

Historical Perspectives: Glossary of Terms

Although some historians aspire to write a “total history” of a given (often short) period or event, they typically divide the discipline into several topical fields. Some historians also come at their subjects with particular intellectual or political perspectives, and these variables are another way of distinguishing between historians and their work. Although academic historians are supposed to try to keep an open mind, these perspectives or preferences of course shape the way that they approach, research, and write history.

Historical Fields or Topics

Political history. This sort of history commonly assumes or asserts that institutions and patterns associated with governance and power are at the heart of history. Political historians study a wide range of themes, though, from biographies of powerful leaders to highly statistical studies of, say, the relationship between ethnicity and political affiliation in the antebellum North. Diplomatic history and the history of foreign relations are ordinarily subsumed within this discipline, as is legal history.

Military history. This field is often associated with political and particularly diplomatic history, and it can overlap with many other fields. Conventional military history focuses on the history of warfare, including military leadership, strategy and tactics, and the development of military technology. This historical field dominates much of the popular literature and television shows devoted to history. But military history can also entail the study of attitudes about war and the relationship between social and military history.

Intellectual history. These histories focus on ideas. Traditional intellectual historians commonly write about prominent intellectuals, including philosophers and novelists. But intellectual historians can also focus on the ideas and the culture (patterns of every-day life) of ordinary people. American intellectual history overlaps a great deal with the field of American Studies, which is a separate department at some universities and is associated with the study of American literature.

Economic history. As its name implies, economic historians study the history of the economy. These histories can be highly technical and statistical, as economic historians are often economists. The history of business is also associated with this field, as is the history of technology.

Environmental history. This is a relatively new field that contains two broad schools. One school focuses on the physical aspects of environmental history, how humans and the rest of the environment have actually interacted with each other. These scholars are often conversant in biology and ecology. The other wing of environmental history is more interested with the history of ideas and culture, with how humans have approached and conceived of the environment.

Social history. This is probably the largest modern field in academic history since its rapid expansion in the 1960s. Social history is of course concerned with particular social groups,

particularly ones that have been marginalized. Social history contains a myriad of sub-fields, including: women's history; gender history; the history of sexuality; the history of families; the history of immigration; urban history; rural history; labor history; the history of particular ethnic or racial groups (such as African-American and Native American history); the history of crime.

Regional history. Regional historians are commonly concerned with the peculiar characteristics of the place (city, state, region) that they are studying. But historians may study how broader themes have developed in a particular locale without primarily defining themselves as regional historians. For historians of the U.S., regional historians are commonly associated with the West and the South. There are of course many non-academic historians, often associated with local historical societies, who focus on the history of relatively small places.

As you can see, the above categories are somewhat fuzzy and overlapping. Historians of the American West are commonly environmental historians, for example, and an urban historian may study how particular immigrant or ethnic groups developed in cities.

Intellectual Perspectives

Historians tend to be much less theory driven than other scholars in the social sciences and humanities, so many of our perspectives are borrowed from other disciplines. Here are some you might encounter.

Post Modernism. This perspective has become very popular in English and Cultural Studies departments over the past several decades and influences many historians, particularly those who study culture and gender. As its name implies, postmodernists interrogate assumptions about logic, meaning, and structure (postmodernism is closely related to post structuralism). They are often concerned with the shifting, indefinite meanings of language, and they tend to study what people have said rather than how they have acted, with "representations" rather than deeds.

The Annales School. The Annales approach to history arose in France after World War II and emphasizes broad, seemingly static patterns or conditions that underlay and shape events, such as population levels or agriculture in medieval societies. It is sometimes referred to as "history that stands still." Historians who study the U.S., which has had quite a dynamic history, do not often employ this concept, though it can be used to trace broad historical patterns and shifts that often go unnoticed (such as social deference or fertility rates).

Anthropology. Historians who study the history of indigenous Americans of course often use anthropological sources and perspectives in their work. They are sometimes referred to as "ethno-historians," as they combine the work of ethnography and history. But anthropologists now study a much wider range of societies than they used to, and historians of immigration and other social groups commonly use anthropological concepts. For example, social and cultural historians may refer to the concept of "mentalité" to try to capture the underlying outlook of a group, such as the concept of "honor" among white southerners.

Sociology. Social historians often end up reading a great deal of sociology, and more and more sociologists have been doing historical work, so the two disciplines often intersect. Max Weber

is one of the founders of sociology whose ideas have been very popular among historians, including his theories about “rationalization” (the process by which nations become more and more efficient) and the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism.

Psychology. A few historians are out and out psycho-historians who attempt to use Freudian theories to explain individual or group behavior. One scholar argues that the Civil War occurred because of patricidal urges among leaders in the North and the South, for example. Ideas from social psychology tend to be more widely accepted and sensible. The concept of scapegoating in the sociology of deviance (the idea that communities must create deviance and deviants in order to define normality) has been used by historians of witchcraft, for example.

Political Perspectives

As noted above, academic historians are socialized to try to keep open minds. Few believe that complete objectivity is possible, however, and all historians are shaped by political beliefs, impulses, and assumptions that shape what they choose to study, what questions they are concerned with, and what conclusions they are apt to draw from it.

Conservatives. This is a word whose meaning has changed a great deal over the past few centuries or even decades. Traditional conservatives, to coin an awkward term, have distrusted change and have tended to see a great deal of value in traditions and stability. They believe that humans are prone to err (some would say “sin”) and require strong, stable institutions to keep them from falling into chaos. They are very distrustful of socialism, pacifism, and other programs of social improvement that strike them as utopian. More modern forms of conservatism, at least in the U.S., are more overtly political and commonly view the U.S. (a nation that traditional conservatives long viewed as dangerously reckless) in very positive terms.

Liberals. Again, this is a term with many and dynamic meanings. Liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were optimistic about the human prospect, about humans’ capacity to improve themselves and their societies. Such liberals have tended to see history in Whiggish terms, as a steady, inexorable march toward perfection –or at least improvement. More recent liberals—chastened by two world wars and the Holocaust and the popularity of MTV and “American Idol”—are much less sanguine about human nature. Most contemporary academic historians would probably consider themselves as liberals but would define that orientation quite loosely—as including a general concern for social and political equity and personal liberty, for example.

Radicals. Radical historians include doctrinaire Marxists who apply Marxian analysis to questions of state and class formation but also a much broader range of scholars who emphasize both oppression and resistance. Radicals tend to focus on inequality and struggles against inequality, and they believe that humans can create societies and nations characterized by high levels of freedom, justice, and equality. Radical historians commonly study subjects such as gender, race, and class, but also many aspects of political history.