

21H991 Fall 2003
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Comment Papers on Topics:

Sep. 3. **Introduction**

Discussion Paper 1: "How to Study What Historians Do"

The American Historical Association has about 14,000 members, most of whom are professional historians. They publish enormous quantities of books and journal articles every year. Most of these publications are read only by a few specialists. A few reach much wider audiences, at least the audience of other historians and their students. (The question of what kind of work reaches the general reading public is one we will discuss later). History is a hands-on craft. There are few algorithms, theories, or general guidelines separate from actual practice. I believe that the best way to learn how to do historical research is to read model works in the field, critique them, then try to do something similar yourself. (This is an ancient Chinese method of teaching landscape painting, for example: copy masterpieces). But there are other approaches, more commonly employed in methodology courses. I should justify why we do not follow them, but you should become at least passingly familiar with each of these approaches, too.

1) **Read the Classics.** The works of Thucydides, Herodotus, Sima Qian, Gibbon, Macaulay, Michelet, Burckhardt, etc. are still great masterpieces, well worth reading and

rereading as models of great historical writing. Unlike science, history does not discard its predecessors, even though fashions and research orientations change. (Do we progress, however? Is Donald Kagan's four volume modern history of the Peloponnesian War better than what Thucydides wrote? In what sense?) Still, something happened in the twentieth century to change quite dramatically how most professional historians write. The history of the wars, diplomacy, and politics of the nation state, *polis*, or empire, which features in the classics, was challenged by a new history "from below", of the "longue durée" (long-term), of social and economic processes. The old history never disappeared; in fact, military and political history is still the predominant form of history writing today. And the old masters certainly incorporated much of what we now call popular history, social structure, and culture into their accounts (Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance*, for example, paved the way for the New Cultural History). But the hegemony of the "master narrative" of national politics has declined, challenged by other contenders. It is probably not coincidental that the decline of nation-state history came around the time of the beginning of the end of European colonial empires in World War I. So the classics still have value, but we read them differently now.

See: Fritz Stern, ed., *Varieties of History* (Useful collections of excerpts) ; John Clive, *Not By Fact Alone* (commentary on literary style of the classic historians, by the great Macaulay specialist).

2) **The Philosophy of History**: Comes in two flavors, one Anglo-Saxon and analytic, one continental (European) and hermeneutic. The first form reflects the interests of Anglo-American philosophers who turned their inquiry into the nature of reasoning onto historical study. They found a very strange beast: it didn't seem to fulfill standard

positivist scientific criteria, such as verifiability (how do we know that any historical source is "true"?), or generalizable laws (do historians try to generalize over many cases or only explain one?). Debate centered on the "covering law" theory of Carl Hempel, the nature of causation, the verifiability of historical reasoning (Karl Popper influence here), and other thrilling topics. Notably, very little of this literature ever examines in detail the real practice of contemporary historians. The favorite philosophers' puzzles are hypothetical cases, such as "Why did Napoleon invade Russia?". [Examples: Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation*; Morton White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge*; William Dray, ed., *Philosophical Analysis and History* (the essay by Louis Mink in here on the importance of "synoptic vision" is quite interesting); William Todd, *History as Applied Science* (more interesting than a lot of the others, because he advocates "mental simulation" and takes engineering instead of physics as his model)

Another area of debate has been the hoary question: is history a "humanity" or a "social science"? The main positions were set out by R.G. Collingwood (*The Idea of History*), and Wilhelm Dilthey: social science deals in general laws of society; historians look for empathetic identification, *Verstehung*, etc. In my view, the sterility of most of these debates is a consequence of presupposing rigid distinctions between idealized positivist science (physics envy) and idiosyncratic humanist uniqueness. But Collingwood is still well worth reading, especially because he grounds his theory in detailed analysis of the classical Greek historians.

A few recent studies along these lines have two refreshing features: they look in detail at real examples of modern historical practice, and they are not afraid to recognize the vital

significance of "values" (political & moral) in science. Hugh Stretton, *The Political Sciences*, analyzes in detail a wide range of historical and social scientific works, stressing throughout the importance of value-oriented selection of themes and of causal factors. For him, R.W. Southern's *The Making of the Middle Ages*, one of the great classics on the period, is more objective than a purportedly detached neutral observer, precisely because of Southern's deep commitment and involvement with medieval values. Daniel Little, *Understanding Peasant Society: Case Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science* applies modern philosophical analysis to my own field, the history of Chinese peasant society. He does a very good job of eliciting the principles behind the debates in the field and drawing out from them broader conclusions for the philosophy of social science. Donald McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics*, is not what it seems. One of the leading modern new economic historians, McCloskey argues that economics is not and never has been a positivist science basing its analysis on its ability to predict the future. It is a historical science, whose best practitioners rely as much on rhetoric (methods of persuasion, including but not limited to mathematical ones) to mobilize consensus, or fuel debate. You will find many of these arguments quite familiar if you have followed the literature on the sociology of science. Concepts of "theory-laden observation", "underdetermination of theories by facts", and the "hermeneutic circle" appear here in different guises, applied concretely to historical study.

The Philosophy of History in its hermeneutic version seeks for the Meaning of the Historical Process as a whole. (Capital letters indicate its Germanic origins) Its progenitors are the great German historicist philosophers of the nineteenth century: Hegel, Marx (in his Hegelian, not economist, version), Spengler, Nietzsche. Michel

Foucault, at least in one interpretation, is their intellectual heir. Toynbee represents an Anglo-Saxon offshoot. Traditional historians have been very devastating in their critiques of the grand systems (Peter Geil on Toynbee, e.g., but William McNeill has to some extent tried to resuscitate Toynbee). The analysis of these grand systems was relegated to classic intellectual history of Great Ideas, but few working historians found them useful. Hayden White, however, has brought them back to life in a literary mode by looking at the tropes used by the systematic philosophers (Marx, Tocqueville, Nietzsche,) and by demonstrating the similarity of the classic historians to them (Ranke, Burckhardt, etc.) Has the resolute denial of philosophy by the social history tradition merely led it into naive positivism? Are there new insights to be found in discarded German idealists? Is Foucault a madman and a fraud or the greatest historical philosopher of modern times? The passion and extremism aroused by these issues indicate that they have touched a sore nerve. Some of the New Cultural Historians have reinvigorated this tradition, but others have firmly denied it. We will not read the philosophers themselves (that is the job of the Social Theory seminar), but we will discuss applied versions of some of these speculators to discrete historical problems.

Historians in their Spare Time: A number of great historians have offered reflections on the nature of history, as a sideline from their major works. The two most famous are E.H. Carr's *What is History* and Marc Bloch's *The Historian's Craft* [Other examples: Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History*. C. Vann Woodward, *The Future of the Past*, etc.] Both are well worth reading. They are not philosophically rigorous, but they are concrete. On the other hand, they do not represent their central work: given the choice, it would be

more useful to read their major works. But many of the questions they raise about craft, structure, style, and sources will reappear in our analyses of other works.

Historiographical Surveys: These are general review essays of trends in a field or subfield, usually written by a major figure in the field. Examples: John Higham, *History*; Olivier Zunz, (the best on social history; Lynn Hunt). Peter Novick's book falls partly in this category. [See symposium on his book in recent *Journal of American History*]. Again, this is not the central work of historians, but it is useful for orienting you to unfamiliar terrain. Scanning contents of the major journals is another useful way to find the lay of the land. Many of them publish review articles from time to time. *Reviews in American History* is entirely devoted to this. [See also Daedalus issue, *Historical Studies Today*; *Historical Studies Newsletter*; Journal surveys]