

HIS

THINKING ABOUT
TORY

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INTRODUCTION

What historians do, while it may seem obvious, proves surprisingly hard to define once you start thinking about it. Most people would describe the discipline of history as “the study of the past.” But “the past” is a huge category that includes the time since you started reading this sentence. What we mean by “the past” in this context is “past enough that we have some perspective on it,” which in practice takes us back at least one or two generations. But most academic disciplines outside of the sciences concern “the past” in that sense. Most research in the humanities—in departments of literature, art history, and philosophy, for instance—concerns the human past. Many sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists also work on material that goes back decades or even centuries. What is special, then, about history as a discipline?

While it does concern itself uniquely with the past, history as a field of study is unusual in its lack of overarching structure or definition—a trait that paradoxically accounts for its wide and enduring appeal beyond academia. Other fields in the humanities and social sciences are more tightly bound to canons or bodies of knowledge, to technical methods, or both. People who teach in literature departments are expected to have read a list of great works of fiction, drama, and poetry, even if over the decades some authors fade away while others settle in. Sociologists are required, among other things, to be conversant with major figures such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, philosophers with a core pantheon of authors stretching from Plato to John Rawls. Literary and art-historical studies have developed very specific methods for analyzing texts and deciphering images. Other fields require mathematical or quantitative expertise. These commonalities give other disciplines coherence, but they often have a problematic side-effect, the emergence of “insider-speak” and in some cases technical jargon. A history department, by contrast, might include a specialist in Tokugawa Japan, another working on the Ottoman Empire, and a third studying the Reagan presidency. They may never encounter any of the same books, since there exists no historical “canon,” yet they need to

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evaluate the work of colleagues with other historical focuses and to present their own research to them. This is one reason why history written by academics is, compared to work in other fields, low in jargon and technicalities and more accessible to general readers. Ideally (though, alas, this is far from true in practice) anyone should be able to pick up any history book, even an academic one, and understand its contents without the benefit of prior training.

This is not to say that researching and writing history requires no specific skills; on the contrary, depending on one's period and place of concentration, the technical requirements can be steep. You may need to master a difficult language—Aramaic, say, or Mandarin—or in some cases more than one. Some subfields, such as medieval history, require advanced paleographic training just to read the documents; for others you need expertise in archaeology, macroeconomics, or linguistics. (And while it might seem easier to work on a recent period in your native language, specialists working on quasi-contemporary history will tell you that an infinite amount of potential source material can be its own kind of curse.) History does not have a governing technical “method” precisely because it can accommodate so many of them, from sifting through dirt to reading philosophy. But once the research is done, a historian is expected to put forward a narrative and argument that any well-educated person can understand. History, one is tempted to say, is written by specialists for nonspecialists, but even that is not entirely true: witness how often people with no disciplinary credentials produce superior works of history. In just the last fifteen years, the most prestigious history award in America, the Pulitzer Prize, has gone to an English professor (in 2002), to journalists (in 2003 and 2007), and to a banker (in 2010). Imagine, by way of contrast, the Nobel Prize in physics or economics being awarded to someone with no formal training in those fields!

Eclecticism is what makes the discipline of history so vibrant and broadly appealing: the skills required to do it are those both of the specialist and of the nonspecialist. To define cutting-edge questions, academic historians must immerse themselves in a large body of scholarship that defines topics and debates: planning a project on some aspect of American slavery, the British Empire, or the Vietnam War requires finding your way around a vast literature so that you can be sure of contributing something new and worthwhile. On the other hand, the research process itself is something most historians learn about on the fly, just by doing it: aside from techni-

calities such as language and paleography, “historical research” is mostly impossible to teach. It requires ingenuity (where do I start looking for evidence about same-sex relationships in the seventeenth century?); initiative to figure out how to begin, whom to talk to, where to go; and persistence to sift through many boxes of archival material or pages of online documents to find the elusive evidence one is tracking. How do you teach researchers to cope with the letdown of finding that the archive they’ve traveled to doesn’t have what they want, and the imagination to turn the situation around by figuring out what the disappointing documents might actually contain that they had not anticipated? The skills and temperaments of good research historians are very similar to those of successful journalists: curiosity, ingenuity, patience, and doggedness. And like journalists, good historians know how to put a story together and make it understandable to a wide range of readers.

It is much easier, then, to define history by contrasting it with other disciplines than to describe a historical “method.” People in fields like art history, literature, or philosophy usually work on an existing “object”: they exercise interpretive skills on a set of texts or images that serves as a point of departure for their research—the novels of Toni Morrison, Romanesque murals in Catalan churches, the collected works of Hegel.¹ Historians begin with no such object; their task consists in creating, through research, the thing that they work on. Social scientists usually begin their projects with a research design and a hypothesis they will attempt to confirm or disprove using questionnaires, experiments, or calculations. Historians also start out with a question or a tentative thesis but typically have no direct access to their subjects; most often the chaotic evidence produced by historical research ends up reframing the initial question, which is never answered with any degree of certainty.

The work of historians, then, is less theory-driven than that of just about anyone else in the academy, but that does not mean that theory is not there. As William H. Sewell has argued, historians’ distinctive contribution to the

1. For the point about existing versus constructed objects, see Gabrielle Spiegel, “History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 65 (January 1990): 75. Scholars in literary and art-historical fields have extended their purview beyond traditional works of art and literature to a wide range of “texts” and the infinite corpus of “visual culture”; I would argue, however, that their disciplinary habits endure even as the objects change.

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social sciences is their analysis of how human action unfolds over time.² The work of any given historian is deeply rooted in the specifics of a certain time and place, incommensurable with any other: in that sense, historians are the ultimate empiricists. But historians, Sewell argues, also reconstruct sequences of “events” and their consequences, tracing complicated patterns of causality and attending to a complex of contextual factors that render the outcome of any given situation contingent. This practice of detailed description, attentive to the interplay between event and context, evinces a theory of “social temporality” that governs historians’ work. Historical temporality, Sewell writes, “is lumpy, uneven, unpredictable, discontinuous,” speeded up by events like wars and revolutions.³

Historians, that is, operate according to distinct theories of temporality and causality, even if those are most often left implicit. Theory is rarely foregrounded in historical work, in part because of the discipline’s strong empirical bent, and in part because of a traditional commitment to narrative and to an ideal of evocative writing. Most historians would probably agree that their task is ideally twofold: to explain the unfolding of change in the past, and to make the people and places of the time come alive for their readers. To be a great historian you need not just the skills of a journalist but those of a novelist. (Many people are drawn to study a specific period in history not because of an intellectual problem or a political agenda but because novels or movies about it set their imagination on fire.) In some languages the words for “history” and “story” are the same, as if chroniclers of the past have always been their society’s best spinners of tales.

History is not only the ultimate hybrid field, borrowing its languages and methods from both the social sciences and the humanities; it is also the discipline that most frequently crosses over from the academic world into the public sphere. Works of popularized psychology, sociology, or economics sometimes pop up on the best-seller lists, but history books camp out there continuously. Therein lies another distinctive feature of history, its conspicuousness in public life—in school curricula from the earliest grades; in museums and war memorials, heritage sites and theme parks; as a constant reference point in the speeches of politicians. Unlike sociology, history has its own television channel, unlike economics, its own book club. It

2. William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1–21.

3. *Ibid.*, 9.

is precisely because history looms so large in public life that controversies about the content and nature of historical inquiry flare up so frequently both inside and outside of academia.

Disputes over heritage sites and museums are described in chapter 4, but the quintessential fights over history concern school curricula: what should children learn about their country's past, and how should they learn it? In the United States the biggest dustup of this sort occurred in the early 1990s in the context of efforts to establish national standards for primary and secondary education. The 1994 National History Standards were drafted by a committee of academics, schoolteachers, and administrators, incorporating new scholarship on the history of women and minorities and recommending that courses in global history replace the traditional "Western civilization" survey.⁴ Even before the document was published, Lynne Cheney, the conservative former director of the National Endowment for the Humanities (who, ironically, had been involved in setting up the original drafting council), delivered a strident attack on it in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "The End of History." She charged that the proposed curriculum foregrounded historical actors like the escaped slave Harriet Tubman at the expense of more important figures like George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Alexander Graham Bell, and that it offered a "grim and gloomy" portrayal of American history focused on such subjects as the Ku Klux Klan and McCarthyism. Letters to the *Journal* chimed in, accusing drafters of using the National History Standards as a ploy to "indoctrinate" children with liberal "hatred of America" and to advance the multicultural "balkanization" of the nation.⁵ The ruckus broke out at a charged moment of political transition: a Democrat, Bill Clinton, had taken office in 1993, and the right fretted that liberals would now have free rein to pursue this supposed agenda.

Similar "history wars" over curricula in schools have broken out in Britain and Australia, and other countries—Russia, South Africa, France—have faced the complex process of balancing patriotic pride with accounting for the darker aspects of their past.⁶ While English departments were also

4. Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 2000), chapters 1, 7–10.

5. *Ibid.*, 1–6, 189.

6. *Ibid.*, chapter 6; Steven L. Kaplan, *Farewell Revolution: Disputed Legacies, France 1789/1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Stuart Macintyre

rocked in the 1990s by “culture wars” over who should be included in the literary canon (or whether there should be a canon at all), history is the discipline most regularly embroiled in public controversy.⁷ The reason for this is evident. Historians construct narratives that provide social groups—national, regional, ethnic, and other—with a collective identity, in the same way that we construct our personal identity by telling ourselves the story of our life. We can, of course, gain a new sense of ourselves by achieving a new perspective that transforms the narrative: many forms of psychotherapy aim at helping patients do just that. Changing the story of a collective entity such as a nation can be liberating, but is almost inevitably fraught and usually meets with enormous resistance.

“History” changes all the time because it is driven by the concerns of the present—it is often described as “what the present needs to know about the past.” In archaic and hierarchical societies, the “useful” past is that of monarchs, military leaders, and great dynasties; in a democracy, citizens want to hear about the history of “the people.” Since the end of the eighteenth century, in the West and elsewhere, the story that elites wanted to tell, and people wanted to hear, was that of their nation’s unique destiny. Groups of people who felt excluded from the nationalist script—workers, women, ethnic and racial minorities—later felt the need for research that captured experiences at odds with the master narrative. In recent years, as our experience of globalization has led us to realize how interconnected the planet’s people are and have been in the past, global histories are beginning to edge out national narratives. At the same time, historians are nothing if not respectful of the past, and the discipline is more eclectic and less trend-sensitive than most others, especially since many substantive, research-intensive books can take ten or fifteen years to research and write. Such traditional genres as military history and biography, buoyed by the reading public’s appetite, continue to flourish alongside relative newcomers like global and environmental history. While the discipline usually identifies a “cutting edge”—cultural approaches yesterday, global and transnational

and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Carlton, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2003).

7. For an excellent discussion of the historical context for the “canon wars” and “history wars,” see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), especially chapter 6.

ones today—much of the best work proceeds by way of layering and combining topics and methods.

Thinking About History evokes the capaciousness and diversity of history but also highlights the inherent tensions and regular controversies that shape the discipline. Each chapter is structured around a central question, to which it brings elements for discussion but no definitive answer. The first half of the book considers ways in which history has changed in recent decades as historians have turned to new actors, new spaces, and new objects. Whose history do we write, and how does writing about different people affect what stories get told and how they are told (chapter 1)? How did people come to think of the nation as the inevitable context for history, and what happens when we think of history outside of national spaces, as stories that happen before, between, and beyond those arbitrary national entities (chapter 2)? And what has happened to various subfields of history since a traditional hierarchy of historical topics—knowledge at the top, nature and things at the bottom—has been shaken up by new approaches (chapter 3)?

The second half of the book revolves around three ways in which the historical enterprise gives rise to internal or external controversy—the discipline’s productive tensions. “How Is History Produced?” asks about the differences and overlaps between academic, public, and popular history and the elusive and sometimes problematic nature of historians’ sources (chapter 4). “Causes or Meanings?” follows another fault line, this one within historical analysis, between description and what can be loosely termed interpretation. Finally, “Facts or Fictions?” concerns perennially tricky questions about objectivity and invention in historical research, via the storm over postmodernism that shook the profession in the 1990s. While that crisis has abated, it has, I suggest here, shaped our thinking about historians’ practices in enduring ways.

This book is about how we think about history, not why we should study it. Many attempts to explain the importance of reading and writing history drift into platitudes of the “those who don’t study the past are condemned to repeat it” variety. History doesn’t teach lessons, and trying to fit a scenario from the past onto one in the present can be disastrous: “We will liberate Iraq, as we did Europe!” “Don’t go for a diplomatic solution—remember Munich!” On the other hand, most people agree that attempts to ignore, distort, or erase the past can have catastrophic effects for societies.

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There are lots of reasons for learning about history—political passion, the quest for identity, intellectual curiosity, a taste for the exotic—and most people are drawn to the study of the past for a combination of reasons. As Peter Mandler has argued, history’s ethical value does not reside in neatly packaged “lessons” from the past but in the mind-expanding experience of sorting out complex questions within settings very different from our own.⁸ The aim of this book is not to justify to readers the importance of history for themselves and their communities. Rather, taking for granted the importance of studying the past, its aim is to describe the ways in which innovations and controversies have shaped this field of inquiry in the last few decades.

In the chapters that follow, I have done my best to describe evenhandedly the questions and controversies that shaped the writing of history in the recent past. But as the book makes clear, especially in the final chapter, the vast majority of historians working today reject the view that any scholar can be truly “objective,” and the point applies to this author as much as any other. While I draw on a wide variety of examples, the fact that I work on social and cultural, rather than military or political, history has surely influenced my choice of questions and books. My perspective is even more profoundly shaped by my specialization in French (and more broadly European and Western) history: most of the examples I offer and the authors I discuss are drawn from the fields of European and United States history. To a large extent, this was inevitable: whether or not we like it, the questions and concepts that have shaken up the discipline of history in the last half century—labor and social history, agency and resistance, gender, cultural analysis, material culture, and social practices, to name but a few—were initially formulated by historians of Europe and the United States. Although there have been significant changes in recent years, the conspicuousness of Euro-American history in the following pages reflects in part the much larger story of several centuries of Western dominance over the rest of the world, which has shaped global intellectual life as well as much else. But invoking world historical patterns does not, in the end, get me off the hook: while I have tried to correct for my limitations by getting help from colleagues in African and Asian history, I have surely not escaped the blinders of my training and field. A volume on this subject written by a

8. Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (London: Profile Books, 2002), 145–47.

historian of Africa, Asia, Australia, or Latin America would likely be quite different.

If this book has a thesis, it is the one implicit in its design. Its chapters are organized around six questions with no set answers, describing decades' worth of conversations and controversies. *Thinking About History* offers, not answers or prescriptions, but an invitation to continue the conversation. We need our collective pasts for all the familiar reasons: to gain wisdom and inspiration from the successes and failures of our forebears, to find out who we were and are, to nourish our imaginations. But the past would surely die if we merely memorialized it, if we did not argue about it. Based on the premise that much of the excitement about history comes from the controversies, substantive and methodological, that it ignites, this book is intended as a contribution to the urgent task of keeping those arguments alive.