



## What is Historical Research?

Stephen Petrina  
May 2020

**History**— 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.

**Contextualism** suggests that "knowledge is made concrete and is framed by relevant factors, relations, and conditions (the setting or the context) within which, or among which, human acts and events unfold. Contextualism underscores the idea that human activity does not develop in a social vacuum, but rather is rigorously **situated** within a sociocultural and cultural context of meanings and relationships. Like a message that makes sense only in terms of the total context in which it occurs, human actions are embedded in a context of time, space, culture, and the local tacit rules of conduct.... **We cannot know the world around us in full detail**, contextualism asserts" (Rosnow & Geogoudi, 1986, pp. 4-5). Contextualism can be viewed as an integration of agency with larger social and cultural frameworks of influence. Contextualism recognizes the interplay between motivated actors, culture, social forces and situations. Hence, integrating human agency with contexts of economic, ideological, political and social forces is a challenge for historians. Balancing cultural contexts, ideological structures, and human agency in narrative introduces both historiographic and literary problems.

**Conceptual history** is often used interchangeably with intellectual history and the history of ideas. Conceptual historians assert distinctions, however, between ideas, which are assumed to be somewhat durable or enduring and concepts, which are more contingent, mutable, and dynamic. Ideas are often reduced to the agency of human actors while concepts are often assumed to have agency as a nonhuman actor. This latter point of the performativity of terms and associated concepts is suggested in Austin's (1955/1962) *How to Do Things with Words*. Nonetheless, whether concepts are deeds *and* does remains contentious. Inasmuch as concepts are not isolated from various signifiers and practices and mediate or shape experiences, conceptual historians often refer to "conceptual matrices," "conceptual systems," "conceptual networks and patterns of conceptualization" (ECHP, 2011, p. 111). Conceptual history can be defined as "study of conceptual change" or "the study of the semantic transformations" (Plotikov & Swiderski, 2009, p. 72). White (2000/20002, p. ix) places emphasis on the history of conception and conceptualization— on "the invention and development" of concepts or the history of "conceptual change," "semantic innovation" and transformation (ECHP, 2011, p. 112).

**Cultural History** depends on how culture is defined. If culture is defined broadly as the means of making meaning, then histories of this necessarily focus on humans in interaction with artifacts and tools. If defined as symbol systems, then the focus is on symbolic learning and communication. According to Gordon (2004), cultural history is "a way of understanding the past that emphasizes the ways that groups and individuals, in competition with one another, construct the meanings that guide their interpretations of the material world" (p. 3).

But behind this lies one of the great insights of the new cultural history: the banal, the everyday experience, the day-to-day actions of ordinary people, are seen not only as historically constructed, but as important to the understanding of power relations in human societies. (p. 3)

In this way, cultural history explores the everyday past of regular people doing mundane things.

**Environmental history** "explains how we got to where we are. Why is the environment we live in like it is? More formally, environmental history is the investigation and description of previous states of the biophysical environment, and the study of the history of human impacts on

and relationships with the non-human setting. Environmental history seeks to explain the landscapes and issues of today and their evolving and dynamic nature, and from this to elucidate the problems and opportunities of tomorrow. Environmental history has emerged following rising concern over the ecological sustainability of modern human societies. Environmental histories written on the grandest scale address the spectre of global environmental change, even though their authors might not use the term 'environmental history.' Such views have shaped modern environmental concern in a fundamental way— without what is essentially environmental history, the discourse would lack its most basic parameters. At any spatial scale, an environmental issue without a past is altogether as mysterious as a person without a past. In seeking a sustainable relationship between human and natural systems we must first construct histories, establish baselines, and identify long-term trends. (Dovers, 1994, p. 22)

**Perceptual history**, as the history of perception, is often used interchangeably with the history of body, consciousness, emotion, experience, and the senses (Carp, 1997). Subjective experiences of qualia or the sensational qualities of hearing, olfaction, sight, taste, and touch animate actors and have histories. These sensory modalities, along with extrasensoriality, intersensoriality, kinesthesia, proprioception, and synesthesia, give a phenomenal character to experience. Emotions, feelings, and moods, pain and pleasure, colour everyday life and challenge historians to find traces of expression. First-person and third-person phenomenological records intended to explicitly document perceptual or preconceptual experience are few and far between. Similarly, client and patient therapeutic records are not readily archived. This *not* to say that historians are merely left with records of *perspectives on* emotional or perceptual experience rather than actual *experiences of* feeling and perception (Stearns & Stearns, 1985). And this is *not* to say that the focus of perceptual history is “the mystery of the inner sanctuary of private awareness,” as communal or shared sensations are common (perhaps more common pre-capitalism) (Herrick, 1945, p. 69). If conceptual history is a study of “conceptual change,” then perceptual history is a study of “perceptual change” or how and why phenomena are encountered, entangled, and experienced differently (Taylor, 1979, p. 18). The challenge is to explore the past of perceptual worlds assembled, composed, and shared. The challenge is to perceptualize history.

**Critical History (Archaeology & Genealogy)**— Nietzsche says when a “past is considered critically, then one attacks its roots with a knife, then one tramples roughshod over all pieties. This is always a dangerous process, one that is dangerous to life itself. And human beings or ages that serve life in this manner — that is, by judging and destroying a past — are always dangerous and endangered” (1873/, p. 76; 1873/2000, p. 61). Gordon (1997, p. 1024) asks:

So what then is the "critical history"? I would say it is any approach to the past that produces disturbances in the field— that inverts or scrambles familiar narratives of stasis, recovery or progress; anything that advances rival perspectives (such of those as the losers rather than the winners) for surveying developments, or that posits alternative trajectories that might have produced a very different present— in short any approach that unsettles the familiar strategies that we use to tame the past in order to normalize the present.

Critical history, sometimes referred to as social or cultural history, involves co-generating and finding voice with or for the marginal and submerged that ‘lie a little beneath’ history—the voices of the mad, the delinquent, the disempowered, the oppressed. If history tends to be written as victor(y) and progress narratives, then critical history provides an antidote by allowing for stories or explanations that run counter-intuitive to tales of smooth progress. At one time, critical history was said to focus on conflict rather than consensus. Nowadays, however, the focus is on microhistories. Critical history has been called a history of the present.

(<http://omni.cc.purdue.edu/~felluga/theoryframes.html#NewHistoricism>)

Foucault used what he called “archaeology” to explore the strata of history wherein one would uncover the “conditions of acceptability of a system [discourse] and follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence.” Changes, discourses, etc. are not realized or “analyzed as universals to which history, with its particular circumstances, would add a number of modifications” (Foucault, 1997, *The Politics of Truth*, p. 62). Foucault used archaeology and genealogy to explore relations between power, knowledge, and the body by uncovering layers of the past and to problematise power relations in the present by tracing power through the past (Sawocki, 1991). Genealogy, for Foucault, was “a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in the empty sameness throughout the course of history” (Foucault, 1980, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 117).

a. Archaeology

- i. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969/1972, p. 16): in so far as my aim is to define a method of historical analysis freed from the anthropological theme... to define a method of analysis purged of all anthropologism.
  1. (pp. 139-140): [Archaeology] does not try to repeat what has been said by reaching it in its very identity. It does not claim to efface itself in the ambiguous modesty of a reading that would bring back, in all its purity, the distant, precarious, almost effaced light of the origin. It is nothing more than a rewriting: that is, in the preserved form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written. It is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object.
- ii. Foucault used what he called “archaeology” to explore the strata of history wherein one would uncover the “conditions of acceptability of a system [discourse] and follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence.” Changes, discourses, etc. are not realized or “analyzed as universals to which history, with its particular circumstances, would add a number of modifications” (Foucault, 1997, *The Politics of Truth*, p. 62). Foucault used archaeology and genealogy to explore relations between power, knowledge, and the body by uncovering layers of the past and to problematise power relations in the present by tracing power through the past (Sawocki, 1991).

b. Genealogy

- i. “Truth and Power” (1977/1979, p. 136): [Interviewer:] I would like to ask, keeping within the same methodological framework, how you place yourself in relation to the geneological approach? What is its importance as a means of asking questions about conditions of possibility, about modalities and the constitution of the objects and domains that you have yourself analysed?

- ii. Foucault: I wanted to see how problems such as the constitution of particular objects could be resolved from within a historical frame, rather than being posed in relation to a constituting subject. We have to get rid of the constituting subject, of the subject itself, in other words undertake an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject in historical terms. What I call genealogy is a form of history which takes account of the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of the object etc, without having to refer to a subject which is either transcendent in relation to the field of events, or which flits through history with no identity at all.
- iii. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” (1977):
  1. Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times. (p. 139)
  2. Genealogy, consequently, requires patience and a knowledge of details and it depends on a vast accumulation of source material. Its "cyclopean monuments" are constructed from "discreet and apparently insignificant truths and according to a rigorous method"; they cannot be the product of "large and well-meaning errors." In short, genealogy demands relentless erudition. (p 140)
  3. Genealogy does not oppose itself to history as the lofty and profound gaze of the philosopher might compare to the molelike perspective of the scholar; on the contrary, it rejects the meta-historical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for “origins.” (p. 140)
- iv. *Society Must be Defended* (1976):
  1. If you like, we can give the name "genealogy" to this coupling together of scholarly erudition and local memories, which allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics. That can, then, serve as a provisional definition of the genealogies I have been trying to trace with you over the last few years. You can see that this activity, which we can describe as genealogical, is certainly not a matter of contrasting the abstract unity of theory with the concrete multiplicity of the facts. (pp. 8-9)
- v. “What Our Present Is” (1983/1989):
  1. (p. 411): [Interviewer:] Does, for example, the opposition between knowledge and science that appears in your work and mainly in a number of your more methodological writings, seem to you more important from the perspective of the kind of history you are proposing to us?
  2. MF: Well, I think, really, that the type of history I do carries a number of marks or handicaps, if you will. First, the thing that I would like to say is that the question I start off with is: what are we and what are we today? What is this instant that is ours? Therefore, if you like, it is a history that starts off from this present day actuality. The second thing is that in trying to raise concrete problems, what concerned me was to choose a field containing a number of points that are particularly fragile or sensitive at the present time. I would hardly conceive of a properly speculative history without the field being determined by something happening right now. So, the entire concern is not, of course, to follow what is happening and keep up with what is called fashion.... The game is to try to detect those things which have not yet been talked about, those things that, at the present time, introduce, show, give some more or less vague indications of the fragility of our system of thought, in our way of reflecting, in our practices.

3. (p. 412): [Interviewer:] Yes, but in terms of this actuality, the manner in which you tell its story seems original to me. It seems to be regulated by the very object you are analyzing. It is because of these key problems of our society that you are led to re-do history in a specific way.
  4. MF: Fine. So, in terms of the objectives I set forth in this history, people often judge what I have done to be a sort of complicated, rather excessive analysis which leads to this result that finally we are imprisoned in our own system. The cords which bind us are numerous and the knots history has tied around us are oh so difficult to untie.
  5. (pp. 413-414): [Interviewer:] And really the type of history you have done is very much an analysis of strategies, but also an analysis of the way in which a number of practices sought out their own basis.
  6. Absolutely. I am going to use a barbarous word but words are only barbarous when they do not clearly say what they mean; it is known that many familiar words are barbarous because they say many things at once or say nothing at all, but, on the other hand, certain technical words which are bizarre in their construction are not barbarous because they say fairly clearly what they mean. I will say that it's the history of *problematizations*, that is, the history of the way in which things become a problem.... So, it is not, in fact, the history of theories or the history of ideologies or even the history of mentalities that interests me, but the history of problems, moreover, if you like, it is the genealogy of problems that concerns me. Why a problem and why such a kind of problem, why a certain way of problematizing appears at a given point in time.
- vi. "On the Genealogy of Ethics" (1994, p. 263):
1. Three domains of genealogy are possible. First, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents.
- vii. "What is Critique?" (1978):
1. What I understand by the procedure of eventualization, whilst historians cry out in grief, would be the following: first, one takes groups of elements where, in a totally empirical and temporary way, connections between mechanisms of coercion and contents of knowledge can be identified. Mechanisms of different types of coercion, maybe also legislative elements, rules, material set-ups, authoritative phenomena, etc. One would also consider the contents of knowledge in terms of their diversity and heterogeneity, view them in the context of the effects of power they generate inasmuch as they are validated by their belonging to a system of knowledge. We are therefore not attempting to find out what is true or false, founded or unfounded, real or illusory, scientific or ideological, legitimate or abusive. What we are trying to find out is what are the links, what are the connections that can be identified between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge, what is the interplay of relay and support developed between them, such that a given element of knowledge takes on the effects of power in a given system where it is allocated to a true, probable, uncertain or false element, such that a procedure of coercion acquires the very form and justifications of a rational, calculated, technically efficient element, etc. (p. 59)

- viii. Genealogy, for Foucault, was “a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in the empty sameness throughout the course of history” (Foucault, 1980, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 117).
- ix. Foucault studied discourses and power/knowledge. For example, he studied madness instead of specific people who were mad or controlled the mad, sexuality instead of specific manifestations of gender or sex.
- c. Riddell (1979, p. 241): “Foucault's archeology... suspends the classical notion of the *arche* or origin.” Foucault’s “substitution of the metaphor "genealogy" for the metaphor "archeology," as noted by his editor and translator, is not necessarily a radical shift or turn in his thinking, even if his definition of "genealogy" (following Nietzsche) becomes a more forceful refusal of the beginning as origin.,, literature becomes for him an instrumental and disruptive machine, a "madness" of language (as in his model, Holderlin).”