

CHAPTER 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF THEORY IN HISTORY

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Empiricism or Theory: Does It Have to Be an “either/or”?
- Case Study: The History of Slavery
- Text Goals and Chapter Organization
- Your Reservoir of Knowledge—Just the Tip of the Iceberg

“All theory is provisional. The notion of having one consistent, all-embracing theory is itself a heresy . . . I think of theory as critique, theory as polemic . . . Sometimes people talk as if you can have a methodology without a theory or as if you can keep the theory inside a locked drawer in the desk.”

E.P. Thompson¹

EMPIRICISM OR THEORY: DOES IT HAVE TO BE AN “EITHER/OR”?

As you noticed your reading list and saw this text, and as you opened its pages for the first time, you may have asked yourself, “why do I need to learn about theory? Isn’t it the job of the historian to be as objective as possible and doesn’t all that theory stuff just get in the way? What does this have to do with me and my education?” Certainly, historians search for meaning in the past and some “truth” that the past might convey to us. Most of us encounter histories—in books or on film—that emphasize grand narratives that, at least implicitly, focus on retention of critical information about any given topic (the French Revolution, Westward Expansion of the United States, etc.). These traditional approaches typically do not explore the **historiography** of that topic or reveal the various methods and techniques that could open up fresh ways of understanding the subject. All the debates between historians (and there are always debates on any important historical topic) and the use of theoretical frameworks for understanding the subject are submerged, often leaving the impression that the current story being presented is the only way to understand the past. As you continue through this text, it is our goal that you will not view history as a collection of facts about the past, but as a vibrant field that constructs various, sometimes competing understandings about the past, constructions that usually tell us a lot about our own society. In other words, as a profession, history seeks to uncover some truth about why the past was the way it was, and in some cases how it influences why today is the way it is.

Some practicing historians, however, are wary of such claims. According to many people, lay and professional historian alike, the business, or practice of writing history is patently untheoretical. Historians in this model claim to deal with tangible, touchable, unmediated, and raw facts that are put together like puzzle pieces. And once those pieces are placed together in the proper order, the “truth” will be clear. Theory is relegated to the sidelines, alternately scoffed at or ignored. By the time readers of history have encountered “history and theory,” the theory part has been given a cold shoulder, accused of gross misdeeds against proper historical method. Who needs it, anyway?

For example, the social historian Lawrence Stone accused historians who employed **postmodern** techniques of abandoning the principles on which the historical discipline is situated. Stone argued that they contributed to the degeneration of historical method because they used sources from linguistics, cultural anthropology, or literature while neglecting “the real” facts that make up evidence. The issue of having a monopoly of what constitutes the real is a crucial aspect of historical debate in the last forty years. What exactly is real? Language? Dates? Events? Perception? Respondents to his claims argued that Stone misunderstood the way theory operates in our own discipline.²

Other critics have argued that that history is simply an **empirical** approach to the past. But this argument falls flat when we examine the evidence. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) put forward the concept of the scientific method in the seventeenth century in *Novum Organum*. The scientific method relies on making a hypothesis, then observing data, and finally reaching a conclusion about the viability of the hypothesis. Can history duplicate this method? Sure it can, that is why it is often considered as part of the “social sciences.” Like scientists, historians generate hypotheses (or theories), observe the data, and then reach conclusions based on the observations of the data (or primary sources). Over time, this approach has shifted; rather than find “the truth” as if there were only one narrative, historians now search for “a truth” about the past. This shift has occurred as historians have increasingly recognized that they help to construct identities and meanings. In other words, historians interpret the evidence.

Interpretation is based on the ways in which we read the evidence, and we all read evidence differently. We are informed by our contexts (when and where we are in time and place) as well as by our view of the world.

For example, and we will explore this later in the text, the pioneers of working-class history embraced the evidence workers provided through a variety of sources and believed that workers’ stories were just as legitimate as the stories about labor from governments and institutions. These historians were often deeply engrossed in labor movements to begin with, and thus their interpretations were based in part by their personal convictions. The same development applies for women’s history and ethnic studies: as women and members of ethnic minorities pried open the previously barred doors to academia, they have brought with them perspectives rooted in their own experiences, and those perspectives have influenced their scholarly activities, creating a seismic shift in scholarship as new voices have been incorporated into old narratives.

Gender, race, ethnicity, and class are not the only factors that shape the perspective of the scholars who create, and the audiences that consume history. Ideas, or theories, also change. Beliefs that at one historical moment might have made sense to many people in society (e.g., notions of sexual or racial inferiority in the nineteenth century) may seem absurd at a later time, and thus compel historians to go back and reevaluate the work of earlier scholars writing from that erstwhile set of assumptions. This process of reevaluating both the past and the history of the past also leads to some new thorny questions: where did those original, absurd beliefs come from, and how did they become so powerful?

As E.P. Thompson stated in the quote that opens this book, these interpretations of the past are based on particular theories and those theories change. One reason they change, or are provisional, is because the context in which one writes changes. Historians, like their historical subjects, are confined by the time and place in which they write. They also learn from previous contexts. So a historian writing in 1997 can note why historians made the claims they did in 1965 and 1952. We have hindsight, history, to help us along in some ways.

However, it is not enough simply to say that historians are “products of their times.” Any particular period in the life of a society is complex, and in a large, modern society, there are a variety of ways in which people relate to each other. We come from different backgrounds (class, race, sex, etc.), we are raised in different places of the world (imperial/colonized), we have different ideological standpoints (liberal versus conservative), and so on. We are not all the same, and those differences in experience lead to different questions. Because historians

ask different questions, they often find new evidence. They look in places other historians had not, they find innovative ways of looking at the same material, or they read primary documents with a different eye, a new pair of lenses so to speak. The vast array of historians, studying the past from their various social and intellectual positions, and engaged in sometimes long-running debates with historians who came before them, makes the field of history far more vibrant than the standard university textbook lets on. Just beneath the tectonic plates of the seemingly stable grand narrative, historical debates run like fault lines, and historians embrace different sources, and frequently different theories, in search of new ways of understanding the past. So it is that we discover that the business of writing history is an ever-changing process. If it were not, there would be no place for newer scholars. Once we had found all the evidence, then that would be it. But history is not stagnant, and a primary reason is because of the theory embedded in all historical thought.

In fact, the study of theory provides a set of conceptual tools that you can apply in other fields, and indeed in a variety of courses throughout the social sciences and humanities. Various fields in the humanities and social sciences share a common set of conceptual categories in which scholars work. Thus, as you explore the ideas of Karl Marx on wage labor, Michel Foucault on discourse, or Benedict Anderson on nationalism, you are exploring concepts and developing a critical vocabulary that will equip you to analyze a wide variety of texts in various fields. Armed with that set of concepts, you will better understand the **monographs** you later encounter. Rather than reading simply for the historical content, you will approach a text aware of the fact that historians usually frame their historical narrative within a set of theoretical questions regarding the nature of gender, race, class development, or language.

CASE STUDY: THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY

An example from the history of slavery in the United States may better help you understand how we approach historiography in this text. In 1918, U.B. Phillips wrote a seminal history of American slavery. Relying largely on plantation records that described daily plantation life, Phillips concluded that slaves had been largely happy and loyal, and the institution of slavery

basically gentle, and at times benevolent, even going so far as to compare plantations to schools. Roughly forty years later, another eminent historian, Stanley Elkins, examined many of the same records but arrived at drastically different conclusions. What Phillips saw as peaceful, loyal, happy slaves, Elkins wrote, were individuals who suffered from such complete domination, and who had been so totally culturally uprooted, that they had developed a sycophantic identity with their oppressors. Rather than schools, Elkins explicitly compared the plantations to concentration camps, equating the slaves with prisoners, and the masters with guards. Three decades later, a new group of historians found something quite different. Again, drawing largely on the plantation records that provide the most complete information about plantation life, historians such as John Blassingame presented a more heroic, resistant picture of slave life. For Blassingame, the story of slavery was not one of complete cultural destruction, but one of cultural retention; the superficially harmonious relations between masters and slaves were a mask, a means of slaves making their way in the world of the plantation, even as they forged a separate life of their own, one that blended elements of African culture with aspects of the culture of European Americans.³

How is it that these three respected historians, all examining generally the same sources, arrived at such startlingly different conclusions? Do they reflect changes in the society around them? Or perhaps they are linked to theories the historians themselves bring to the documents? Identifying the changes in scholarly perspective and asking these questions about why and how perspectives change is the essence of history and theory, and indeed is the foundational argument of this text.

Historians develop their understanding of historical problems through a confluence of personal, intellectual, and social influences. Just as the events, social institutions, and individuals historians examine are the products of their environment, so too are historians and the scholarship they produce. Delving a little deeper into the brief historiography of slavery described above provides a concrete example of how this works. U.B. Phillips, author of the relatively apologetic scholarship on slavery, was himself a southerner, writing of a time and place filled with family memories. This is not to say that, in and of itself, personal connection to a subject automatically leads to a bias, especially since at times familiarity with a subject (as

with the labor historians described earlier) leads to observations outsiders might miss. However, bias either for or against a particular subject must be factored into an analysis of all scholarship. Furthermore, and perhaps more significantly, Phillips wrote his work at a time when general beliefs about the link between “race” and personality and character were widespread. Phillips’ assertions that blacks were essentially suited to their position as slaves and thus content with their lot both emerged from and buttressed existing racism of the early-twentieth century. Written at a time that the Jim Crow segregation laws of the south were becoming fully entrenched, and as racial violence (at least in its most extreme form of lynching) seemed to be gradually waning, the image of bucolic and tranquil race relations presented by Phillips was comforting and largely assured him a broad audience.⁴

By the time Elkins wrote his work in 1958, things had changed considerably, both sociopolitically within the United States, and intellectually in terms of thinking about race. By 1958, legal challenges to racial segregation led to the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision that called for the desegregation of institutions of public education. Such challenges to segregation, emerging from within the black community itself, made earlier assumptions of black complaisance less believable. Furthermore, intellectuals and social critics had increasingly pointed to racism as a major problem in American society. Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish sociologist and Nobel Prize laureate issued in 1944 his study *An American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Democracy*, which looked to slavery for the root problem of race relations in the United States. At the same time, the Nazi policy of genocide against the Jews had horrified the world and thus undermined the common root of racism that lay at the foundation of both Adolf Hitler’s “final solution” and Phillips’ images of benighted but blissful slaves. Additionally, World War II provided a psychosociological model through which Elkins could provide an alternative explanation for slave subservience rather than simply relying on an assumption of racial inferiority. Using studies of concentration camp survivors that found the total oppression of the camps led to a close identity between some prisoners and their captors, Elkins used the Nazi camps as an analogy for the slave plantations of the Old South, with the slaves holding the positions of prisoners and the overseers and masters the positions of guards. For Elkins, then, the supposed happiness of the slaves was

not a product of their innate nature, but of their total oppression.

Elkins’ work held sway for a short period of time in the early 1960s. The work placed blame for the evils of racial segregation and discrimination squarely in the time of slavery, thus shifting the blame from African Americans. Both black and white intellectuals and political leaders found much, initially, to commend Elkins’ work. However, with the emergence of the Black Power movement in the second half of the 1960s, questions that had always been quietly asked about *Slavery* came to the forefront. How, if blacks were so completely browbeaten, could they have developed a flourishing culture that contributed to such key elements of American culture as jazz and Christian spirituals? And if African Americans were so defeated, how to explain persistent acts of resistance that were present in the archives, ranging from Nat Turner’s bloody rebellion of 1830 to the daily acts of resistance by less notorious slaves? And could the slave plantation have been as totally oppressive as concentration camps? With Black Power came the search for slave community, and once historians became attentive to it, the slave community appeared everywhere throughout the archive.

By the early 1970s, a number of key works, among them *The Slave Community* by John Blassingame, hit the bookshelves, detailing the resistance of slaves and their struggle to maintain a cultural identity in the face of overwhelming odds. Several key social institutions, such as the family and religion, shielded slaves against the total oppression noted by Elkins and provided a non-racist explanation for the scenes of community detailed by Phillips. Slaves no longer appeared either completely satisfied with their lot, or utterly oppressed. Rather, they were more heroic figures, struggling against long odds to preserve their community. While Elkins drew upon sociological studies of concentration camp survivors to help explain his position, Blassingame utilized the work of anthropologists such as Melville Herskovitz who examined syncretism and cultural survival to argue for the persistence of an African heritage among African Americans.

Thus we can see how scholars focusing on the same general subject, in this case the nature of master–slave relations in the United States, arrived at different positions depending on the relative acceptance or rejection of concepts such as racism, the political context of the day, and the general atmosphere that shaped the historians themselves.

TEXT GOALS AND CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

This book proceeds from the basic premise that these shifts and turns are the essence of good historical writing. This book on the one hand is a discussion of these changes over the twentieth century, placing them in context. But on the other hand, this book very explicitly is designed as a hands-on manual to explore the practice of reading for argument and articulating themes of works encountered. In order to accomplish this task of identification, we will ask you to “dialogue with your text”—that is, ask questions of it, write in the margins, note key items from each page, or look up unfamiliar words. Demonstrating understanding of these differences enables more critical reading skills, but also, with the accompanying primary sources, the text gives the reader opportunities to practice valuable analysis of source material using the methods of particular theories in each chapter. Accordingly, readers can “mix and match” sources and theories—for example, a source we asked readers to examine as a Marxist historian can also be read through the lenses of a gender, environmental, or cultural historian. The tools of unpacking meaning and taking facts and turning them into historical evidence are central takeaways for this text, as these are crucial skill sets for demonstrating mastery of the discipline of history as a profession.

Accordingly, you will read about the theory, specifically contexts of each tradition, then move on to significant secondary sources. To further understand the significance of the perspective being argued, however, you should go through two additional processes: analyzing the way historians apply the theory, and then learning to work as an historian to apply the theory itself to primary documents. This reader addresses both phases of this method. As you thumb through these pages, always keep in mind that our categories are general categories and that historians cross these disciplinary and theoretical boundaries all the time, especially as the field continues to be shaped and reshaped by new sources and new ways to look at old sources. Finally, as you read this text, you may find that some theories and approaches are more to your liking and interests than others. For historians, recognizing the approaches that best fit their historical lenses is a key aspect to moving forward in the profession. As we encounter various histories, various approaches to the past, and various stories that have been told, we develop our own historical voice

and approach that guides us as practitioners. In the end, as historians, it is not enough simply to be aware of various methods. We must always know our own method and why we make the choices we do in terms of evidence, argument, and narrative. As you leaf through these chapters, think about your own approach(es) and how those approaches complement or diverge from those discussed in this text.

We purposefully have plotted a trajectory that follows both a linear path (from the end of the late nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century) as well as a conceptual path. We will begin our trek with an overview of the ways in which people have thought about the past in the western and western-influenced world up through the nineteenth century. This move toward “objective” history had important ramifications for our first “umbrella theory”: historical materialism.

1. Introducing Historical Materialism (Chapters 3–6)

In her 1984 song “Material Girl,” Madonna declared that she would only date boys who saved their money because then they could lavish her with gifts and trinkets. While this made for a great dance tune, it also makes for a great way to define history that focuses on the material. Put simply, when we talk about materialism, we are talking about the touchable, tangible, “sink-your-teeth-into” reality. For Madonna, part of this reality was economic. It did not matter if you danced well, or if you were romantic or smart, it was the cash that transformed her affections. We have all heard this in one form or another, we may even have used it, but how do we take such ideas and apply them historically?

Of course, when scholars think about the world and social relations in “materialist” ways, they do so with more complexity than Madonna’s Material Girl. When we talk about the material world, we are talking about items and objects that have tangible qualities. Historical materialism is a way of thinking and writing about the past that relies on evidence that has some **ontological** basis. It looks to the world outside of the mind as the basis for knowledge and human relations. There is no one, single, homogeneous understanding of materialist history, nor is there only one approach, a “materialist” approach to thinking about the past. There are many kinds of materialism, the most obvious of which begins with the very world around us: trees, lakes, city streets, railway lines, building shapes, and geographic positions, all of these examples are *things* by which we can understand

our past and ourselves. Meaning is to be found through this tangible world. Some historians focus on “material culture,” artifacts created by a particular society, such as houses, clothing, household furnishings, and the like, in order to understand how a particular society is changing over time, or how various groups within a complex society have different experiences. As we will see, once historians dig into this information, their analysis may lead them into attempts to explain their evidence, and the explanations may move them beyond the material world, into an understanding of culture. But materialists emphasize the tangible over the cultural/ideological, and often hold that cultural and ideological changes are rooted in changes in the material nature of life, rather than the other way around.

In Chapters 3–6, you will read many different ways in which the world can be interpreted from a predominantly materialist framework. We will begin with a discussion of Marxist philosophy, a powerful framework for explaining how the economy and social relations define and predetermine cultural ones. Next, we will explore the first and second generations of the *Annales* School, a group of scholars whose materialism led them to ground their understanding of human societies on the foundation of economic, geological, and geographical developments that were more fundamental than national boundaries and fleeting political events. We will also briefly explore the third generation of the *Annales* school that focused on microhistory and data interpretation, specifically with **demography** or the study of population and people. We will then turn our attention to the transformation of earlier Marxist history into a new category of analysis—the New Left and social history. Still interested in social relations, but also interested in the lives of people within a class, social history is often considered to be “history from below” or the history of everyday life. Finally, we will discuss the roots and emergence of environmental history. At the end of this sequence of chapters, you should be able to define materialism as a philosophical model. But more than that, you should be able to see how historians have interpreted materialism in a variety of ways.

2. Cultural Approaches to History (Chapters 7–10)

Beginning with Chapter 7, we will detail approaches that are more **epistemological**, that is exploring identity and how meaning is constructed apart from some material exteriority. When we talk about a cultural umbrella of

history, we mean those approaches that examine attitudes, values, and perceptions as primary determinants of social relations. Historians who emphasize a cultural approach examine the ways in which people create meaning even sometimes of material objects themselves.

We will begin this sequence of chapters with perhaps the most complex—and contested—ideas in the text, postmodernism and its theoretical offshoots. Next, we will explore the more general field of cultural history itself. We will then discuss women’s/feminist/gender history, tracing its development from operating firmly within the realm of materialist histories to newer concepts, such as queer theory, which are highly influenced by the disruptive power of postmodernist thought. Finally, we will end the book with an exploration of postcolonial history and the concepts of race and nation.

There is, as you will discover, some overlap—many materialist theories have elements of culture and many theories we consider to be cultural have materialist roots. We also will examine the ways in which theories of history reflect the world of the time—from Marxism to the New Left, Environmental to Feminist to Postcolonial History, you will read about how peoples’ views of the world inform their historical approaches. Again, these are lenses through which everyone perceives the world. We are confined by our experiences—who we are, where we are, and when we are—and those experiences shape our perspectives.

YOUR RESERVOIR OF KNOWLEDGE—JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Our goal at all points will be threefold: first, to introduce you to the varieties of ways people have conceptualized history of the past century and to do so in an accessible way; second, to provide examples of how those ways of thinking about the past are put into practice by historians; and finally, to provide hands-on experience in reading and interpreting both primary and secondary sources using the various lenses in each chapter. This last goal is a skill you can take to any readings you encounter in the future. At this stage, when you finish this text, you should be able to recognize specific names and particular methodologies, so even if you read an article far afield from your own historical interests, you should be able to interpret its arguments and its theoretical positions quite easily.

In reading about these theories and approaches, you will build your own reservoir of knowledge about how history was written during the twentieth century. With this reservoir, you will build critical skills of reading for argument and looking for how sources are read. But this knowledge is hopefully just the tip of the iceberg, since though we will cover numerous theories, there are infinitely more we have not explored but are tremendously fascinating and useful for the historian. Chaos theory, for example, began in the sciences, but has since been applied to the humanities as a way to understand experience.⁵ The works of Deleuze and Guattari have provided frameworks for those interested in visual culture and the societal gaze.⁶ Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian philosopher, also explores film theory and popular culture.⁷ Nor will we explore the Hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer⁸ or Donna Haraway's late Feminist Cyborg theory.⁹ And we do not cover newer theories, such as Poor Theory to come out of the University of California, Irvine.¹⁰ All of these ideas have grounding in the world around us—and are ways that its practitioners have found to explain human relations and practices. It is our hope that at least one of the approaches you will explore will strike a chord and compel you to read more as you progress as an apprentice historian. At the very least, you should be thinking more critically about your own approach to history and why you hold the positions you do.

Finally, one last word: we wrote this book to provide you with a framework for your historical work. In that regard, this book serves as a place to start your journey as historians, not a place to end. As you move forward in your careers, whatever that career may be, find your own voice, your own words, and recognize that there is no single *right* way to practice history. Keep in mind, though, that there are plenty of wrong ways to write history—those that let bias interfere with appropriate reading of source material and those that disregard facts entirely. We have shown in this book that theoretical perspective and historical lenses need not undermine the historical project, and are in actuality essential to it. Theory, in fact, can provide a grounding for explaining the past and understanding ourselves along the way.

Endnotes

1. E.P. Thompson, interviewed by Mike Merrill, in *Visions of History: Interviews*, Henry Abelove, Betsy Blackmar, Peter Dimock, and Jonathan Schneer, eds. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 15.
2. Lawrence Stone, "Notes: History and Postmodernism," *Past & Present*, no. 131 (May 1991): 217–218; Patrick Joyce, "History and Postmodernism, I," *Past & Present*, no. 133 (November 1991): 204–209; Lawrence Stone, "History and Postmodernism," *Past & Present*, no. 135 (May 1992): 189–208.
3. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1918); Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
4. For an excellent summary of this historiography, see Carl N. Degler, "Why Historians Change Their Minds," *Pacific Historical Review*, 45/2 (May 1976): 167–184.
5. See for example, N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Order and Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).
6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977).
7. See for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities/University of Washington, 2000); also *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (London: Verso, 1992).
8. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994).
9. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association, 1991).
10. Statement of the CTI Project in Poor Theory, 2008–2012, "Poor Theory: Notes Toward a Manifesto," <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/critical/poortheory.pdf>, accessed 16 August 2013.