abolitionist sentiments but didn't agree with them, and instead made choices based on their own belief that slavery was a necessary evil. What I suspect is more distressing to white Americans, however, it is the idea that many white people in the past believed enslavement was wrong and chose to keep their mouths shut and participate anyway, even as secondary recipients of its "benefits." In this sense, perhaps the "standard of the time" we're talking about is moral cowardice, though I doubt that's what people who use the phrase are thinking. The history of enslavement in the United States makes clear that it's never just an issue of knowing, but rather one of believing and then making different choices. Hard choices. The truism of judging people by the standards of their time, by working to exempt people in the past from the critical eye of the present, simultaneously obscures other historical

figures who we might appraise more positively, especially knowing the context in which they were making their choices.

5. Conclusion

From all the points above, one can argue that it is biased and arrogant for us to judge those from the past by the standards of today. Presentism colors history with the lens of today's current standards, which create a distorted meaning of the subject by removing it from the context in which it occurred. We can judge people by the center of their time but not by the standards of today. If the end of the twentieth century can be characterized by futurism, the twenty-first can be defined by presentism.

References

- [1] Hughes, C. (2018, April 11). *Presentism: Don't Judge our Ancestors' Actions by Today's Standards*. Voices and images. <https://www.voicesandimages.com/presentism-dont-judge-ancestors-actions-by-todays-standards/>
- [2] Historian. (2021, March 2). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Historian%27s_fallacy&oldid=1009900853
- [3] History Extra. (2020, June 10). Should we judge historical figures by the morals of today. <https://www.historyextra.com/period/modern/historical-figures-statues-judge-morals-today/>
- [4] Ingram, D., & Tallant, J. (2018). Presentism. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/presentism/>
- [5] New York Essays. (2021, January 26). *Can we leave the past behind*. <https://newyorkessays.com/essay-can-we-leave-the-past-behind/>
- [6] Donner, L. K. (2020, July 10). *The many evils of Presentism*. Liberty Nation. <https://www.libertynation.com/the-many-evils-of-presentism/>
- [7] Bartram, E. (2021, January 18). *Don't we have to judge people by the standards of their time*. Contingment Magazine. <https://contingmentmagazine.org/2020/01/25/mailbag-standards/>
- [8] Liu, Y. F. (2020, June 7). *BC620: The Development of Tang's State System*. Eastday. <https://n.eastday.com/pnews/1591527080013622>
- [9] New York Essays. (2021, January 26). *Should the past be judged*. <https://newyorkessays.com/essay-should-the-past-be-judged/>
- [10] Administrative divisions of the Tang dynasty. (2021, September 3). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administrative_divisions_of_the_Tang_dynasty
- [11] History.com Editors. (2020, April 28). *Tang dynasty*. History. <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-china/tang-dynasty>