

What Is Historiography?

History 300
Professor Lavender
Fall 2009

Historiography Defined

Main Entry: his-to-ri-og-ra-phy

Date: 1569

Greek, from "histori" (history) and "graphii" (writing)

1:

a : the writing of history; especially : the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods

b : the principles, theory, and history of historical writing

2 : the product of historical writing : a body of historical literature

More simply put....

- 1) The history of how history has been written over the ages
- 2) The history of the philosophies which have governed how historians have written history over the ages.
 - With special emphasis on the epistemology of historical proof and causation
 - How do we know what we know?
 - How does history happen?

Major sites of change in the writing of history:

- What moves history?
 - God, fate, environment, resources, etc.
- What makes historical change happen?
 - Is historical change overt (result of actions and predictable) or covert (ironic and unknowable)?
- What is appropriate as a topic of research?
 - Who makes history?
 - Whose history "matters"?
 - What aspects of life are important to history?

How history as a discipline has changed over past generations:

- Change in the People we talk about
- Our example: The history of Italy



Kings, Queens, Gods, Nations: "Tribal Histories" to "Great Men"

- Herodotus' Histories
- Thucydides' The Peloponnesian War
- Suetonius' Twelve Caesars
- Why this way?
 - Partly philosophical worldview
 - Partly the profession:
 - Who can read history?
 - Who pays for history to be written?
 - For whom is history written?

Why this changes?

- People more literate
 - printing press
- Philosophical changes stress individual over collective identity
 - Reformation
- But still people writing it today
 - (most popular variety, in fact)

After “Great Men”: Great Peoples/Civilizations

- "Prescriptive Histories"
 - Gibbon's The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire
 - What we today can learn from the past

The Birth of Social History

- The "Little People": The Annales School
- Fernand Braudel's 3 volume history of “Civilization and Capitalism”
 - (The Wheels of Commerce and Structures of Everyday Life, etc.)
 - Reconstruct *all* of the population

Other key shifts

- Levels of Existence:
 - Public vs. Private life
 - High Culture vs. Low Culture
 - Actions vs. Ideas
 - Intellectual history vs. *mentalite* and discourse

Most important thing:

- That the “truth” of history is contingent and changing
 - Perhaps even unknowable in its complete sense
- Yet we still seek it out
 - And any tampering with it is a “cardinal sin.”

Models of Causation and Change: Linear

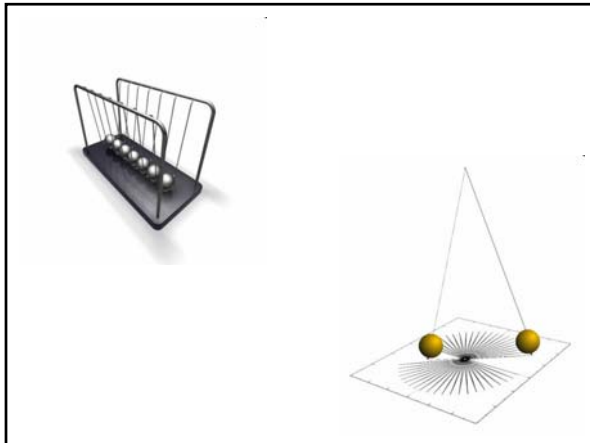
- “Things change gradually and progressively for the better”
 - “Whig” historians
 - Downplays conflict, implies direct causation
 - Assumes progressivism, change is purposive
 - Conflict produces change for the better

Models of Causation and Change: Ironic

- “Things change in spite of people's intentions”
 - "Shit Happens"
- Any action causes a reaction, usually opposite from that intended
- Henry Ford: "History is just one damn thing after another."

Models of Causation and Change: Dialectical/Hegelian/Marxist

- “Change happens via the ‘dialectic’ (thesis, antithesis, synthesis)”
 - Thus there no clear direction of history (like an unanchored pendulum)
 - history moves dialectically, not linearly
 - Two steps forward, one step back; action, reaction, new action, repeat.



Models of Causation and Change: Cyclical

- “Historical change is cyclical and repetitive”
 - civilizations rise, reach stasis, decline, fall; then, another civilization rises from its ashes
 - repeat (like on the back of shampoo bottles)
 - history moves in stages
 - reform, reaction, revolution, totalitarianism, reform, etc.

SO:

- With all this intrusion by the historian....
- HISTORY IS
 - NOT JUST WHAT WE FIND
 - BUT ALSO WHAT WE HAVE THE VISION TO SEE

Historiography as history

- Historiography is the study of history of history writing
 - so the main “characters” in that story are historians
 - and their texts

Historiography as philosophy

- But historiography is also the PHILOSOPHY of history
 - epistemological debates (how the world works)
 - and the construction of meaning in the world

Being philosophical

- The difference between “opinion” and “argument” is essential to the enterprise
 - first level: “I don’t like it.”
 - second level: “I don’t agree with it”
 - third level: “Its flaws are as follows”
 - fourth level: “It is flawed because....”
 - fifth level: “The flaws in the argument are there because...”
 - sixth level: “Here’s what I can make out of it.”
- Nothing below level four is of interest.

How to Read -- Authorship

- **Questions of Authorship:**
 - Who is the author of the reading?
 - Knowledge about him or her?
 - What added dimension does this information bring to reading?
 - Can the author be said to have a “theory” of history?
 - What is that theory?
 - Its sources and antecedents?
 - Is the author engaged in a dialogue with any of the other authors we have read before in this class?
 - Which ones?
 - What does the dialogue address?
 - Why this bone of contention or this point of agreement between the two authors?

How To Read -- Method and Epistemology

- According to the author:
 - What are the processes of good historical method?
 - Who or what causes historical change?
 - Who or what is “great”?
 - Imagine here the “Great Man” – often represented by Caesar or Napoleon.
 - Who is the hero of the author’s history?
 - What makes that hero heroic?
- What is “History”?
- Who determines what history is?
- What is the nature of the “fact”?
 - What makes it “true”?
- What are the differences among supposition, argument, and proof?

How to Read -- Sources

- According to the author, what makes a source “good” or “reliable”?
- According to the author, how should the historian utilize sources, including sources which do not agree with one another?