



***Methods of Analysis***  
**Historical Analysis**

Stephen Petrina (2020)

History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's [or makeshift] dam is the history we make today. (Ford, 1916c, p. 10)

Few methods reduce to cliché as readily as history: “history is bunk,” “history shows,” “history teaches,” “history is our guide,” “that’s ancient history,” etc. This is partially due to different senses of history. Beard (1946) differentiates among three senses:

history-as-actuality means all that has been felt, thought, imagined, said, and done by human beings as such and in relation to one another and to their environment since the beginning of [hu]mankind’s operations on this planet. *Written-history* is a systematic or fragmentary narration or account purporting to deal with all or part of this history-as-actuality. *History-as-record* consists of the documents and memorials pertaining to history-as-actuality on which written-history is or should be based. (p. 5)

All three lend themselves to cliché yet despite this familiarity, or perhaps because of this, non-historians struggle with historical understanding and analysis. History teachers consistently report that students’ “essays are the sites of massive, undifferentiated data dumps. They have paraphrased primary sources instead of analyzing them, ignored argumentation, confused past and present, and failed completely to grasp the ‘otherness’ of a different era” (Díaz, Middendorf, Pace, & Shopkow, 2008, p. 1211). As well, historians criticize each other for the dreaded *salto mortale* or “sweeping and ahistorical generic categories” and for caricatures of the past, simplistic assumptions, and shallow, trivial, unsubstantiated claims (Drumm, 2014, pp. 459-460).

With specific ways of dealing with the past, historical analysis involves

examining primary sources (first-hand accounts or documents [or artifacts] of an event or issue) as well as secondary sources (second-hand accounts written or told by others [e.g., other historians]) about the topic under study. Analysis requires placing issues and events within a time perspective, discussing them in the context of the history of the times and formulating an interpretation that relates to some theory about [these perspectives, times, topics, etc.]. (Terborg-Penn, 1985, p. 10)

Beard (1946) emphasizes the active role historians play in “the past” *and* “the present.” “Too feeble an involvement in the life of the present,” historians tend to agree, “makes for a slack and routine grasp of the past. But present commitments that are too parochial imprison our imagination, instead of challenging it” (Higham, 1962, p. 609). Indeed, history can be alternatively defined as “the cultivation and maintenance of the collective memory” (Joyce, 1984, p. 133). Options vary considerably in the ways that the collective memory or past is cultivated and maintained, and shaped from the present. Like news reporters who have to fabricate a case or story from evidence and events, historians construct cases and stories— the

past does not provide stories *tout court*; cases and stories have to be analyzed, evidenced, and composed or constructed in a process of becoming written-history.

At the outset of identifying a historical problem and interacting with secondary sources, “the historian, however situated, confronts [primary] source materials and texts. The interaction between the historian and these objects and records constitutes the first step in historical analysis.” “The text and materials in part drive the historian,” Warner (1991) continues, “pushing the focus toward specific subjects and heightening certain outlooks. On the other hand, the sensitivity and imagination of the historian will inform what can be made of the source” (p. 21). Like all forms of research, historical analysts anticipate an audience, however larger or small. “What use is a history book that no one reads, or a museum that no one visits, or a film that no one watches? Historical understanding is only possible when a historian proposes and an audience reacts” (Warner, 1991, p. 22).

In trying to distinguish his archaeological and genealogical analyses from historical analysis, Foucault captured how historians approach problems and what they value. For instance, he (1975/1981) explains, “I adopt the methodical precaution and the radical unaggressive scepticism which makes it a principle not to regard the point of time where we are now standing as the outcome of a teleological progression which it would be one’s business to reconstruct historically” (p. 49). In addition to this precaution, what makes historical analysis challenging is a caveat that historians value “clear thought, careful marshalling of evidence, and incisive writing” (Chirot, 1983, p. 1264) along with “colorful material, painstakingly culled from a host of sources” (Bogue, 1984, p. 511).

Of course, good syntheses with careful generalizations and evidence withstanding analytical scrutiny are valued. Nonetheless, throughout the twentieth century historians became increasingly skeptical of historical synthesis. A sign of the waning of synthesis, its only specialist journal, *Revue de Synthèse Historique*, began publication in 1900 and ceased in 1930. The *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale*, founded in 1929, built on this French tradition of historical synthesis in encouraging histories of long durée but at the same time departed in encouraging minute analytical details of everyday life in social history. In a nutshell, “historians value accuracy of fact above conceptual synthesis” (Allardyce, 1987, p. 377).

That said, climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic beg expansive scales and big histories, if not syntheses. Historians readily deal with differentiated units of analysis, from macroscopic Gaia to the microscopic virus, end of time to the moment, global population to the individual, Africa to Lucy, ocean to the boat, paddy to the grain of rice, or world’s factory to the household. If history-as-actuality includes the scope of humankind’s “operations on this planet,” documented from Greenland’s ice cores to Greta’s strikes, then concerns of the Anthropocene add weight to historical analysis. Similarly, the Covid-19 pandemic adds urgency as historical analysts are pressed to quickly write a history of the past four months— January-April 2020— ostensibly from a scope beginning with the Bubonic plague of the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century. Historical analysts are challenged to, somehow at the same time, account for environmental history, cultural history, and medical history over the past 4,400 years. So we return to a cliché: history is easier said than done or easier written than made. I primarily write microcultural histories but I’ve also demonstrated the utility of a big history of the critique of technology (Petrina, 2016).

1. What is Analysis?
  - a. Loucks (1943, p. 148): Once chemists were concerned primarily with the techniques of analysis. They proved water to consist of hydrogen and oxygen. They analyzed the atmosphere and found it to be a mixture of gases. They broke down complex compounds into their constituent atoms and listed the elements. In recent years, however, increasing interest has been taken in the techniques of synthesis. Chemists have been engaged in putting elements together.... The effect of the laboratory upon Clio's art, however, has been to stimulate the processes of analysis rather than of synthesis. Historians have broken down the complex geographical-biological-cultural compounds which we call civilization in much the same way as chemists have separated crude petroleum into its constituent oils and fuels or as anatomists have dissected the human body into its various organs and tissues. Indeed, historians have specialized in limited periods or limited areas in order that they might better employ their historical techniques of analysis and dissection. This is necessary and commendable work, to be sure, just as is analytic chemistry. But while analysis is a necessary prerequisite, it is not a substitute for synthesis.
  - b. Geertz (1973, p. 9): analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification... and determining their social ground and import.
  - c. Wood (1984, p. 512): historians value fellow workers who are able to boil down everything in the field to a clear and concentrated substance— not too thick or too thin.
2. What is Historical? What is History? What is Historiography?
  - a. Beard (1946, p. 5): History-as-actuality means all that has been felt, thought, imagined, said, and done by human beings as such and in relation to one another and to their environment since the beginning of [hu]mankind's operations on this planet. *Written-history* is a systematic or fragmentary narration or account purporting to deal with all or part of this history-as-actuality. *History-as-record* consists of the documents and memorials pertaining to history-as-actuality on which written-history is or should be based. Of course for recent history, a writer may use in part [her or their or] his own experiences or observations and oral statements made by [her or] his [or their] contemporaries which he [she or they] had heard and remembered or written down.
  - b. Van Dyke (1960, pp. 116-117): Obviously, history-as-actuality encompasses a multitude of different kinds of activities. History-as-written can therefore vary considerably in its subject matter. There can be histories of art, of science, of religion, of political life, and so on; and there can be histories concerned with interrelationships among various kinds of activities. For the most part, history-as-written is the work of members of departments of history; but, still, history is also written by others. The word historian may therefore designate either a member of a department of history or anyone who writes history.
  - c. If history is defined as “the cultivation and maintenance of the collective memory” (Joyce, 1984, p. 133), then historiography is the cultivation and maintenance of the ways history is told or silenced and the way the past is made visible or hidden.
    - i. Warner (1991, p. 22): Yes, lying, distortion, special pleading, suppression of data, and all sorts of institutional politics interfere with the interaction between historians and their sources, and historians and their audiences.... The only correction for gross abuse that I know is the same for history as for science—quick and thorough criticism. Here, I think, our profession is quite wanting. I note that both the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association refuse to review textbooks as they do other histories. Yet school and college classrooms are by far the largest arenas of historical analysis. I note too that as a professor my colleagues and I are extremely skittish about criticism of our teaching; yet the power imbalance in the classroom makes it very hard for the students to give good feedback. Finally, our professional reviewing structure, despite recent additions of film and museum

criticism, is very imperfect. Reviews are too slow in coming, too short, and editors are reluctant to express their sense of what is important, and what is of only limited interest.

- d. Kaestle (1988, p. 61): result of an interaction between fragmentary evidence and the values and experiences of the historian.
  - e. History is Bunk
    - i. Ford (1916b, May 23, p. 1): Napoleon means nothing to me because I don't know much about him. The only history that is worth the snap of your finger to you or me is the history I make day by day.
    - ii. Ford (1916c, May 25, p. 10): History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam is the history we make today. That's the trouble with the world. We're living in books and history and tradition. We want to get away from that and take care of today. We've done too much looking back. What we want to do and do it quick is to [just] make history right now.
    - iii. Ford (1921, p. 1): History is bunk. What difference does it make how many times the ancient Greeks flew their kites?
    - iv. Ford (1932, p. 7): History as it is taught in the schools deals largely with the unusual phases of our national life— wars, major political controversies, territorial extensions, and the like. When I went to our American history books to learn how our forefathers [and foremothers] harrowed the land, I discovered that the historians knew nothing about harrows. Yet our country has depended more on harrows than on guns or speeches. I thought that a history which excluded harrows, and all the rest of daily life, was bunk. And I think so yet.
3. What is Historical Analysis?
- a. Terborg-Penn (1985, p. 10): historical analysis involves examining primary sources (first-hand accounts or documents [or artifacts] of an event or issue) as well as secondary sources (second-hand accounts written or told by others [e.g., other historians]) about the topic under study. Analysis requires placing issues and events within a time perspective, discussing them in the context of the history of the times and formulating an interpretation that relates to some theory about [these perspectives, times, topics, etc.].
  - b. Stewart (2013, p. 71): Historical Analysis takes factfinding one step further. Analysis breaks down a complex historical phenomenon for closer examination and scrutiny.... Through analysis each event is broken down into its subcomponents and interrelationships as the historian tries to understand all the important dynamics. Analysis is critical to our understanding of what historical events actually mean.
    - i. (p. 71): Next we have Historical Synthesis. Just as it is important to break down events into component parts to truly understand them, it is equally important to take those insights and use them to recombine the relevant information into a complete and coherent picture. A historian has to try and make sense of the many details of an event using value judgments gained through his or her analysis of the relevant facts. Historians must try to make sense of events in order to construct an accurate narrative and not leave a reader with all the pieces spread out on the floor for them to look at and puzzle over on their own. As historical professionals we have to take risks and bring all the complex pieces together into a coherent narrative with conclusions and judgments.
  - c. Procedural Steps in Historical Analysis
    - i. Warner (1991, p. 21): At the outset, the historian, however situated, confronts source materials and texts. The interaction between the historian and these objects and records constitutes the first step in historical analysis. The possibilities of this first set of interactions are numberless, but the outcome is at first only one history, one

particular presentation. The text and materials in part drive the historian, pushing the focus toward specific subjects and heightening certain outlooks. On the other hand, the sensitivity and imagination of the historian will inform what can be made of the sources. Some historians are fascinated by the authenticity of texts and objects from the past, and their presentations remain essentially notes to lists and chronologies. Others can imagine a microcosm of the world in an old book or a remnant.

- ii. (p. 22): The second step in history presentation is also private, although multiple histories emerge. In this step history is perceived when what the audience knows interacts with what is new in the material being offered. The action is inside the heads of the audience, as it was in the case of the historians and their material. Because the audience brings a variety of experiences to a historical presentation, as many interpretations emerge from the encounter with the presentation as there are viewers and readers.

#### 4. Historical Progress

##### a. Foucault (1975/1980, pp. 49-50):

- i. [J.-J. Brochier] I came across a sentence in *Madness and Civilisation* where you say that we must 'free historical chronologies and successive orderings from all forms of progressivist perspective'.
- ii. [Foucault] This is something I owe to the historians of science. I adopt the methodical precaution and the radical but unaggressive scepticism which makes it a principle not to regard the point in time where we are now standing as the outcome of a teleological progression which it would be one's business to reconstruct historically: that scepticism regarding ourselves and what we are, our here and now, which prevents one from assuming that what we have is better than- or more than- in the past. This doesn't mean not attempting to reconstruct generative processes, but that we must do this without imposing on them a positivity or a valorisation.
- iii. [J.-J. Brochier] Even though science has long shared the postulate that man progresses?
- iv. [Foucault] It isn't science that says that, but rather the history of science. And I don't say that humanity doesn't progress. I say that it is a bad method to pose the problem as: 'How is it that we have progressed?'. The problem is: how do things happen? And what happens now is not necessarily better or more advanced, or better understood, than what happened in the past.