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What Is Bias?

There is a nice story about how Calvin Coolidge went to hear a clergyman preach on sin. 'What did he say?' he was asked. 'He said he was against it', Coolidge replied. The history teacher or student, well used by now to the normal form of questions at GCSE, might be forgiven for asking mischievously, 'Ah, but he was a clergyman. Was he a reliable source? How do we know he wasn't biased?'

Bias plays a big part in the teaching and assessment of history in our schools, but there is surprisingly little written about it. Like empathy, it owes its position to a large extent to the work of the Schools Council History 13-16 project, which recognized the detection of bias as an important skill which the study of the subject could impart; unlike empathy, it has survived into the National Curriculum, thinly disguised as Attainment Target 3, 'The Use of Historical Sources'.¹ Students are required to comment on the usefulness and reliability of various sources, and a key element of the process is the fearless unmasking of bias.

Bias is not easy to define, and it can be very difficult to detect. However, even when it is easily detected, dealing with it is not straightforward. Take this passage from Macaulay's splendidly one-sided *History of England*, for example:

The obstinate and imperious nature of the King [James II] gave great advantages to those who advised him to be firm, to yield nothing, and to make himself feared. One state maxim had taken possession of his small understanding, and was not to be dislodged by reason. To reason, indeed, he was not in the habit of attending.²

Macaulay's attitude towards James is fairly clear, and his judgement is perhaps unkind, but does that in itself make it untrue? There have been plenty of stupid people in history, and various crowned heads of England can certainly claim a place within their ranks. One might object to Macaulay's judgement, one might consider James more a victim than a transgressor, one might even claim James as a successful king brought down on the brink of triumph, but the fact remains that Macaulay is entitled to his opinion and he has plenty of evidence to support him. It is no argument to claim he cannot be right merely because he expressed himself so forthrightly.

However, it is also fair to accuse Macaulay of bias against James and in favour of William III. He is, after all, the epitome of the Whig school of history, whose whole outlook condemned such figures as James for



It is fair to accuse Macaulay of bias against James II.
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their backward-looking (and therefore obstinate) stance against the supposed march of history. But in rejecting Macaulay's bias must we also reject his conclusions? It is hard to see why we should: just because the Whig school of history no longer holds sway, James II does not therefore become a wise, sagacious king. There is certainly no sign of a revision of our general picture of James along the lines of the more favourable assessment that Mary Tudor, for example, has received in recent years.³ Macaulay's bias may have proclaimed itself with pride, but this in itself is not enough to invalidate his judgement.

But if this is so, the question remains: what, then, *is* bias? Is even blatant bias, as long as it does not resort to distortion, no more than a point of view? And if so, should we be putting so much emphasis on children detecting it?

The problem lies in the fact that bias is seldom defined, whether for the purposes of examination boards at GCSE and A level, or for assessment within the National Curriculum. Yet bias is a relative term and

is not necessarily synonymous with the crude falsification or distortion it is sometimes assumed to be. In fact, it is possible to go further and assert that, not only are all accounts, primary or secondary, subject to the bias of their authors but, far from being a fault, it is precisely that bias that gives sources their value. Without bias, we would know little or nothing about anyone's opinion of anything. All those questions in books and on examination papers along the lines of 'Source X is biased. Does this mean it is of no use?' are seriously misleading: the question historians ask – and children must be given historically valid questions – is not 'Is this source biased?' (which suggests the possibility of unbiased sources), but rather, 'What is this source's bias, and how does it add to our picture of the past?'

Is it possible, therefore, to offer a working definition of bias as a basis for historical work with young people?

Acceptable Bias?

Not surprisingly, we generally take most exception to bias with which we disagree. Thus, Alan Bullock's judgement, although clearly far from neutral in tone, will raise few eyebrows:

There are few more ghastly pages in history than this attempt to eliminate a whole race, the consequence of the 'discovery' made by a young down-and-out in a Vienna slum in the 1900s that the Jews were the authors of everything that he most hated in the world.⁴

Few people would disagree with this verdict on the Nazis, even though by background and circumstance Bullock was hardly approaching his topic with an open mind, and the title he gave his biography is an indication of the view of Hitler presented inside.

But if Bullock's bias is quite acceptable, the bias visible in this passage from Eichmann's interrogation by Captain (Hauptmann) Less in Israel is surely less so.

Less: Then you must have acquired the view that the salvation of the German people depended on the extermination of the Jews.

Eichmann: Herr Hauptmann, we didn't have such opinions, we just didn't. Commands were given, and because they were commands, we obeyed. If I receive an order, I'm not expected to interpret it, and if I give an order, I'm forbidden to justify it. I receive an order and I'm expected to obey.⁵

'Of course', we say, 'he would say that, wouldn't he?' Partly, the difference in our reactions to the two extracts reflects their difference in kind: Bullock was writing a biography, while Eichmann was on trial for his life. However, in both cases our reaction is inevitably tinged by the fact that we know so much about the Nazis. If we respond cynically to Eichmann's

plea, it is surely because we have heard its like before.

But where we have not heard the like so often, judgement is more difficult. How acceptable is the following judgement?

Alexius was a shrewd judge of a man's character, cleverly reading the innermost thoughts of his heart, and knowing the spiteful, malevolent nature of Bohemond, he rightly guessed what would happen.⁶

As with Macaulay and James II, it is fairly clear where the writer's sympathies lie, but without further information there is no basis for judging the source extract one way or the other. When we learn that the writer, Princess Anna Comnena, was the daughter of the Emperor Alexius, and that Count Bohemond was an old family enemy, then perhaps we smile at her natural bias. And, since passions over the fate of the Byzantine Empire tend not to rage all that fiercely nowadays, we are no doubt happy to accept that while no doubt Bohemond was a bad lot, doubtless the Byzantines were not pillars of virtue either. We worry less about bias in cases where we ourselves have no strong feeling one way or the other.

Often, of course, writers are not aware of their own bias, but this unconscious bias, because it tends to come through omissions rather than purple prose, is often the hardest to identify. It was this sense of a pervading bias by omission in historical writing about the American West that prompted Dee Brown to write his best-selling work on the fate of the American Indian, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. Brown deliberately set out to present a biased case, one biased entirely in favour of the Indians, in order to offset the massive anti-Indian bias of other writers:

Out of all these sources of almost forgotten oral history, I have tried to fashion a narrative of the conquest of the American West as the victims experienced it, using their own words whenever possible. Americans who have always looked westward when reading about this period should read this book facing eastward.⁷

Brown's work was not without its impact in British schools, where it formed an important inspiration for the unit on the American West in the Schools Council course. Since then, Brown's interpretation has gained so much currency that it is in effect the norm, reinforced not just by other writers but by a series of feature films critical of American expansion.

What do these examples of bias tell us? They tell us, firstly, about the writers. Dee Brown's reinterpretation of American history needs to be placed in the context of the painful process of heart-searching America was going through when he was writing, as a result of the Vietnam War. Bullock's view of Hitler was a reflection of the immediate post-war reaction to the excesses of the Nazi regime, while Eichmann's view of his own responsibility is both a result and a reflection of the nature of that regime.

Yet, none of this *necessarily* invalidates what the writers are saying. Even in Eichmann's case, a cynical reaction along the lines of 'They all say that' is not sufficient on its own to condemn him: bias alone is not proof of guilt.

Moreover, 'acceptable bias' is not unchanging. However unthinkable it might be at particular points, it is possible for the most generally accepted 'standard version' to be revised in the light of new evidence or interpretation. So far, revisionist attacks on the generally held view of the Holocaust have failed to impress because they rely so heavily on blatant distortion, falsification or suppression of the available evidence;⁸ however, A. J. P. Taylor's revision of the then current orthodoxy that held Hitler solely responsible for the outbreak of the war made considerable inroads on that theory,⁹ while even the apparently indefensible policy of appeasement has received a much better press recently than would have been dreamt possible even ten years ago.¹⁰

Distortion

Contrary to the common misconception, bias and distortion are not necessarily the same. Politicians are fond of accusing different branches of the media of bias and distortion, but what is distortion to one person can be fearless exposure of unpalatable truths to another.

I will define 'distortion' as the presentation, whether deliberate or not, of a verifiably false version of events, whether by exaggeration or by omission. Napoleon's own official version of the Battle of Marengo, at which he was virtually rescued from disaster by General Desaix, was carefully and deliberately distorted so that with each new version Desaix's role in the battle shrank in importance and Napoleon's grew. (We might mention in passing the poor Prince Regent's deluded version of the Battle of Waterloo in which he himself led cavalry charges against the Imperial Guard.) There are similar traits to be seen, of course, in the personality cults surrounding Stalin and other leaders of the same mould, showing both in historians' accounts and in paintings and photographs, either drawn or doctored to show Stalin taking a leading role in the events of 1917, while Trotsky was slowly but surely removed from the scene.

Less dramatic but just as important is the accusation that a picture of the past is distorted because it generalizes from too narrow a base. Those who challenge Dr Christopher Haigh's account of the progress of the English Reformation, for example, protest that he has extrapolated too much from his work on Lancashire, a strongly Catholic but hardly typical English county.¹¹ Similarly, accounts of the French Revolution that never look beyond Paris, or of the Industrial Revolution that ignore the survival of the rural way of life, can be accused of exaggeration from a narrow basis, or to put it another way, over-generalization. Of course, there is no question here of a deliberate attempt to distort the

past; but equally, the accusation is not just one of bias, but of a failure to look at things in their proper perspective.

Distortion can come about by accident. Historians make mistakes, misread documents or misunderstand their significance. Macaulay made a number of errors of this sort, most notably by confusing two different William Penns, which accounts for his unlikely portrait of the great Quaker as a time-serving courtier at a Catholic court. Years of theorizing on the origins of man were wasted because scientists were including Piltdown Man in their scheme of things. But whether arrived at through bias or accident, the result of distortion is the same: a version of the past that is fundamentally wrong.

Distortion is different from bias because it is saying something that, demonstrably, *is not true*. Of course, the distortion may well be a *result* of bias, and as such will be of interest to historians, but it should not be confused with the bias itself. Much as we might fume over the slant in a particular newspaper, bias merely induces us to write to the editor; actual distortion prompts us to contact the Press Council.

Objectivity

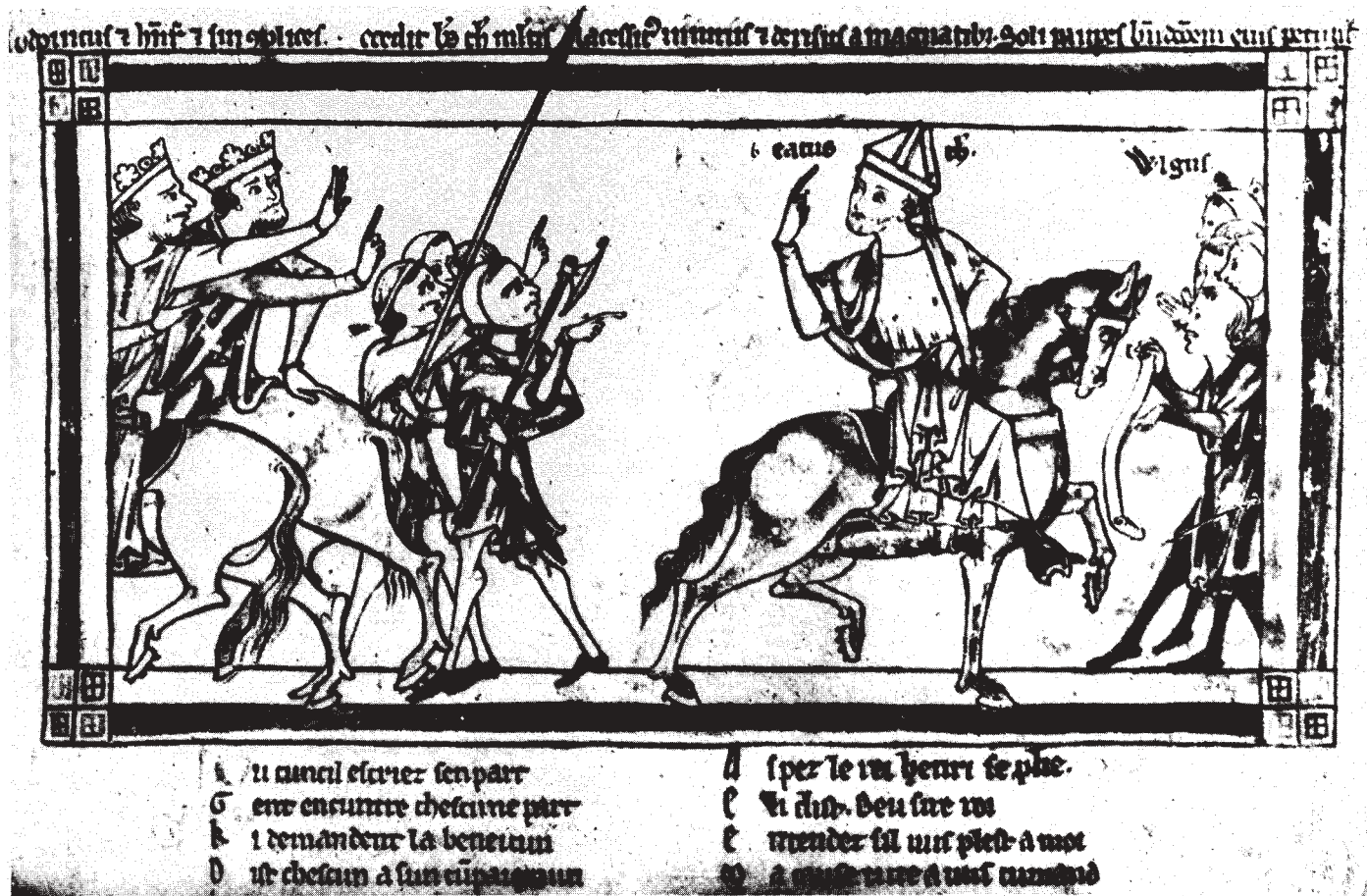
If we complain that a source is biased, the implication is that we would prefer a source that isn't: there is, of course, no such thing. The problem is that our conception of objectivity all too often gets confused with the notion of neutrality. This is quite mistaken. Paul Johnson's verdict on Thomas à Becket, for example, is hardly neutral, but it might well be claimed as objective:

Becket was the dangerous type: a man of enormous energy, with second-class brains and no sense of proportion.¹²

These are not exactly the measured tones of a judge's summing up, but they could convey the clear message of a jury's verdict. Nevertheless, it may be that neutral language gives a more reassuring impression of objectivity. A work of history written in such tones would almost certainly be unbearably tedious, but it might be expected that neutrality and objectivity are to be found in works of reference. Here, for example, is part of a dictionary definition of Becket:

Becket, Thomas (?1118–1170) Archbishop of Canterbury. Of Norman origin, he was educated in London, Paris, and Bologna. Henry II appointed him chancellor in 1155 and archbishop, despite Becket's unwillingness, in 1162. Becket opposed Henry's attempts to bring the church within the jurisdiction of the king's courts and insisted on the right of ecclesiastical courts to try clergy (see Clarendon, constitutions of).¹³

However, unemotional though this statement of facts is, it inevitably contains its own bias. The fact that



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Becket is listed in the dictionary at all, while other primates, for reasons of space, are omitted is itself a judgement. A Catholic dictionary would presumably have listed him as 'Becket, St Thomas'. From this entry, we learn little of his early life, so what is the significance of the few details that are recorded? Is it an unconscious bias towards academia that produces a list of schools but nothing on his family background, his favourite food or his religious beliefs?

Objectivity, even in so apparently neutral a work as a dictionary, is impossible in history, yet by implication it is precisely what all too often we lead children to expect:

Is Roger of Wendover likely to be biased?¹⁴

Do you think the account in Source 1 is fair, or is it biased?¹⁵

Source G is an artist's impression. Do you think it gives a reliable picture of living conditions in mid-nineteenth-century Britain? Explain your answer.¹⁶

Do you think Source D is a reliable source? Give reasons for your answer.¹⁷

Read Source C. Do you think Greeley is likely to be a reliable witness?¹⁸

What are the implications of these questions, all taken from current textbooks? That Roger of Wendover, if he is judged to be biased, must be lying through his teeth? That source 1, if biased, cannot be fair? That the picture in source G might not be reliable? (No explanation is given as to how a picture might be judged 'reliable'.) In questions like these, 'biased' becomes a euphemism for 'lying', and 'reliable' for 'true'. Yet what is an unreliable source? Essentially it is one which displays a high degree of distortion, and which therefore misleads us about what it relates: it is not, and should not be presented as, simply one with an obvious bias. (Indeed, arguably, the less obvious the bias, the more 'unreliable' the source, since it is more likely to trap the unwary historian.) But even here, 'unreliable' is an uncomfortable term. Spies' reports are notoriously 'unreliable' in terms of what they actually say, but they are essential fodder, and obviously 'reliable', for the historian of espionage. Louis XIV was often fed 'unreliable' reports from the provinces by his intendants, which would pose problems for the social historian of seventeenth-century France, but their very unreliability makes them both useful and reliable for the historian of French monarchical government.

On what basis do these authors expect children to judge this 'reliability'? On the basis of one short,

despairing comment on the Indians, taken out of context, children are expected to comment on the reliability of Horace Greeley as a source. They know nothing else of him: they are given no clue to the personality of the larger-than-life Republican editor, whose words were avidly read throughout the northern states during the Civil War, who thundered against slavery, and who had the ear of President Lincoln. What answer can possibly be expected?

Essentially, what is wrong with these questions is that they misrepresent the nature of historical sources: all sources are biased, so it makes little sense to ask children to identify the ones that are. They are, in other words, unhistorical questions, and it is unfair to throw them at children. Much the same holds good for questions about the usefulness of sources. To the question 'Is this source useful to a historian?' the only sensible answer is 'It depends what the historian wants to know.'

Detecting Bias

It should not be assumed from this that children should not be engaged in detecting bias: quite the reverse. Since all sources are biased, it is part and parcel of any process of evaluation that that bias should be identified. The realization that there is no such thing as a fully objective 'reliable' source, however much some writers and broadcasters strive for objectivity, is essential when it comes to applying this skill or aptitude to other sources, notably the news media. It makes much more sense to tell a class to *find* the bias in the *Times* or Sky TV version of events than it does to suggest the notion that one or both of them *might* be biased, leaving an unspoken assumption, readily picked up by children, that the guilty party had made everything up.

Conclusion

In the game of bowls, bias is the built-in tendency of the bowl to swerve from the straight when travelling across the green. The idea of the game is to take account of this bias, and still to get your bowl as close to the jack as possible. Much the same applies to historians. All sources have an in-built bias, some more marked than others, and some more obvious than others, but none are exempt from it. The historian's task is to discover that bias, and to plot the source accordingly on a mental map or picture of what was happening in the past. In this sense the familiar image of the historian as detective is highly misleading. A detective faces only one central question – 'Who did the deed?' – and all his or her investigations are geared to answering it. A witness who identifies the wrong suspect or whose memory goes to pieces may indeed be categorized as unreliable, but this is not a path historians should wander down too far. For the historian, all sources are biased, and yet all sources are reliable: it is merely a

question of finding out what they are reliable *for*. This applies, or should apply, to historians of all ages. Examiners and authors, please copy.

Notes

1. Department of Education and Science, *History in the National Curriculum* (HMSO, 1991).
2. Lord Macaulay: *History of England*, vol. 1 (Heron Books, 1969), p. 569.
3. For a collection of essays on the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I, see J. Loach and R. Tittler (eds), *The Mid-Tudor Policy, c. 1540–1560* (Macmillan, 1980). See also D. M. Loades, *The Reign of Mary Tudor* (Blackwell, 1992).
4. Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (Penguin, 1962).
5. Jochen von Lang (ed.), *Eichmann Interrogated* (Bodley Head, 1983).
6. E. R. A. Sewter (ed.), *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena* (Penguin, 1988).
7. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (Pan, 1970).
8. Much of the revisionist attack on the Holocaust comes from the right-wing 'Centre for Historical Review'. See, for example, R. Harwood, *Nuremberg* (Centre for Historical Review, 1978), which claims the trial was a Jewish conspiracy. Other examples of sophisms mounted by the revisionists include the claim that there were no gas chambers at Auschwitz and that Anne Frank's diary is a forgery. The well-known right-wing historian David Irving claimed in *Hitler's War* (Viking, 1977) that Hitler did not know about the Holocaust though the memoirs of Adolf Eichmann suggest that he did (see the *Daily Telegraph*, 13 January 1992).
9. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Hamish Hamilton).
10. See, for example, M. Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler* (Cambridge University Press, 1976) and J. Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1989).
11. See C. Haigh (ed.), *The Reign of Elizabeth I* (1985) and *Elizabeth I* (1988), P. G. Lake, 'Calvinism and the English Church, 1570–1635', *Past and Present*, 114 (1987) and the general discussion in G. W. Bernard, 'The Church of England, c. 1529–1642', *History*, 75, no. 244 (1990).
12. Paul Johnson, *The Offshore Islanders* (Penguin, 1975).
13. J. P. Kenyon, *A Dictionary of British History* (Secker and Warburg, 1981).
14. Jon Nichol, *Thinking History: Medieval Realms* (Blackwell, 1991).
15. Schools History Project, *Contrasts and Connections* (John Murray, 1991).
16. Paula Bartley, *Life in the Industrial Revolution* (Edward Arnold, 1987).
17. Paul Shuter and John Child, *The Changing Face of Britain* (Heinemann, 1989).
18. Fiona Reynoldson and Paul Shuter, *Indians of North America* (Heinemann, 1992).

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