

The Historical Imagination: “Thinking” and “Doing” History

By Craig Wollner, Ph.D. (February 2008)

What is the historical imagination and why is it important?

The historical imagination is the mental equipment with which practitioners of history approach the craft. Every history major is required to take a course called historiography at some point in her or his academic career. There the most important tenets of historical thinking, research, and writing—the elements to which the historical imagination are applied—are taught. This class usually discusses the work of the great nineteenth century historian Leopold Von Ranke, the father of modern historical thought. One of Ranke’s key insights was that every era is “immediate to God,” meaning that each time is unique and historical occurrence is therefore not cyclical.

A corollary to that perspective is that one epoch should not be valued over others. Ranke also said that rigorous critical examination of sources is essential to sound scholarship. He meant by this that the scholar should carefully scrutinize her sources, using such tools as philology to test their veracity. The classic example of this practice is the case of the fifteenth century humanist Lorenzo Valla. He showed that the document known as the *Constitutum Constantini*, which supposedly dated from the fourth century, was a forgery. The document allegedly ratified the donation by the Roman emperor Constantine I of the Western Roman Empire to the Roman Catholic Church in gratitude for having been miraculously cured of leprosy by Pope Sylvester I. But Valla demonstrated through philological investigation that the document’s Latin usage was obviously from a later time.ⁱ

Ranke further asserted that a key attribute of the historical imagination is empathy, the ability to project oneself into the time and place of the actors under study, to see their world through their eyes. This does not mean sympathizing or siding with those whose actions we would ordinarily condemn, but understanding why they believed and behaved as they did. This is perhaps the most difficult and, at the same time, most important of the attributes those who deal with the historical record must develop.ⁱⁱ

In any case, following these practices would, Ranke believed, lead to the grail of historical inquiry, writing history “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*,” “to show what actually happened,” and with the highest degree of objectivity possible.ⁱⁱⁱ

History is a deceptively simple discipline. It utilizes neither a scientific jargon nor a complex methodology. It is usually written in the language of the people. Consequently, many believe that doing history involves merely straightforwardly arranging “the facts” chronologically. But the community of practitioners generally agrees that the few standards Ranke proclaimed a hundred and fifty years ago remain those by which the soundness of the historical imagination at work on a problem is to be judged.

One of the persistent difficulties instructors have in teaching history and that people who want to write history have as they begin is the propensity to default in their thinking and writing to a

“social studies” approach to their topics, often leading to a rendering their work as an exercise in the examination of current events. This is sometimes called “presentism,” the tendency to frame past events in the values and occurrences of contemporary life.

The distinction between history rooted in the past and that which is based on matters of concern in the current moment lies in the fundamental nature of historical inquiry, which is to study the impact of time on human affairs. As the English novelist L. P. Hartley put it in *The Go Between*, “The past is a foreign country: They do things differently there.” The temptation to view, say, the Vietnam war of the late twentieth century in the context of the Iraq war of the early twenty-first century is often overwhelming for some investigators, but in succumbing to it, they forfeit their ability to visit an America that was different from the one they live in, to glimpse the mutability of our society’s hopes and fears, and to understand social, cultural, and political values and patterns that are foreign to them, even though the similarities between the two conflicts seem on the surface strikingly similar. But the United States of the Vietnam era—of the sixties and seventies—was one in which the immense baby boom cohort came of age and began to drive the political agenda of the nation. The divisiveness in society over the war had much to do with the threat of the draft for many of the young men of the day. It had to do with the questioning of previously unquestioned political, economic, social, and cultural institutions. It had to do with the Cold War. Although on the surface, some of the same issues that affected the history of the Vietnam War resonate today—the apparently contrived reasons for entry into the conflict, the instances of government deception about the conduct of the war, just to name two—the researcher who defaults to this kind of analysis short circuits one of the basic elements of real historical scholarship: the ability to see the past in its own light.

A key to correcting the tendency toward a social studies approach is to remind oneself of the foundational steps of any historical enterprise, by addressing **how historians frame questions and seek answers**. History is first and foremost a questioning methodology. It begins by framing the topic under discussion as a question that homes in on a particular aspect of a broad issue. For instance, if the topic is World War II, the question asked should be narrow enough to be answerable with the time and resources available to the questioner. Even someone like Ken Burns, the documentary film maker who recently did in fact deal with World War II, could only focus on a small part of the sprawling picture of the war, although he could presumably bring the considerable resources of PBS to bear on the subject. Once narrowing and focus is accomplished, the other guidelines to the successful completion of the historian’s task fall quickly into place. These elements include the following:

Respect the subject. The philosopher George Santayana perhaps stated the kernel of this injunction succinctly when he observed, “We must respect the past, remembering that it was once all that was humanly possible.”^{iv} This means that the historian does not patronize those who populate his work. As Mary Lynn Rampolla points out, to write that a figure “was ahead of his or her time,” is to suggest that he or she thought and acted as we would.^v Those who came before us were not less (or, for that matter, more) moral than we are. True, we may have more or better information than they on certain matters, but that does not make us their superiors. By the same token, to judge that figures from an alien culture are “better,” “worse,” “wrong,” or “right,” compared to us because they act by the standards of that culture, no matter how attractive or

repugnant these standards may be to us, is to condescend to the culture and to misconstrue the nature of the historical developments under discussion. Edward Said made this point forcefully in his landmark book *Orientalism*, in which he asserted that historians (and other scholars) had practiced a kind of subjugation of eastern cultures and societies by writing about them from a perspective that unselfconsciously assumed their characteristics were traits of inferiority compared to the West.^{vi}

Perhaps a more useful illustration for this audience is from a book now more or less regarded as passé. In Francis Jennings' *the Invasion of America*, the author nevertheless highlights a misleading history of white-native relations by pointing out that historians for generations wrote about the native peoples of America from an—again, unselfconscious—attitude of superiority that distorted the actual history of the relations between native peoples and European interlopers.^{vii} The title of the book alone suggests how the failure to respect the subject degrades, or at least fails to capture, historical reality. The dominant narrative was that America was “discovered” by white Europeans, when in reality, native peoples had lived there for several thousands of years. So, Jennings says, a fairer, more accurate metaphor of white settlement would be one of invasion. Under the meta-narrative (the generally accepted version of history under which white have historians labored and which they have reinforced with their successive contributions), the first white settlers were said to have come upon a “virgin land” awaiting them. In light of the swift decimation and conquest of the indigenous populations, accomplished as much by the transmission of European diseases to which natives had no resistance as force of arms, Jennings substitutes the phrase “widowed land,” as a more apt characterization of the process by which whites became dominant in the early contact era. Moreover, previous scholars further denigrated the level of civilization of the native peoples by insisting, often against clear evidence to the contrary, that native populations were small, which suggested that they were primitive, nomadic hunter-gatherers, whereas more accurate statistics indicate a settled farming population (suggesting a higher level of civilization than had previously been assumed) that was much greater in numbers than historians had routinely estimated.^{viii}

Guard against anachronism. The past cannot be judged except by its own standards and the state of its own knowledge, but this obvious truth has not from time to time prevented even the most sophisticated historians from using contemporary values and information to understand and characterize it. It is easy, for example, to condemn the slaveholders of the antebellum South for keeping human chattels because we today find slavery abhorrent, but we learn nothing of the reasons for their resistance to giving it up if we dismiss their worldview by applying ours to them. Callous and improbable as it seems, the comfort with this practice of plantation owners as well as other non-slaveholding citizens of the South, made it not only acceptable, but in their eyes, a superior way of life to that of the North. Moreover, if our moral values interdict that understanding, they also impede our grasp of the causes of the Civil War. By the same token, judging Franklin Roosevelt an incompetent because he failed to anticipate Pearl Harbor—and this has been asserted by professional historians—is to convict him of not being us, with all our information about the origins of World War II. Historians must always avoid falling into the traps of passing moral judgment or projecting current knowledge and values on actors of a previous time who could not possibly have known or embraced them. Falling into these habits composes what the theoretician of history Quentin Skinner called the tendency toward

anachronism or what philosophers describe as the “proleptic fallacy.”^{xix} The simplest and most memorable illustration of the trap of the proleptic fallacy is the story of the elderly French doctor called out on a dark, cold, and stormy night to deliver a baby. When he returns to his cottage exhausted and bedraggled, his wife scolds him for going out on such a night at his advanced age. The doctor replies, “It was worth it. Do you know who was born tonight? Victor Hugo!”

Be aware of your own biases (strive for objectivity). As noted previously, objectivity is the highest value of historical thinking. Historians know that it is impossible to eliminate all bias from the thought processes of even the most sophisticated and experienced practitioners—the quest for objectivity represents what the great early twentieth century historian Charles Beard called “that noble dream”—because we are all captives to some extent of our culture, our personal experiences, and our personal identity.^x It is easy to assume that the researcher located in a different place and time from his subject, cannot truly understand the subject’s motives, views, and activities, let alone analyze them without actively or passively leveling moral judgment. But it needs to be emphasized that while true understanding will always be constrained by the researcher’s cultural bias, lapsing into a fatalistic relativism abdicates the responsibility to analyze. The best history is written by those who employ all possible techniques they can to eliminate bias from their work, on the one hand, while exercising humility about the limitations of understanding in approaching the topic and being willing to examine even that which might be personally distasteful to them.

On the attempt to eliminate bias, in addition to simply recognizing and acknowledging their own biases and the obstacle they might pose to a clear understanding of the past, there are simple measures historians commonly take to guard against unconscious displays of bias. One is to try to **eliminate prejudicial language** from their writing so as not to telegraph to their reader how they should think about an issue. This means that they avoid words that convey value judgments. A historian writing about General Custer’s leadership at Little Bighorn might be tempted to describe him as stupid or vain, but even though there is truth in such a description, it would be misleading, insofar as it cuts off consideration of other factors that played a role in the defeat. These could include the anomalous decision of the Sioux and their allies to mass in one battle group, rather than their usual pattern of small bands. Or, take for example, Jefferson’s ambivalent relationship to slavery: it could, from the vantage of the twenty-first century, be characterized as hypocritical for the author of the words, “All men are created equal,” to own other human beings, but such a label does little to explain the complex realities of his mind, his times, or their relationship to each other. It isn’t necessary to condone Jefferson’s racism (a historian might, in fact, ask: could Jefferson’s views properly be called racism in the context of eighteenth century America?) in order to understand it nor to convey your understanding to a reading audience.^{xi}

At the same time, historians try not to use biased language revealing unthinking prejudices. “Orientals,” to take one example, is a word no longer in employed to describe Asians.^{xii} Its use suggests ignorance or bias. It should be noted that such caveats are not about obeisance to political correctness, but respecting the values of the culture in which a historical work is embedded and speaking to it in its own language.

On the second point, I like to tell the story of one of the great Latin Americanists of the last half of the twentieth century who was criticized by some in his field because, in pursuit of the truth of Chile's political development, he interviewed not only the violent and reactionary officers of the Army (who were so far to the right that they laughingly called themselves "*los momios*," the mummies), but their reviled leader General Augusto Pinochet. Although his own ideals were decidedly liberal, he often said he would interview Hitler, if doing so would reveal the truth of the Third Reich. The point is that historians aren't responsible for their subjects' views or actions. They are responsible to characterize their views and actions as close to the reality of the times and place as possible and not pass moral judgments on them. That is as close to true objectivity as fallible human beings can come.

Finally, **understanding continuity, change, and focus** are key elements of the historical enterprise. It is often assumed that history is simply a chain of events, with one leading inevitably to the next in a continuum that eventually culminates in an inevitable resolution of some sort. Although the great tradition of historical writing in the West has tended to reinforce the view that historical occurrence is linear, there have been many alternative theories about the mechanics of history which have had greater or lesser currency from time to time. These include Marx's view of the dialectic in history and the cyclical theories of such figures as Arnold Toynbee, with his theory of challenge and response, and Oswald Spengler's, whose hypothesis was captured in his title, *the Decline of the West*.

While such theories are now generally regarded as passé, a significant alternative view of the structure of occurrence was offered by the late historian-philosopher, Michel Foucault, who believed that history was full of discontinuities and that historical developments were not necessarily connected in an orderly procession. Rather, he believed that periods of intellectual coherence that engendered "discourses"—constellations of power and knowledge—could occur concurrently as products of various power-knowledge systems that brought about their own unique history.^{xiii} Similarly, the late historian of science, Thomas Kuhn, in a seminal book called *Theory of Scientific Revolutions* adumbrated a theory of occurrence in science that relied on paradigms, or constellations of ideas, based on which "normal science" is practiced.^{xiv} When the paradigm begins to break down because researchers discover anomalies that fail to be explainable under the assumptions of the paradigm, paradigm breakdown occurs and the process of formation of a new paradigm takes place. A primary example Kuhn used to illustrate his concept was the collapse of the Ptolemaic universe and the ascension of the Copernican theory. When Ptolemaic principles failed to explain previously unknown natural occurrences, such as the solar parallax, the paradigm went into crisis and then breakdown. Eventually a new paradigm, the Copernican model, replaced it with answers to such novel questions. "Normal science" resumed.

Alternative theories of the focus of historical inquiry have also taken on great significance over the last half of the twentieth century and into the present one, to the extent of modifying the Rankean canon. Ranke and his followers put all their emphasis on state history—national and international politics, constitutions, and military conflicts—after World War II. But, influenced by the *Annales* School of historiography founded by the French scholars Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, a newer generation of historians turned their attention to other matters. (As a late

colleague of mine used to say, the French, having failed at war and diplomacy, decided that they really didn't matter much anymore.) These younger scholars focused on social history, concentrating on patterns of life in the lower orders of society, especially key themes of everyday existence such as race, class, and gender. By concentrating on such themes, they believed they could give a truer portrait of life as lived by the vast majority of people in any society, who may never have been touched by the machinations of political or social elites.

The sensitivity to new topics in historical research gained intensity in the wake of the social and political upheavals of the middle and later years of the twentieth century, which seemed to call into question the foundational values of the society concerning freedom, liberty, and equality set against the motif of American exceptionalism. The catalysts were the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the protest against the Vietnam War, to name a few. The claims for the older focus grew, in the minds of the younger generation, less and less tenable as the increasing ferment called attention to the inequities and hypocrisies buried in the traditional "meta-narrative" of the American experience that emphasized the inexorable march of inclusive political, social, and economic progress. Rejecting the "privileged discourse," or history as written by the dominant group, which contributed to what they characterized as a mythical national story, the historians of the last half of the century attempted to write excluded groups in and debunk the dominant saga of ever growing goodness.^{xv}

One of the great ironies of the discipline is that even as they revise the flawed perspectives of past schools of historical thought, historians often fail to understand their own. But in fact historians move through time like schools of fish, bunched together on the basis of affinities generated by time and circumstance (much, in my mind, as Foucault and Kuhn suggest practitioners of other discourses do). Thus, in the wake of World War I, American historians, following the path breaking work of James Harvey Robinson, attempted to construct a "new history" that would generate a "usable past."^{xvi} In the Depression era, Charles and Mary Beard and others wrote "Progressive" history, a version of American history strongly influenced by the sense that the national experience was an ongoing pageant of class conflict and the Progressive movement's attempt to reform the political, social, and economic system that generated the tensions. By exposing the schemes of the plutocrats, the Progressive historians like Charles Beard and Vernon Louis Parrington could assist in the badly needed reforms that would put the country back on track. Thus, Charles Beard wrote in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* that the signers of the seminal document had not promulgated a basis for the freedom of all, but a compact protecting their own middle class property rights. "It cannot be denied," he wrote, "that the interests seeking protection were extensive and diversified. This is conclusively shown... by the rapidity with which the new government under the Constitution responded to their demands."^{xvii} And in perhaps the most famous extended conceit in American historical writing, Parrington indicted the capitalists of the Gilded Age for their rapacious gluttony and for duping the common people, especially the farmers. He wrote of a "Great Barbecue" following the Civil War, in which, "When the bill was sent to the American people the farmers discovered that they had been put off with the giblets while the capitalists were consuming the turkey."^{xviii}

By the same token, following World War II, historians came to realize that even though fascism was defeated and the US had emerged as the globe's strongest power, the world remained a dangerous place for America, with a totalitarian threat inimical to democracy in the form of the Soviet Union at large. As a result, historians writing in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s discovered a consensus about basic tenets of American life that they suddenly asserted had always existed. The "Consensus" historians minimized the social, cultural, and economic conflicts as well as the deep ideological differences that had driven the country's history during a period when internal solidarity seemed to be the key to national self-preservation. Even a liberal cynic like the brilliant Richard Hofstadter could write in his classic work, *the American Political Tradition*, of "a democracy in cupidity rather than a democracy of fraternity," while at the same time asserting that there was general agreement about values in our political culture.^{xix} In 1946 he wrote, "A political society cannot hang together at all unless there is some kind of consensus running through it, and yet... no society has such a total consensus as to be devoid of significant conflict. It is all a matter of proportion and emphasis, which is terribly important in history."^{xx} Even allowing for the total breakdown in harmony represented by the Civil War, Hofstadter and the Consensus school believed Beard and Parrington had gone too far in using conflict to explain the nation's past.

Why pursue such a detailed discussion of the vagaries of historical thought when, as I've noted, professional historians themselves (Hofstadter notwithstanding) are often not conscious of the values underlying their own perspective? The answer is that anyone who thinks about history needs to be sensitive to the varieties of historical thought and to their mechanics in order successfully to pursue her or his own research. Too often an adequate enough appreciation of the methods of analysis and habits of mind that inform sound and productive historical inquiry are missing from otherwise intelligent discourse that purports to be about history. Those who think or write this way frequently cannot grasp the difference between useful sources and defective ones, between one point of view and another. Even when they recognize a reliable source, they cannot adequately interrogate it to obtain the maximum information it could yield. Finally, they are unable to frame research questions in ways that can lead them through enriching thought processes to satisfying results.

One of the greatest historians who ever wrote was Thucydides, who lived in the fourth century B. C. He wrote one book, *The Peloponnesian War*. He was the first to exercise the historical imagination in all of the facets that I've described—although imperfectly (he often reproduced speeches he had heard from memory or reconstructed them based on what he thought would have been said). In the preface to his book, he articulated the reasons to think and write about history. His view makes as apt a coda to an introduction to the historical imagination as I can think of.

To hear this history rehearsed, for that there be inserted in it no fables, shall be perhaps not delightful. But he that desires to look into the truth of things done, and which (according to the condition of humanity) may be done again, or at least their like, he shall find enough herein to make him think it profitable. And it is compiled rather for an everlasting possession, than to be rehearsed for a prize.

ⁱ See Carlo Ginsburg, *History Rhetoric and Proof: the Menachem Stern Jerusalem Lectures* (Hanover, N. H.: University Press of New England, 1999), 54-66 and *passim* for a recent discussion of Valla's contribution to historiography.

ⁱⁱ See *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, 16 October 2007, <<http://etext.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv2-09>> for a useful discussion of this concept.

ⁱⁱⁱ From Von Ranke, *Latin and Germanic Nations*, in Stern, *Varieties of History*, 57. See also Trygve R. Tholfsen, *Historical Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 157-186, for a succinct discussion of Ranke's philosophy of history and his influence.

^{iv} George Santayana, *the Philosophy of George Santaya* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1940), 560.

^v Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2007), 45. Another excellent guide to the writing of history for students is Richard Marius, *A Short Guide to Writing about History* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1989). Both Marius and Rampolla are good on mechanics, but Marius treats issues of the historical thinking process more fully than Rampolla. A more exhaustive work is the classic Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff, *the Modern Researcher*, 5th edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), but this work is for a general audience of researchers, not only historians.

^{vi} Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). The introduction and first chapter provide the sum and substance of Said's argument.

^{vii} Francis Jennings, *the Invasion of America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

^{viii} See Jennings, *Invasion of America*, chs. 1 and 2 for discussion of what the author calls the "civilization/savagery dichotomy" by which historians assumed the native-white encounter unfolded and for his indictment of foremost historians and anthropologists who accepted it.

^{ix} See Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, v.8 (1969), 3-53. Although this is a highly specialized essay aimed at political philosophers and historians of ideas, it can be read profitably by those seeking to understand the mechanics of historical thinking generally.

^x Charles Beard, "That Noble Dream," reprinted in Stern, *Varieties of History*, 314-328. See also Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) for an exhaustive discussion of the quest for objectivity in American historical writing.

^{xi} See Rampolla, *Writing in History*, 63, for a discussion of the use of value-laden language.

^{xii} Rampolla, *Writing in History*, 62-63.

^{xiii} Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 197.

^{xiv} Thomas Kuhn, *the Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), chs. 2 and 3.

^{xv} See Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the twentieth Century: from Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, Ct: Wesleyan University Press, 1997, 2005). See Part III for a consideration of the post-modern movement in historical thinking.

^{xvi} See James Harvey Robinson, "The New History," excerpted in Stern, *Varieties of History*, 258-266. A short but excellent consideration of Robinson's influence on American historical thought is found in John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1983), 110-116.

^{xvii} Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1913), 48-49.

^{xviii} Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America: 1860-1920* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1930), 24.

¹⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *the American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Random House, 1973), xxxvii.

^{xx} Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, xxviii. See also Jack Pole, "Richard Hofstadter," in Robert Allen Rutland, ed., *Clio's Favorites: Leading Historians of the United States, 1945-2000* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 68-83; 73-74, for a discussion of Hofstadter's intellectual development.

OTHER HELPFUL WORKS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *the Modern Researcher* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985).

A classic on research methods by a great historian (Barzun) and, in subsequent editions, a younger colleague (Graff), but meant for a general audience.

Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953).

As noted in the text, Bloch was one of the prime movers in the trend toward social history. This brief book represents a working historian's ideas concerning practice, with emphasis on social history research. Bloch, a member of the French Resistance, was captured and executed by the Nazis. The work was edited for publication by his distinguished colleague, Lucien Febvre.

Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

An exhaustive history of the development of historical theory and method.

Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

Another discussion by a practitioner of the main questions every historian ponders when engaged in the work of writing history.

James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: the Art of Historical Detection* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

An excellent aid for understanding the dynamics of historical thinking and writing which uses various perspectives to illustrate the inductive, deductive, and wholly interpretive nature of the construction of historical narrative. As such, it is an entertaining guide to the use and abuse of evidence.

Mark T. Gilderhuis, *History and Historians: a Historiographical Introduction*, 6th edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007).

As brief as Breisach is lengthy.

Robin W. Winks, ed., *The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

A compendium of essays and excerpts focusing on the techniques of evaluating historical evidence.