Chapter 14

Thinking Historically: Writing and Understanding Historical Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces readers to the multiple ways of perceiving historical research. It focuses on differing approaches to historical understanding and the ways that these methods shape the way we see the field. This chapter discusses archives, types of sources, and approaches to interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

For many individuals, historical research is an additional aspect of research, not one that is the immediately relevant, but one to which they pay lip service as being important. However, understanding how history is written helps us to understand the development of our field and of the multiple understandings of the field that currently available. Whenever I talk about history or historical research one of two things happen. People get excited and start telling me how fascinated they are by a particular aspect of history or their eyes glaze over. In this chapter I am hoping for a different kind of reaction.

Understanding the Past

Simply stated, history is the story of the past. It encompasses both a story or narrative that frames an event, and a meticulous use of documents to back up the argument. The story is the understanding that we use to understand historical significance. The documents and other sources that form the basis of this narrative are called primary sources. This means that they were generated contemporaneously with the period under study. Historians follow multiple sources to pull together an overview of the period or event. Studying history is cumulative in the sense that we start by looking at specific events, and then branch out to give meaning to these events within a broader historical period. Historical research always starts with a question. It is the task of the reader to unearth the kinds of questions that are being asked. It is the task of the writer to explain how a particular event fits with broader phenomena.

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Thinking Historically

Historical research and writing inevitably incorporates a particular point of view and explanation. In general, historians do not think about history as a method, although they do recognize that there is an historical method. For this reason, most historical research does not include a methodology section. The only departure from this is when the research method includes statistical analyses. These types of studies will include a discussion of the method. While there is not usually a methodology section, most research works do include a section on sources. These indicate the archives and other materials consulted.

How Is History Useful?

Historical research has many uses, but they are not always clear. The study of history is the study of multiple interpretations. Interpretations change along with our historical understanding of our own period. Historical research begins with a question. In many ways, it resembles a puzzle to be solved. The first question is often a simple, “What happened?” But these kinds of questions are initially reserved for major political events and changes. We ask, what happened during the Civil War? However, this is of limited interest unless we can dig a deeper.

Ultimately historians are grappling with the question of why an event occurred. Even though historical causation is almost impossible to establish. The historian can lay out the many perspectives that contribute to an event, but very rarely can they say that causation is definitively found. This question of causation is quite complex and never fully resolved.

The study of history is centered around an understanding of chronological thinking. This means an acceptance of the idea that the past sets the stage for the present and the future. This means that we can only understand the present through our understanding of the past. Additionally, it means that while the past does not predict the future, it does lay the groundwork for it. The lessons are at best murky. For example, the famous Santayana dictum, (1905, p. 284) that “Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it” is pithy, but does not fully convey the complexity of historical understanding. Historical events build on each other. Although our sense of chronology is viewed through our own cultural and historical contexts, there is a sense that what happens affects in some unknown way what will happen. This means, that history does not repeat itself although there may be patterns.

It often a truism that historians look at the individual event and that political scientists and sociologists may look at the same data and seek patterns. This is less true now than it has been in the past since historians do now generally look for patterns and trends, but by and large they do not look at generalizable patterns. Since historical events are unique, they are not seen has helpful for prediction.

The historian Eric Foner (2017) points out that our understanding of our culture is seen through the prism of the past. He goes on to cite Carl Becker who wrote that “history is what the present chooses to remember about the past (p. A25).” But even this is not sufficient. History is not only a function of memory, but also of forgetting. Individuals, events, phenomena are forgotten because they do fit in with the present day narrative of ourselves. For example, women have for a long time been left out of the narrative of our historical understanding because it was maintained that they were not included in the decisions that shaped the country. However, it turns out that when one looks, they were in fact there, often as pivotal characters.

Because causation is difficult to establish, and because there are multiple interpretations of history, history cannot be used to prediction, at least in the ways that many use it. This idea can be clearly seen in the work of Neustadt and May (1986) who wrote about the misuses of historical analogies. For example, they state that American hesitation about entrance into the second World War was based on an errone-