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History and Historiography

Pauline Maier, a History Professor from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was asked in a C-SPAN interview, "What is the History Teachers goal?" Her reply was that it was to make history alive and relevant in the present. But don't most history courses end up doing the opposite by focusing on dates, etc? Do history courses end up confirming that the past is gone and unrecoverable?

Or can we learn important lessons by considering the main themes of history, by analyzing events, causes and effects, change over time, along with the responses of people who were the agents of this change?

Let's keep some of this in mind as we proceed.

Three Theories of History

If indeed there are lessons to be learned, it would help to have some potential historical models that might help.

- 1) Cyclical Theory – Some think that history always repeats itself, that it is cyclical or circular. Every generation repeats the same things (usually mistakes) over and over without learning any lessons. It goes something like this: If the economy is bad, i.e. there's a Depression (consider that a few years ago some thought that the typical business cycle of boom and bust had ended with the advent of technology and the internet, oops!). Depression results in a competition among nations for scarce resources. This results in war. War ends and begins a period of peace. The winners (and sometimes the losers) prosper. And eventually, the prosperity runs its course and leads to an economic downturn (recession or depression). The cycle starts all over.
- 2) Spiral Theory - Imagine turning the cycle on its side. Events repeat, but things may get better or worse, depending on which way the spiral goes. In some cases it may get better or worse. Consider the last example. Have wars got better or worse? Depends on your perspective.
- 3) Linear Theory – Things don't really repeat. History is a straight line. Most historians think that the story of humanity is progress. Thus, linear history would be a line that slopes upward. Could it possibly slope downward?

Historiography

If the study of the past is called history, then the history of history is called historiography. Sorry, but historians don't only study the past, they study the history of studying the past. In fact, historians are not truly independent, unbiased observers. We all bring our biases and prejudices along as baggage when we study history, or any other subject. We are influenced by our own history.

To put this in perspective, I've identified below ten different stages of American Historiography, so you'll have some idea of how different historians have viewed American History. Again, these folks were influenced by the age in which they lived

- 1) Nationalistic Phase (1780 – 1860): These were mainly amateur historians that sought to glorify the American past. They believed that the US was a grand experiment, not an accident, but represented a major step forward for humanity (mostly because of the American Revolution and its emphasis of liberty, independence and freedom). Additionally, since there had been one revolution, there could be another, so these historians sought to convince people that the US was the best. One of these was named Parson Weems. You may not know him but you know his stories about George Washington. George didn't lie when confronted about chopping down the cherry tree. George could throw a silver dollar across the Potomac River (about 1 ½ miles across!). These stories were myths created to make the first President seem super human. Of course the "best" nation would only have this type of leader.
- 2) Scientific Phase (1865-1890): Coincided with the Industrial Revolution. University trained historians seek to apply scientific methods, like forming a hypothesis and then seeking to prove it with historical evidence.
- 3) Progressive Phase (1890-1920): These historians generally believed that history was a story of progress, though they frequently found themes of conflict, selfishness, and greed in the nation's past. Frederick Jackson Turner is one historian who believed that the existence of a "frontier" in America allowed for greater democracy and liberty than at any other time or place.
- 4) Debunking Phase (1920s): The horrors of World War I caused many historians to question the belief in progress, given the fact that the war had witnessed the introduction of new methods of destruction like poison gas, machine guns, submarines, and airplanes. These historians attacked (debunked) the notion of progress when it seemed that humanity was actually headed in the opposite direction.
- 5) Modern Phase (1930s-1940s): In spite of the Great Depression and World War II, these historians were generally positive about the course of history see how each phase no seems to react to the phase that comes just before it?).
- 6) Consensus Phase (1950s) In the age of "Father Knows Best," "I Love Lucy," "Ozzie and Harriet," and "Happy Days" those studying history in the 1950s found that the story of American History was of consensus, that is an absence of conflict. Of course, the subjects they studied, generally political and economic history of elite white males, clouded their view.

- 7) New Left or Radical Phase (1960s): Vietnam, Campus unrest, the Civil Rights Movement, "Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll." You get the picture. Historians experiencing these events were impacted in the way they viewed history. Conflict, not consensus, was the "real" theme in US history. Much of the reason was due to the subjects they studied. For the first time Women, African-Americans, Native Americans, Labor Unions, and Working Class people, all who had been previously ignored, were studied. No surprise that when these groups were examined, historians found conflict.
- 8) Neo-Consensus Phase(1970s-1980s): These decades witnessed a turn toward conservatism in the US, culminating in the Reagan years. These historians also studied the once ignored groups but drew different conclusions. They argued that in spite of the way these groups were treated, they did not foment class, gender or racial revolt. Consensus, not conflict, was the persistent theme in American History.
- 9) Post-modern Phase (1990s): Literary criticism from Literature and English departments at universities affected history departments in the US. Critics became skeptical about many things, and often denied that truth was unobtainable.
- 10) Post-postmodern Phase (2000-??): Many historians are currently seeking ways to integrate National history into Trans-national history, so that American events will be fit into a wider context. Perhaps liberty and democracy (for example) are not uniquely American traits that define American exceptionalism. We will see, look to Eastern Europe, African, Asian, and Latin American countries to see if experiments with democracy and capitalism will succeed. If there is a backlash, expect that the next phase will be a return to local/regional history (the opposite of transnational history) where historians will examine much smaller areas seeking out those things that make people different!

What do you think? Does the time a person "comes of age" impact their worldview? Are there cycles to history or not? Let's discuss some of these issues of the discussion board.



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