

## COMMENT

# Do not fear historical interpretations

## THE TRUTH IS OUT

**THERE:** The search for knowledge empowers ordinary citizens to think with an open mind

**H**ISTORIANS and non-historians seek truths and search for patterns in human affairs to make sense of the past, to understand the present and to be prepared to face the future. The ways they interpret and explain the past enables them to create theories or schools of thought.

Everywhere, historians and non-historians alike distort history. Therefore, it is important for all citizens to develop a mastery of historical literacy.

One aspect of historical literacy is to use history and its theories as tools of thought. The authentic search for knowledge empowers ordinary citizens to be clear in their thinking and not gullible in the use of history as indoctrination and propaganda.

The major theories of history include the cyclical, rise and fall, progression, challenges and responses, the theological, the deterministic, the great mind-great ideas, the ordinary-everyman, the social forces, the chance-historical

accident, the geographic and the teleology-final cause human nature theory.

Historians and philosophers noted important perspectives about history. Ibn Khadun, the father of sociology and one of the greatest historians, wrote: "History is the record of human society, or world civilisation; of the changes that take place in the nature of that society, such as savagery, sociability, and group solidarity; of revolutions and uprisings by one set of people against another with the resulting kingdoms and states, with their various ranks; ... and, in general, of all the transformations that society undergoes by its very nature."

Anaxagoras asserts that "reason governs the world". Reason is seen as the mainspring of human advancement — the ideal drive to realise a preconceived end.

G.W.F. Hegel notes that "spirit or mind is the only motive principle of history". David Hume said: "History's chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature", and Alexander Pope asserted "the proper study of mankind is man".

The cyclical theory, that history repeats itself, states that civilisations, city states, empires, kingdoms, dynasties, nations, colonial and military rule, rise; go through ages of glory, decline and fall.

The Great Ideas school of

thought is one where progress occurs when there is an idea or a thesis and a challenge to the idea; an antithesis. In this dialectic, there is a synthesis and a new idea is arrived at to be challenged again.

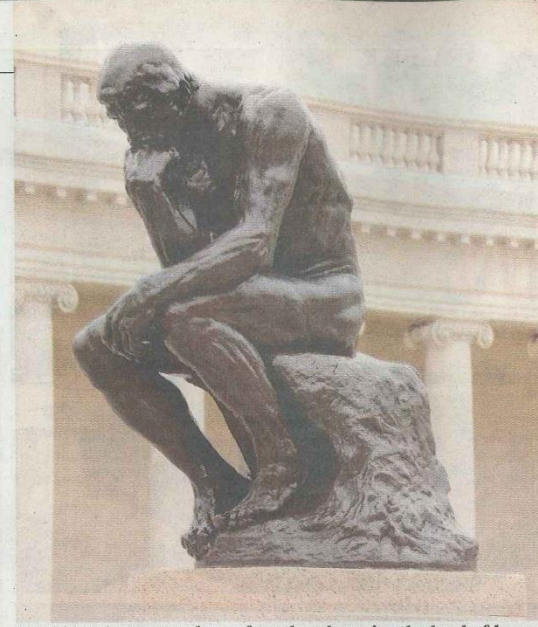
Karl Marx asserted that the economic shifts of the means of production moved history in the linear progression. Those who take the deterministic view of history see communism, religion and democracy as the goal of human history, related to evolution of creation. The Great Ideas theory focuses on institutions, ideas, power and sees that "no army can stop an idea whose time has come".

The linear view is also related to the view that religions brought great transformation and changed the history of mankind. The theological theory is that history was the manifestation of God's plans. God is the Almighty director of the historical procession and divine providence ultimately shaped the course of events.

The Great Man theory holds that men of character and destiny will shape the course of events, or that people become famous through associations with events they did not cause to happen. These great men and women include pioneers, inventors, explorers, discoverers, the military conqueror, the dictators, the hero-emancipator, divine



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monarchs, tyrants or law giver.

Social historians, sociologists, and anthropologists tend to take the view of the significance of the everyman, of the unrecorded or cumulative efforts of ordinary persons, or the unsung and unknown hero or of the many who shape human history.

Geographic theories find that landscape, environment and ecology determine the history of communities and mankind — necessity and survival being the mother of invention.

New age thinking of deconstruction thought challenge traditional history, which is considered as oppressive. They propose a fundamental change in society's historical thinking. Postmodernist historians agree with Nietzsche that "there are no facts, only interpretation".

History is to be seen and written from women's voices, indigenous voices and voices of the non-mainstream person and communities. Liberal historians, who are socialists or communists, also believe in the notion of historical progress.

Whatever their schools of thoughts, explanations and interpretations of facts, good historians are seekers of truths who raise the level of human thinking with authentic constructions of world views.

Mastery of historical literacy empowers and enables the ordinary person to be unafraid and unpersuaded by the distorters who use history to shape distorted futures.

With the variety of historical theories, how do we interpret Malaysian existence?

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