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## What Constitutes Evidence for an Historical Explanation?

Kenneth Feigenbaum

What constitutes evidence for an historical explanation? What constitutes evidence for the explanations of the falls and rises of civilization? Better, what constitutes evidence for the best explanation of this phenomenon?

The purpose of this article is to acquaint the readers of the *Comparative Civilizations Review* with the work of a philosopher of history, Raymond Martin. In particular, I will present his approach on what constitutes how a decision should be made as to which explanation of an historical event is superior to another and why this is so.

In Chapter 3 of his major work, *The Past Within Us: An Empirical Approach to Philosophy of History*, titled Explanatory Competition, he presents his argument as to how by engaging in explanatory competition a historian might be led to the best explanation of an historical phenomenon. Martin analyzes the fall of the Mayan civilization as a prime example of his approach to the question of “best explanation.”

According to Martin, “The overriding explanatory objective of historians is to show that their explanations are better than competing explanations, and they attempt to do this by arguing both for their explanation and against competing explanations.”<sup>1</sup>

Martin succinctly expresses himself as to what all of us who are curious about the past want to know: knowing what happened, which includes why it happened; and knowing the reasons as to why it did. Martin compares the effect of “looking through a rear window” to the problems of history in which only parts of historical events can be fully viewed.

“The historical quest to know what happened and what it means is so fascinating, epistemologically, because our “rear window” doesn’t look out on this past directly, but, rather, only on the scattered past events that have made it to the present. On the basis of such scraps, our so-called evidence, we have to piece together a coherent account of what must have happened, and we must do it without much help from experimental science.”

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, p. 31.

“Clearly the overwhelmingly central complication that arises in this project is that there are always alternative ways to interpret these traces (our evidence) so that an essential part of our task as historians is to figure out which among these alternative interpretations is best, which involves among other things, determining which one among them is most likely to be true.”

“Yes, true.”

For Martin believes that “the fundamental point of the historical quest, from the start, has been the truth.” This truth approximates to the correspondence theory of truth<sup>2</sup> and what Donald Spence, in *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis*, terms “historical truth.”<sup>3</sup> A history where coherence is the test of an explanation falls short of Martin’s goal.

Martin describes the lowland Mayan civilization as one that had achieved by the end of the eighth century A.D. “an impressive degree of intellectual, social, and artistic development. Their economic, religious and social structures were highly evolved. Their writing system was the most sophisticated in the New World. They had made important discoveries in mathematics. Then suddenly their civilization began its rapid decline.”<sup>4</sup>

Martin points out that this decline can be precisely delineated. This is due to the fact that the Mayans were monument builders (stelae) and used them to write on, to describe calendrical information. Early on, nineteen of the major population centers erected stelae. However, as of A.D. 889, when tradition dictated that stelae be erected, only three centers erected stelae, with the last known Classic Period calendrical inscription being carved in A.D. 909.

The traditional accounts of the collapse of Mayan civilization, according to Martin, tend to stress a single explanation for its happening, but more recent explanations combine different elements of the traditional explanations. Martin briefly sketches the main arguments archaeologists have used for the explanations of the collapse of the Mayan civilization. He then suggests a taxonomy of these arguments and next addresses how the archaeologists try to show how their explanations are better than competing explanations.

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<sup>2</sup> Note: Professor Feigenbaum, a psychologist, means by this the idea that the truth or falsity of a statement is determined strictly by how it relates to the world and whether or not it accurately describes the world.

<sup>3</sup> Donald P. Spence, *Narrative truth and historical truth : meaning and interpretation in psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, 1982, and other editions.

<sup>4</sup> Martin, p.31.

- The first set of explanations are termed “catastrophic” explanations. That is, the collapse is due to natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, climatic changes and epidemics.
- The second set of explanations he terms “ecology” explanations. These explanations involve overpopulation and overly intensive agriculture. The subsistence failure occurs because of overpopulation and agricultural practices.
- The last category of the major explanations for the collapse of the Mayan civilization is that it was caused by “social dysfunction.” This was brought about by peasant revolt, intra-center warfare, external invasion, and trade disruption.

Martin provides some of the rationale for each set of explanations and then goes about providing evidence that each explanation contains some major flaws. He also discusses whether the explanations of the decline of Mayans given by the archaeologists, anthropologists and historians employ positive arguments for their respective positions and/or negative explanations for competing ones.

Martin says that for the sake of simplification, only two factors are relevant to determining which of two competing explanations is the better: the degree in which each is justified by the available evidence, and the degree to which each is sufficient.

The larger question of how historians show that one explanation of some event is better than competing explanations of that event reduces to three simple questions.

- 1) How do historians show that one explanation is better justified than competing explanations?
- 2) How do historians show that one explanation is more sufficient than competing explanations? And
- 3) What is the relationship between showing that one explanation is better justified or more nearly sufficient than competing explanations and showing that it is better than competing explanations?<sup>5</sup>

The specific example of the answers to these questions is provided by his analysis of the explanations of the fall of the Mayan civilization. He reviews the criteria of both negative and positive arguments for each of the explanations of the fall.

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<sup>5</sup> Martin, p.45.

Several reviews of the book followed its publication, for example (Dray, 1990) and (Roth, 1992). Although both are generally favorable, both point out some weaknesses; Martin, they maintain, does not present a specific methodology for determining what is “sufficiency” in determining the validity of an explanation.

According to Roth, “Martin, then, although condemning positivist methodological prescriptions for their impracticality, offers in their stead a standard of correctness which for all intents and purposes is inaccessible.” He writes that Martin is careful to insert the term “sufficient” when speaking of causal explanations for which covering laws are necessary, but he observes that historians, however, typically argue over the priority of various causes, which Martin terms “weighted explanations” or “causal weighting.”

Roth claims that Martin’s approach reaches only for partial causes without a definitive criterion to prefer one over the other. Roth says that historians do not claim to know what counts as a set of conditions for the explanations of the events that they attempt to analyze. “Choosing the best explanations based upon inadequate or incomplete data eventually leads to a choice based upon one’s values.” Martin concedes in his text that “the plausibility of particular explanations cannot be separated from the larger interpretative framework of which they are a part.” Thus, they are holistic in nature.

David Hackett Fisher (Fischer, 1970) presents to his readers a set of what he terms “Historical Fallacies.” His fallacies are divided up into distinct types. The types are (a) Fallacies of Question-Framing; (b) Fallacies of Factual Verification; (c) Fallacies of Factual Significance; (d) Fallacies of Generalization; (e) Fallacies of Narration; (f) Fallacies of Causation; (g) Fallacies of Motivation; (h) Fallacies of Composition; (i) Fallacies of False Analogy; (j) Fallacies of Semantical Distortions; and (k) Fallacies of Substantive Distraction. Fischer provides examples of each of his “fallacies” through the analysis of the texts of many historians.

I propose two additional criteria or methods to add to Martin’s empirical approach that may assist in determining the “sufficiency” of an historical explanation. The first is to employ the historical fallacy tests of Fisher and the second is a detailed analysis of the counterfactuals that the historian presents in his or her explanation. The latter is supported by Martin. Admittedly, all counterfactuals are not of equal value; some are more powerful in rebuking an argument than are others. Thus, a set of criteria as to what constitutes a strong counterfactual and a weak one needs to be expressed and then fully developed.

Much of the content of the *Comparative Civilizations Review* focuses upon history and, specifically, the comparative study of the history of civilizations. It is hoped that presenting Martin’s approach to the journal’s readers might help in the adjudication of historical debates.

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