

Student A:

Despite being written with differing audiences and purposes in mind, Tilly's "How (and What) Are Historians Doing" and Appleby, Hunt & Jacob's (AHJ) Telling the Truth About History mostly address the same points -- what history is, how to define it, its scope, and what it should become in the future. Because of this last point both works are partially prescriptive works by historians on their own discipline, as well as more traditional analyses.

Tilly defines history (as studied in the West) as "a federation of overlapping disciplines" (686) satisfying six conditions. From their discussion of the kinds of history done today, AHJ might grudgingly agree to these conditions. However, much of their book deals with the history of each condition, revealing which ones seem to always be true of the 'historians' of any age and which have evolved over time. Tilly's historians insist on "time and place as fundamental principles of variation" (686), but this is a relatively recent notion, as shown by AHJ's discussion of several groups of historians (Marxists, modernization theorists) who see time and place as subordinate to larger forces. However, AHJ suggests that historical questions are always "rooted in national politics" (or social context, more broadly), another of Tilly's conditions. More generally, for Tilly 'history' today is basically what historians do, and AHJ historicize what historians do.

Tilly and AHJ agree that philosophical questions are crucial to the future of history, but in different ways. Tilly focuses on two axes that define much contemporary historical work (individual-group and humanistic-social scientific), while AHJ focus on philosophical issues in doing history emphasized by theorists from the Enlightenment on, with an emphasis on present-day postmodernists, relativists, and traditionalists. In Tilly's view, "the philosophical problems will not wait forever", and some section of his space of historical approaches must prevail, through a grand realization (such as "subjectivity is never reliably accessible" (710)) that reveals some part of the space to be better suited to studying the past. It seems like AHJ in fact show that such absolutisms have been claimed to be true over and over in the past and are always overgeneralizations. AHJ instead show how history incorporating all viewpoints can be productively done while acknowledging the many shortcomings of any approach.

I found Telling the Truth About History a bit difficult, but satisfying because it addressed several broad themes I've read little about previously -- the history of approaches to history, the role of history in forming a national consciousness, critical perspective on the role of 'theory' in history, where "the line" between theoretically-informed history and theoretical outer space lies, and the role of history in American society. I wish we had read parts one and two at the beginning of the semester along with the Tilly article for historiographical background, then part three at the end of the semester for perspective into the future of history. Many bits of information I'd heard about theorists like Hegel, Gramsci, Durkheim, and Marx came together in AHJ's succinct and clear summary.

Broadly, AHJ historicize present-day history, science, and social theory

to appraise some contemporary theoretical perspectives bearing on what historians do today and to suggest where history should go from here. AHJ in some sense used the historian's craft as a weapon, taking theoretical challenges to today's history (postmodernism, relativism, traditionalism), defusing their novelty by setting them in historical context, analyzing them in that context, and finally appropriating their salient criticisms while discarding their absolute essential natures. Interestingly, the first two parts of the book show the rise and dethroning of absolutisms, while the third part takes perspectives opposed to the authors' point, reveals the absolute nature of each, and dethrones them, often by analogy to past absolutisms.

AHJ's conclude that a new kind of objectivity is necessary, possible, definable (they do), preferable, practical, and should be the basis of future historical work. Against the near-nihilism of some postmodernists and relativists, AHJ offer a modern purpose for studying the past (relatively similar to Tilly's), as work "toward a more intellectually alive, democratic community, toward the kind of society in which we would like to live" (229). They note that the new objectivity is only possible in an already democratic society (here America), and the definition of objectivity is indeed such that more democracy reinforces it, and vice versa. This focus on democracy as essential to a historian's *raison d'être* reminded me of William's conclusion that democracy determine the future definition of engineering, though in this case more explicitly spelled out. I can't help noting that the general idea that 'democracy' not only can but should determine the goals of fields of study seems like intellectual capitalism, in which the ideological market determines what goods are sold. Although a scholar or scientists will always have some choice of what they study, I'm uneasy that AHJ and Williams seem to press for restriction of this choice.