



(MUDIMA)



Introduction, Function, and Purpose of Legal History: A Conceptual and Practical Review

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: History of Law, Function of Law, Purpose of Law, Law Reform, Normative Legal Studies

Received : 3 September

Revised : 21 October

Accepted : 20 November

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide an in-depth explanation of the definition, functions, and objectives of the discipline of legal history. As a branch of knowledge that bridges the past with the present, legal history is often overlooked, even though it plays a crucial role in the formation, interpretation, and reform of law. This study uses normative legal research methods with a library research approach. Data were collected through the analysis of documents, textbooks, scientific journals, and other relevant literature. The results of the study indicate that (1) the understanding of legal history is not limited to the chronology of legal events, but is a critical study of the evolution of norms, institutions, and legal thought in its social, political, and economic context. (2) The functions of legal history include the educational function (providing understanding), the pragmatic function (assisting in interpretation and formation of law), and the critical function (revealing the ideology and power behind the law). The main goal of studying legal history is to understand the identity and character of a legal system, avoid past mistakes, and provide a strong foundation for future law reform. This study concludes that legal history is an essential analytical tool for academics, practitioners, and policymakers to understand the law in a comprehensive, dynamic, and contextual manner.

INTRODUCTION

Law is a living and dynamic phenomenon. It does not exist in a vacuum, but rather grows and develops along with the pulse of human civilization. What we recognize today as the legal system, whether it is the Criminal Code, civil law on inheritance, or the state constitution, is the end product of a long, complex, and often conflict-filled evolutionary process. Moreover, every norm, article, and legal institution we know today is the final product of a lengthy historical process, full of debates, conflicting interests, and adaptation to social, political, and economic changes.

In modern legal studies, especially in law faculties, the focus is often too directed at the dogmatic and positivist aspects of law. Students are taught to memorize articles, understand the formal structure of laws, and apply them to concrete cases (law in the books). This approach, although important, has a fundamental weakness: it neglects the 'why' dimension. Why does this law exist? Why is it worded this way and not another? What social, political, or economic context gave rise to it?

This is where the urgency of Legal History lies. Legal history is a discipline that answers the question of 'why.' It is a bridge that connects the past of law (*das sein historis*) with what should happen in the present and the future (*das sollen*).

Without historical understanding, a jurist (legal expert) would be like a 'craftsman' skilled in using tools, but never understanding why the tools were created or how to fundamentally repair them. An ancient Latin adage states, "*Historia est magistra vitae*," which means history is the teacher of life. In the context of law, this adage finds strong relevance. Legal history serves as a teacher that provides wisdom, teaches about past mistakes and successes, and offers a perspective for structuring future law (*ius constituendum*).

Without an understanding of history, a legal expert is like a doctor who treats the symptoms without ever understanding the patient's medical history.

For example, to understand agrarian law in Indonesia, we cannot simply read the 1960 Basic

Agrarian Law (UUPA). We must look back, understand the concept of *domein verklaring* during the Dutch colonial period, examine the dualism of law (customary law vs. Western law), and grasp the spirit of nationalism after independence that underlies the unification of the law.

Another example is in Indonesia, where the relevance of legal history is very prominent. The Indonesian legal system is a complex mosaic consisting of various historical layers: customary law that has existed for thousands of years, religious law (particularly Islamic law), and Dutch colonial law (Civil Law) inherited through the principle of concordance. To understand why our Civil Code (KUHPerdata) still refers to the Dutch *Burgerlijk Wetboek*, why there is a dualism in land law (between customary law and national agrarian law), or why there is an ongoing debate about the Draft Criminal Code (RKUHP), we inevitably have to refer to history.

Unfortunately, this discipline is often considered a supplementary course that is "impractical." This assumption is greatly mistaken. Legal interpretation conducted by judges, the drafting of laws (legislation) by the parliament, and policy analysis by the government, all will be sharper and wiser if grounded in a strong understanding of history. Therefore, this research is important to undertake. This essay aims to clearly and systematically articulate what the meaning, function, and purpose of legal history actually are, in order to reaffirm its relevance in legal education and practice in Indonesia.

B. Problem Formulation

Based on the background that has been described, the main problems in this study can be formulated as follows:

1. What is the fundamental meaning of the discipline of legal history?
2. What are the main functions of legal history in the context of education and legal practice?
3. What are the essential objectives to be achieved through the study of legal history?

C. Research Objectives

In line with the problem formulation above, the objective of this study is:

To describe and analyze the fundamental understanding of the discipline of legal history comprehensively.

1. To identify and outline the various main functions of legal history, including educational, pragmatic, and critical functions.
2. To explain and formulate the essential objectives of studying legal history for the development of legal science and legal reform.

D. Research Benefits

This research is expected to provide benefits as follows:

1. Theoretical (Academic) Benefits:

Contributing thoughts to the discipline of Law, particularly in strengthening the position of Legal History as one of the main pillars of legal studies.

○ Serving as a reference for students, lecturers, and researchers who wish to deepen their study of the philosophy, theory, and history of law.

○ Providing intellectual contributions to the body of knowledge, especially in the disciplines of Law, Legal History, and Legal Philosophy. Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on the methodology and importance of studying legal history within the higher education law curriculum in Indonesia.

1. Practical Benefits:

- B For Legal Practitioners (Judges, Prosecutors, Advocates): Provides insights

for carrying out legal interpretation (especially historical interpretation) more deeply and contextually, or offering a historical perspective in interpreting laws (historical interpretation) so that the ratio legis (reasoning) behind a norm can be found.

- **For Legislators (Lawmakers):** Provides a basis for thinking to avoid repeating past legislative mistakes and to design laws that are more responsive to the needs of the times.
- **For Academics/Instructors:** Can serve as a reference material in teaching courses such as Introduction to Law or Legal History, to emphasize the relevance of this discipline.
- **For Law Students:** Provides a strong foundational understanding of why they need to study legal history, as well as equipping them with more in-depth legal analysis skills that go beyond purely textual interpretation.
- **For the General Public:** Provides education that law is not something rigid and absolute, but rather a product of history that can and should continue to be improved.

METHODS

Law is a living and dynamic phenomenon. It does not exist in a vacuum, but rather grows and develops along with the pulse of human civilization. What we recognize today as the legal system—whether it is the Criminal Code, civil law regarding inheritance, or the state constitution—is the end product of a long, complex, and often conflict-laden evolutionary process. Moreover, every norm, article, and legal institution we know today is the ultimate product of a lengthy historical process, full of debates, conflicting interests, and adaptation to social, political, and economic changes.

In modern legal studies, especially in law faculties, the focus is often overly concentrated on the dogmatic and positivist aspects of law. Students

are taught to memorize articles, understand the formal structure of legislation, and apply them to concrete cases (law in the books). This approach, although important, has a fundamental weakness: it neglects the 'why' dimension. Why does this law exist? Why is it written in this way and not another? What are the social, political, or economic contexts that gave rise to it?

This is where the urgency of Legal History lies. Legal history is a discipline that answers these 'why' questions. It is a bridge that connects the past of law (*das sein historis*) with what ought to happen in the present and future (*das sollen*).

Without historical understanding, a jurist (legal expert) would be like a 'craftsman' skilled in using tools, but never understanding why the tools were created or how to fundamentally repair them. An ancient Latin adage states, "*Historia est magistra vitae*," which means history is the teacher of life. In the context of law, this adage finds strong relevance. Legal history serves as a teacher that provides wisdom, teaches about past mistakes and successes, and offers a perspective for structuring future law (*ius constituendum*).

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Another example is in Indonesia, where the relevance of legal history is very prominent. The Indonesian legal system is a complex mosaic consisting of various historical layers: customary law that has existed for thousands of years, religious law (particularly Islamic law), and Dutch colonial law (Civil Law) inherited through the principle of concordance. To understand why our Civil Code (KUHPerdata) still refers to the Dutch *Burgerlijk*

Wetboek, why there is a dualism in land law (between customary law and national agrarian law), or why there is an ongoing debate about the Draft Criminal Code (RKUHP), we cannot avoid referring to history.

Unfortunately, this discipline is often considered an elective course that is 'impractical.' This assumption is greatly mistaken. Legal interpretation carried out by judges, the drafting of laws (legislation) by the House of Representatives, and policy analysis by the government will all become sharper and wiser if grounded in a strong understanding of history. Therefore, this research is important to conduct. This essay seeks to clearly and systematically articulate what the definition, function, and purpose of legal history truly are, in order to reaffirm its relevance in legal education and practice in Indonesia.

B. Problem Formulation

1. Based on the background that has been described, the main problems in this study can be formulated as follows:
2. What is the fundamental understanding of the discipline of legal history?
3. What are the main functions of legal history in the context of education and legal practice?
4. What are the essential objectives aimed to be achieved through the study of legal history?

C. Research Objectives

In line with the problem formulation above, the objectives of this research are:

1. To describe and analyze the fundamental understanding of the discipline of legal history comprehensively.
2. To identify and explain the various main functions of legal history, whether educational, pragmatic, or critical.
3. To explain and formulate the essential objectives of studying legal history for the development of legal science and legal reform.

D. Research Benefits

This research is expected to provide the following benefits:

1. Theoretical (Academic) Benefits:

- Contribute ideas to the discipline of Legal Science, particularly in strengthening the position of Legal History as one of the main pillars of legal studies.
- Serve as a reference for students, lecturers, and researchers who wish to deepen their study of philosophy, theory, and legal history.
- Provide intellectual contributions to the body of knowledge, particularly in the disciplines of Law, History, and Legal Philosophy. Theoretically, this research enriches the literature regarding methodology and the importance of legal history studies within the law higher education curriculum in Indonesia.

2. Practical Benefits:

For Legal Practitioners (Judges, Prosecutors, Lawyers): Provides insights for conducting legal interpretation (especially historical interpretation) in a deeper and more contextual manner, or offers a historical perspective in interpreting laws (historical interpretation), enabling them to find the ratio legis (reasoning) behind a norm.

- For Legislators (Law Makers): Provides a foundation of thought to avoid repeating past legislative mistakes and to design laws that are more responsive to the needs of the time.
- For Academics/Teachers: Can be used as a reference material in teaching courses such as Introduction to Law or Legal History, to emphasize the relevance of this discipline.
- For Law Students: Provides a strong foundation for understanding why they need to study legal history, and equips them with the ability to conduct deeper, non-textual legal analysis.

For the General Public: Providing education that the law is not something rigid and absolute, but rather a product of history that can and should continuously be improved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Definition of Legal History: More than Just Chronology

There is often a misunderstanding that legal history is merely a chronological list of when a law was made or repealed. This understanding is too superficial. The fundamental concept of legal history encompasses several dimensions:

1. **Study of Origins:** Legal history traces where a norm or institution comes from. For example, where does the concept of a 'legal person' (rechtspersoon) that allows a corporation to act like a human being originate?

The answer can be found in Roman Law and the development of Church Law (Canon Law) in the Middle Ages.

1. Study of Evolution and Change:

The history of law studies why and how laws change. These changes rarely occur solely because of the good intentions of legislators. They are usually driven by external factors:

- **Economic Changes:** The birth of modern commercial law (Lex Mercatoria) was driven by the rise of trade in Europe. The birth of labor law was driven by the Industrial Revolution.
- **Political Changes:** The fall of the New Order in Indonesia in 1998 prompted major changes in constitutional law (Amendments to the 1945 Constitution).
- **Socio-Cultural Changes:** Changes in public views on gender equality have driven revisions of marriage law and inheritance law in many countries.
- **Continuity and Discontinuity:** The history of law also highlights the phenomena of continuity and discontinuity. An example of continuity is how the Civil Code (Burgerlijk Wetboek), a legacy of Dutch colonial law, is still in force in

Indonesia almost 80 years after independence, albeit with many adjustments. An example of discontinuity is the enactment of the 1960 Basic Agrarian Law (UUPA), which consciously "broke" and repealed the 1870 Agrarische Wet and the colonial domain declaration concept.

1. **Study of Context:** The history of law places law within its social context. It studies law in action in the past. How was colonial criminal law applied? Was it applied the same way for Europeans and indigenous people? This is a study of critical legal history.

Thus, legal history is an interdisciplinary and critical study of the origins, evolution, and socio-political context of legal norms and institutions.

To Understand "What" Legal History is, We Need to Examine it from Various Dimensions.

1. The Historical Dimension in Law Basically, every legal product is a product of history. Laws do not appear suddenly. They are a response to a social, political, or economic problem at a certain time. For example, the enactment of the Agrarian Law (UUPA) in 1960 in Indonesia cannot be understood without looking at the dualistic and oppressive history of colonial agrarian politics.
2. Legal history, in this sense, is the study of how certain legal norms or institutions (for example, the institution of marriage, the institution of debt, or the court system) have evolved over time. It tracks changes and continuity. Why do some rules persist for centuries, while others disappear quickly? What factors cause this? These are the questions that legal history tries to answer.

2. Legal History as a Science

As a field of study, legal history is a branch of both history and law. It is an auxiliary science that is vital to both.

- For Historians: Legal history provides data and understanding of how past societies governed themselves. Legal documents (ancient laws, court records) are the best primary sources for understanding the social values, power structures, and economy of an era.

- For Legal Experts (Jurists): Legal history provides context. It frees jurists from the 'textual prison' (merely reading the articles). It teaches that laws that seem logical and neutral today may have, in the past, been the result of complex political compromises or even oppression.

Therefore, the history of law is not merely a chronology. Compiling a list of when a law was enacted is not legal history. Legal history is a critical analysis of why a law was enacted, whose interests it protected, what impacts it caused, and why it was later amended or repealed.

3. Experts' Views on Legal History

To enrich understanding, here are some expert views on this discipline:

- Friedrich Carl von Savigny: (Although better known as the founder of the Historical School), his view is the foundation of legal history. For him, law is a reflection of the Volksgeist (the spirit of the people). Therefore, to understand a nation's law, one must study the nation's history, because that is where the law organically developed.

- Sir Henry Maine: In his work Ancient Law, he compared the evolution of law in various civilizations. He is famous for his thesis that society moves "from Status to Contract." This is a classic example of how legal history analyzes patterns of legal evolution broadly.

- Purnadi Purbacaraka and Soerjono Soekanto: Define legal history as a study that examines the origins and development of legal systems in society, and tries to understand their relationship with other social factors.

From these various perspectives, it can be synthesized that the Definition of Legal History is an interdisciplinary field of study that systematically and critically examines the

origins, formation processes, development, and changes of legal principles, norms, institutions, and legal thought within a specific spatial and temporal context, in order to understand their meaning and relevance for the present.

B. Essential Functions of Legal History

Why bother studying the history of law? Because it has a very concrete function for the present.

1. Educational Function (Education):

- The most basic function is to provide understanding and wisdom.
- By studying legal history, a jurist no longer views law as an "absolute command from heaven." They will realize that law is human-made, full of compromises, interests, and sometimes mistakes.
- This fosters a critical and humble attitude toward the law. They will understand that the law that exists today is not the "end of history," but only one chapter in a book that continues to be written.

2. Pragmatic Function (Practical):

- **For Judges (Interpretation):** Legal history is a vital tool for legal interpretation. This is called Historical Interpretation. When a judge is confused about the meaning of a provision in the Civil Code (inherited from the Dutch), they will look for the *Memorie van Toelichting* (Explanatory Memorandum) from the process of creating the law in the Dutch parliament hundreds of years ago. They are looking for the original intent of the lawmaker. ○ Going further, judges can also use Teleological-Historical Interpretation, which not only looks at the intent at the time it was made but also considers how the purpose (*telos*) of the norm has evolved throughout history to address contemporary challenges. ○ For Legislators (Law-Making): Legal history serves as a "warehouse" of lessons learned. When planning to create a new law on financial technology (fintech), legislators

can look at the history of how law responded to technological innovations in the past (for example, the response to the telegraph or banking). This helps avoid repeating mistakes.

1. Critical Function (Ideological):

- This is a function that is often forgotten. The history of law can be used as a tool to "deconstruct" the law.
- It can reveal that laws that appear neutral are actually tools to perpetuate the power of certain groups. (In line with the views of Critical Legal Studies).
- Example: The history of colonial agrarian law reveals that laws (e.g., *Agrarische Wet 1870*) were created not for justice, but to facilitate economic exploitation by foreign private capital.
- Another example: The history of laws regarding women can show how marriage laws in the past often institutionalized the subordination of women under the authority of their husbands (*patria potestas*).
- This critical function is important for progressive legal reform movements aimed at social justice.

2. Inspirational and Legislative Function

This function is future-oriented (*ius constituendum*).

Sources of Inspiration for Legal Reform:

When a country wants to reform its laws (for example, the drafting of the Indonesian Criminal Code), legal history offers a 'menu' of solutions. We can look at how other countries have solved similar problems in the past, or we can 'rediscover' values from customary law (our past laws) that might still be relevant to adopt.

- **Legislative Function (For Lawmakers):** Legal history provides a foundation or justification for legislators. When drafting the Academic Draft of a bill, historical studies are mandatory. This is to ensure that the new law has strong roots, does not conflict with the

nation's historical values, and does not repeat past legislative mistakes.

C. Main Objectives of Studying Legal History

The ultimate goal of studying legal history is to improve future conditions.

1. Understanding the Identity of the Legal System:

- Every legal system has a "character." The Indonesian legal system is a complex mix of Civil Law (Dutch/European), Customary Law, and Islamic Law.
- The purpose of legal history is to understand how these three elements interact, conflict, and influence each other, so that we understand the "DNA" of our own legal system.

2. Providing a Basis for Law Reform:

- The noblest goal of legal history is to serve as a guide for reform.
- Example: Reforming the Criminal Code in Indonesia (the Draft Criminal Code) is an effort to "decolonize" the Dutch colonial criminal law. This process must use the study of legal history to answer: (1) What is the philosophy behind the old Criminal Code (e.g., philosophy of retribution)?
- (2) What values (e.g., restorative justice, customary law) do we want to incorporate into the new Criminal Code?
- The history of law (especially the Savigny School) warns that reforms should not blindly adopt foreign laws but should be derived from the *Volksgeist* or the values that live within Indonesian society itself, so that the law can later be effective and accepted.

3. Sharpening Comparative Legal Analysis:

- The history of law allows us to compare legal systems intelligently.
- We can understand why England adheres to Common Law (because of the history of the centralist Norman kings who rejected the reception of Roman Law) while France adheres to Civil Law (due to the history of the French Revolution and Napoleon's Codification, which rejected the power of feudal judges).
- Comparisons of law that ignore history will be misleading. They will think differences are merely technical, when in fact the differences are philosophical and historical.
- This understanding is important in the era of globalization, where interaction between legal systems is inevitable.

1. Finding Context (Legal Contextualization)

The main purpose of studying legal history is to place law in its proper context. Law is not an abstract, universal mathematical formula. Law is contextual—it is bound by space (*locus*) and time (*tempus*). Studying legal history aims to prevent a jurist from becoming a "craftsman" of legislation who can only apply articles rigidly (legalism). The goal is to produce "wise" jurists who understand that a legal provision may be just in one historical context, but may become unjust in another. They understand the "spirit" of the law, not just its "letter."

1. Understanding the Evolution and Dynamics of Law

The second goal is to instill the awareness that law evolves. Law is not static; it keeps moving.

What was considered a crime in the past (for example, holding beliefs different from the king) may now be guaranteed as a human right. Conversely, what was once considered normal (for example, dumping waste into rivers) is now an environmental crime. With this awareness, a jurist will be

more open to changes and legal reforms. They will not be shocked or outright reject new ideas (such as restorative justice or cyber law), because they understand that the law must continue to adapt to the times.

2. Building Legal Wisdom

This is the highest goal. The history of law is not merely "knowledge," but "wisdom."

• Intellectual Humility:

History shows that even the legal systems considered the most "great" (such as Roman Law) eventually collapse or must adapt. This fosters intellectual humility, acknowledging that our current legal system is not the end of history and certainly has its shortcomings.

• Long-Term Thinking:

History trains us to think in long time spans. A jurist with historical wisdom will not make reactive and populist legal policies (solely for short-term interests), but will consider the impact on future generations.

In short, the purpose of studying legal history is to change a jurist's way of thinking (mindset): from thinking textually to thinking contextually, from thinking statically to thinking dynamically, and from merely being a legal technician to being a wise legal thinker.

CONCLUSION

1. The Definition of Legal History is not merely a chronology, but a critical and interdisciplinary study of the origins, evolution (including continuity and discontinuity), and socio-political-economic context of legal norms and institutions, based on various schools of thought (such as Savigny's Historical School).
2. The Function of Legal History is multi-dimensional, encompassing an educational function (providing wisdom), a pragmatic function (assisting historical interpretation and wise legislation), as well as a critical function (uncovering the ideology and power behind the law).
3. The Purpose of Legal History is to understand

the identity of the national legal system (Volksgeist), providing a solid intellectual foundation for legal reform to ensure it is not misguided, and sharpening comparative law analysis in the global era.

4. The study of legal history proves the old adage that "law without history is blind."

Recommendations

1. For Legal Education: Law faculties in Indonesia are advised to strengthen the legal history curriculum, not only as an introductory course but also by integrating it into substantive courses (such as History of Criminal Law, History of Agrarian Law, Constitutional History) so that students gain a comprehensive understanding.
2. For Practitioners and Legislators: It is recommended to more frequently use historical analysis in drafting rulings (judicial considerations) and academic texts (bills) to improve the quality and legitimacy of legal products.

For Future Researchers: This research is conceptual in nature. It is recommended that future researchers apply this framework of functions and purposes in specific case studies, for example: "Analysis of the Function of Legal History in the Process of Criminal Code Reform in Indonesia" or "The Jakarta Charter Debate: A Legal History Study on the Relationship between Religion and the State."

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