

# Defining History

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## Defining History

It seems that a definition of history should include all things that have ever happened. That definition would include all physical events and occurrences. It would also seem that the definition of history would be synonymous with a definition of the past—the sum total of all things that have ever happened. But Williams (4) points out that the past is not history. Things may have happened in the past that were not observed or recorded. History is, therefore, only a subset of the past. As a discipline, history is a study of the past, but it will only reveal a portion of the past, and should be done so as objectively as possible.

There have been many different approaches to the study of history. Idealism is the belief that history can be described in terms of ideas--what people thought and the intent behind their actions. The idealists of the mid- to late-1800s cared not only about events, but on what those events meant. Attaching meaning is not easy, and entails problems associated with interpretation if those interpretations are biased or incomplete. The problem with this viewpoint is that we can't always know what was intended. Idealism can be limiting in accurately portraying events as they really happened.

Historicism is another approach by which to describe history. Its premise is that “the autonomy of the past must be respected” (Tosh 6). Each age has its own values, and events should be described within the context of those values. One of the problems with historicism is that its approach is tantamount to legitimization of events by respecting the values of the time. That approach inhibits our ability to fully learn from mistakes of the past. Williams (24) stated that some of [it] has nurtured totalitarianism. When meaning takes on a life of its own and affects viewpoints that lead to ideologies that lead to atrocious actions, then you have what humanity experienced with Nazi Germany.

Relativism is the belief that there is no absolute truth and that all views of history are valid. The metaphor of a cut diamond with many facets, each of which represents a unique view of the whole, is what relativism is like: each individual sees the world individually, and each view is valid. Relativism shows its inherent weakness when a viewpoint attempts to deny history, especially in the face of overwhelming proof. A view that the Holocaust never happened is not a view that should be accepted as relevant, nor should that view be worthy of respect.

Despite the approach taken, historians have many issues to deal with. One issue that historians must face is that of social memory. Tosh describes social memory as being “based on consensus” (4). But beliefs based on consensus can lead to error. Just because a majority believes in something doesn’t make it valid. Perhaps the greatest problem for historians is in the accurate reporting of history. This includes problems with perception and interpretation. One action or event may be interpreted differently by different groups, and by different individuals within a group.

Consider the following simple example of a controversial call by a referee during an important football game. If the initial ruling is against the home team, you can be sure that the majority of supportive fans in the stands will be audibly upset. On the other hand, the fans of the visiting team will find gratification in the call, even if they are watching the game on television from across the country. When later describing the incident, fans will likely describe it “their way,” depending on their allegiance. Besides fans of each team, add to the mix the referee who made the initial call, and the other line judges who may have also seen it from nearby. The positions of these individuals and their respective fields of vision may influence the interpretation of the incident and affect its resolution.

Add one more dimension to this example of a controversial call—that of the replay

officials—and you have what might be the closest thing we have to a perfect world in recounting history. The replay officials often spend many minutes rewinding the recorded sequence in question and viewing it several times, and from different camera angles. Their two choices for a decision are to either overturn the original call, or to allow that initial call to stand. But the second choice actually comprises two very different alternatives. First of all, visual evidence may clearly support the initial call. But there might not actually be enough evidence one way or the other, and the default position in this situation is to allow the initial call to remain unchanged. The point of this illustration for historians is that the evidence should be able to hold up to scrutiny.

It is obviously impossible to have a replay for most historical events. Thus, those events are left open to interpretation. While professionals within the field of history are demanding of proof just like the sciences are, they cannot be as rigorous in that demand since proof is not always available. Supposition does not equal evidence, and evidence is not equivalent to proof. Since actual historical events can't be replicated in a controlled scientific environment (with the exception of scientific experiments themselves), history is not a pure science. With regard to rigor, the most that can be said about the discipline of history is that it is part science and part art. But those in history should do their absolute best to acquire as much proof as is reasonably possible, and make written observations that are as objective as possible.

Primary sources should be used whenever available. A primary source is an original item such as an image, document, map, artifact or recording that provides evidence about the past. A secondary source is a means through which a primary source is presented. For example, an article describing an original document is a secondary source as it is written to present or include information about the primary source. Sometimes, an item can be either a primary source or a

secondary source, depending on how it is used.

Some sources are better than others. Genetics testing, when applicable, is an excellent method of obtaining proof of identity. It was the method used to prove that Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings had children together. The Internet, in contrast, is not reliable as a source. Anyone can post almost anything on the Internet, and with no system in place for peer review, it is prone to error.

Thomas Hobbes wrote in 1651, “The register of knowledge of fact is called history” (Williams 11). Hobbes’ sentence can be broken down into revealing component parts. The “register” refers to the need of history to be recorded in some lasting medium (e.g., print, film, audio). The “knowledge of” phrase of Hobbes’ statement refers to the importance of us needing to know about something. If we don’t know about it, then it won’t get reported or recorded. The term “fact” is important in that we need truth, not suppositions.

Another issue facing historians is understanding causation. Complex events may have multiple causes. To understand causation, it is important to understand the difference between what is *necessary* and what is *sufficient*. When certain necessary factors are in place, additional factors are sufficient to cause the event to occur. Consider the following example regarding the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2002. It was *necessary* for Iraq, under Saddam Hussein’s megalomaniacal dictatorship, to have had weapons of mass destruction in the past that were actually used on thousands of Iraqi citizens. It was *sufficient* for the USA to believe that he still had those weapons for the invasion to have been deemed necessary.

Another example illustrating causation is from the sports world. For a cyclist to be able to win the 23-day Tour de France, it is necessary that the individual have not only a high VO<sub>2</sub> max<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> VO<sub>2</sub> max is a measurement indicating maximal capacity for oxygen consumption by the body during maximal exertion.

but also a high lactate threshold<sup>2</sup>. But having high readings for these two measurements will not ensure a victory. Many other top-level cyclists will also have high readings. But the individual who wins will have had a combination of sufficient factors that made the victory imminent: extremely hard training regimens, superior strategic and tactical skills, and a strong support team.

Another important issue that historians must consider is in how they present history to us. A sound and cogent argument must be presented. Speculations must be kept to a minimum. Historians should not manipulate evidence for revisionist purposes. Not having enough evidence does not mean it is okay to fill in the gaps of time. Conjecture and opinion should be left to journalists and editorialists, not historians.

An analytical approach is needed to accurately present historical events. For an argument to be valid, it should be based on sound evidence. Logic should be employed to present a case such that evidence supports the premises and the conclusions that are made. A sound historical presentation should have a verifiable bibliography, and a prudent researcher will verify sources before presenting history in one medium or another.

The important contribution of the positivists of the nineteenth century was that they valued the critical examination of evidence, and they sought to classify and organize as a scientist would. They thought that history could be as rigid a discipline as the various scientific fields. Cliometrics is quantitatively expressing history through statistics and mathematics. A cliometric approach is very useful to the historian. For example, it is of interest to the historian to know how many people died during a certain battle of the Civil War. Also, it is useful to know how many were wounded. If, for example, a smaller percentage of Union soldiers were killed in a subsequent battle, then it might help historians learn how the Union field commanders might

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<sup>2</sup> Lactate threshold is the point where lactate (lactic acid) begins to accumulate in the bloodstream. The higher this measurement, the greater the muscular pain one can endure during exercise.

have modified their tactics to minimize casualties.

Historians must ask many questions during their research. Asking *what*, *who*, *where*, *when*, *how* and *why* help ferret out the facts. Consider the following hypothetical example of basic questions associated with a car bomb explosion: *What?* A bomb exploded in a car. *Where?* It happened in the parking lot next to an open market in Baghdad. *Who?* An Iraqi father and two of his children inside the car were killed. *When?* The bomb exploded on October 15, 2005, at approximately 3:35 p.m. *How?* The bomb was set off by use of a timer device.

Each one of the five answers above needs further refinement. For example, to obtain greater detail for the *who* question, it must be asked if there were there any other passengers in the car who survived. Also, it should be ascertained if any bystanders were killed or injured. Perhaps the most difficult question to answer in this example is the sixth question of *why?* The first five questions relate to verifiable facts. The *why* question must go into the exploration of potentially nebulous areas of the study of motivation such as ideology, religious fanaticism, and political viewpoints. Interpretation must be thoughtfully performed to get true understanding.

Manipulation and censorship can be problematic for fully revealing history in that the full truth either can't or won't be revealed. A government may censor information in an attempt to keep that information out of the hands of its enemies. Similarly, data may be manipulated for reasons that the manipulators feel is relevant to their special interests. Censorship and manipulation are problems for the historian, but may be deemed necessary at times for the protection of national (and global) security.

Presentation is an important consideration for historians. A list of facts in a book, for example, might be accurate and scientifically relevant, but would be boring to read. Historians thereby connect sequences of events with descriptive sentences in the form of a narrative. A

narrative should be written so that the context of each event is clearly understood. Revision and alteration of a subject over time should only be done to improve accuracy as new evidence is acquired.

Besides print media, film is another method of presenting history. From the standpoint of reaching and informing a large number of people, film may be a very good medium. Far more individuals will watch a one-hour documentary on the causes of the Civil War than will read a book on the same subject. From the standpoint of accuracy and completeness, however, film is limiting. Decisions must be made regarding which of the many events over the Civil War's four years' are to be included in a film that will last only a couple of hours. It has to be visually interesting to viewers. A documentary is decidedly superior over drama in terms of historical accuracy. Since the Civil War was not filmed, photos, maps and other artifacts must suffice for visual images.

History is brought together by historians of many different specialties and interests. A history of the world would include many different types of histories on singular topics. There is the history of women in America prior to suffrage. There is the history of European emigration. There is the history of banking. These examples, and countless others, all go in to describe our history. There are histories within a history. There are countless specialties within just the study of the Civil War. For example, some historians may specialize in the military strategies of the Union and Confederate armies. Others may focus on living conditions during the war. Still others might focus on the psychological effects of a country divided.

Historian Hayden White stated that he only valid reasons for choosing one interpretation of history "over another are moral or aesthetic ones" (Williams 29). Slavery was accepted in its time. But we have the ability to use today's moral filter through which to see the past. With



honest depictions based on the higher sense of morality that we now have, we can make more honest assessments of events of the past. Similarly, aesthetic preferences might mean that one producer's version of a documentary is chosen over another one on the same topic to air on television due to its superior production quality and visual appeal.

Sigfried Kracauer<sup>3</sup> wrote that a historian “is both passive and active, a recorder and a creator” (Williams 41). The historian researches, studies and collects data, and records it. But the manner in which it is recorded and subsequently presented to the public is where the essence of creation comes in. The historian discovers information, and then constructs the method or medium through which to present it. Issues and events of the past come together in the present in the mind of the historian to form the discipline of history. The present is needed to acquire information, verify sources, piece the narrative together chronologically, and present it in such a way that the past is accurately depicted and comes alive as *history*.

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<sup>3</sup> Sigfried Kracauer (1889-1966) was a journalist, sociologist, and film critic.

Works Cited

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