

Notes on David Lowenthal's ideas about the past as "a foreign country"

Abstract

This essay seeks to recover and discuss David Lowenthal's ideas about the past as "a foreign country". The author of this paper attempts to develop a line of thought that deals with the complexity—and the difficulty—of understanding History as a science that produces fundamental knowledge in order to comprehend society. Hence, the purpose is to highlight the meaning of History and its core relevance to understanding humankind. In the end, it is proposed to think of History not as the mere identification of former events, but as the possibility of re-signification of the marks of the past, creating new perspectives for the analysis of the present and the future.

Keywords: geography, history, past, foreign country, artifacts

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Essay

Why should people study History? Isn't it just about the past that cannot be changed? Actually, there are distinguished ways to look back and interpret what is by gone. All of them matter. One of these perspectives is built upon David Lowenthal's ideas about the past as "a foreign country", from which he states that: "The past is everywhere. All around us lie features with more or less familiar antecedents. Relics, histories, memories suffuse human experience. Most past traces ultimately perish, and all that remain are altered. But they are collectively enduring. Noticed or ignored, cherished or spurned, the past is omnipresent".¹ This essay seeks to recover and discuss these ideas through a line of thought that deals with the complexity—and the difficulty—of understanding History as a science that produces fundamental knowledge in order to comprehend society. Hence, the purpose is to highlight the meaning of History and its core relevance to understanding humankind.

Here is an interesting point of view: "We are inescapably the creatures of the past we have come through, including its own attitudes toward previous past".² If such an assertion is held to be true, it not only implies a fundamental importance of the past for the constitution of the present moment, but it also entails the fact that the past is not fixed in time and space, as it assumes different meanings according to the way in which it is looked at. Moreover, as Lowenthal³ explains, it becomes possible to fabricate new pasts according to cultural or economic interests. This means that History can be forgotten, denied, invented, replaced...even by new facts, symbols, events and clarifications. Thus there is a History not as a faithful record of the past, but constantly dynamic, which is reconstructed as the complex meanings of the present also reconfigure themselves. That is: "What we know of history differs from what actually happened not merely because evidence of past events has been lost or tempered with, or because the task of sifting through it is unending, but also because the changing present continually requires new interpretations of what has taken place".³

From this perspective, knowing the past actually involves recognizing the past. The means for this to be delineated can be qualified in two categories: artifacts and memory. Since both categories are too complex to be discussed in a short essay, they are delimited as simply as possible: artifacts are concrete elements such as objects, constructions, landscape marks, documents, etc., while the memory, individual or collective, is immaterial, being preserved by its repetition, usually orally. The two categories are neither absolute. Artifacts can have their meaning changing according to one's perspective of the present and the past and also the artifacts themselves change. Lowenthal,² four decades ago, draw attention to a very interesting fact: memorabilia has been changing rapidly, transforming the sense of antiquity to increasingly new artifacts—five-year old phones, for instance, are obsolete objects from the past. This idea changes the feeling of nostalgia and, consequently, of the past and History itself. Memory is fallible since it is not possible to recall a previous experience as it was. According to Lowenthal,³ memories of past events changes as they are accessed to be counted or just remembered: "we cannot be sure that the entire past is not invented; perhaps the world was created just five minutes ago, as Bertrand Russel suggested, with relics and memories of a past that never was".

That is to say, no matter how one seeks to identify the past, it will never be unchanging. This means that the concreteness of a building that has been preserved for centuries is as solid as a story told about last week: things have happened, but what one remembers and keeps about them says a lot more about the meaning of the present moment than about the past it is intended to store. As Lowenthal³ stated: "Today's past is an accumulation of mankind's memories, seen through our own generation's particular perspectives"; and once again: "Every trace of the past is a testament not only to its initiators but to its inheritors, not only to the spirit of the past, but to the perspectives of the present".³ All that has been expressed throughout this essay only serves to demonstrate that History should not be understood as the mere identification of former events, but as the possibility of re-signification of the marks of the past, creating new perspectives for the analysis of the present and the future. Last but not least, it was

intended to share Lowenthal's metaphor that going back to past—be it through artifacts, memory or both—is like visiting a foreign country: language is different, ways are different, culture is different...but one is also different every time he or she tries to go back to the past, making it subject to changes. May these changes be caused by one's interpretation or perception or even changes in facts themselves that could be considered immutable, because they were somehow recorded either in documents, objects, landscape, landmarks and/or individual or collective memory?

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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