History 109—Making of the Contemporary World

How to Think (and Talk and Write) Like a Historian

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History. The study of the past. Not "the past." From the Greek, *historia*, meaning "inquiry."

Change & continuity. This is the historian's bread and butter. What changes? What remains the same?

Forces of change (causality). The forces of change are rarely singular. Indeed, historians shun monocausal explanations. We can often point to several forces of change that produce events. So... industrialization was the product of a complex web of factors.

Complexity. In understanding historical change and continuity, historians often insist upon complexity. History is not an experiment with a dependent and independent variable. There are usually more variables than can be easily accounted for. Thus, historians prefer to analyze the many factors behind historical change.

Context. A classic historian's tool. We can ask of anything: what is its context? Looking to context – cultural, national, social, economic, political, etc. – can help us to understand an event. The rebuilding of the port or Rio de Janeiro n 1903, for example… (An answer would include: the globalization of trade, the trade in coffee and rubber, and Brazilian efforts to modernize their city along European lines, etc.).

Chronology and periodization. What is your chronology? What is your periodization? Such questions invite us to line up events in time and understand their relationship. So... Robert Marks explains the history of globalization in four waves, providing a chronology and an explanation for each of those waves. For example, he views the late 19th c., from around 1870 to 1914, as a second wave of globalization when goods circled the globe in the context of formal and informal empire. Someone else might tell this history very differently.

Turning points. Moments in time – or particular events – at which history turns. We have seen some examples of these: the Battle of Plassey which opened the way for British control of Bengal, or the naming of Dakar as the capital of French West Africa, the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5, or – as I will say of contemporary Europe – 1945, which marks a transformation of European politics and identity.

Historical narratives. Historians construct narratives – historical narratives, stories rooted in sources and analysis that explain changes across time. Some narrative have such importance that we call them "master narratives," such as the master narrative about the "rise of the West."

The "end of history"? A memorable phrase (a memorable historical narrative) from Francis Fukuyama who, in the aftermath of the collapse of Communist governments in eastern Europe in 1989, pronounced that the historical struggle of governmental systems had ended with the triumph of liberal democracy. The years that followed – with wars of nationalism and the rise of new authoritarian governments – showed the inadequacy of his view.

Contingency. An advanced term, but an important one. The contingency of history reminds us that (as some historians write) "every historical outcome depends upon a complicated web of prior conditions.... Change a single prior condition, and any historical outcome could have turned out

differently." The dominant role of Europe (and its offshoots) in the 19th and 20th centuries was a contingent (not inevitable) development.

Accident. Historical *accidents* have no human causes. So, we can speak of the distribution of coal and iron ore deposits as accidental.

Agency. Agency refers to the power of individuals and groups to make their own history. But see Marx on the "burden of the past."

Conjuncture. See the clear explanation by Marks: "when several otherwise independent developments come together in ways that interact with one another, creating a unique historical moment." He explains European military preeminence in the 18th and 19th c. as just such a conjuncture of industrialization and the nation-state.

The "burden of the past." Remember these words of Karl Marx: People "make their own history, but they do not make it as they please." The past provides the circumstances that shape the present. (Note: you don't need to follow the thinking of Marx the revolutionary to learn from Marx the historian!)

Primary sources. Texts, images, documents, artifacts, anything, really, that provides an entryway to another time or place. These are not a direct transmission from the past, but documents that require interpretation. Some examples: an account of the "Black Hole of Calcutta," a photograph of Rio de Janeiro, the lighthouse of Jaffa, a wood block print of the war between China and Japan n 1894.

Secondary sources. The work of historians.

Presentism. Seeing the past in terms of the present. The term is often used to criticize historians (or historical thinking) that imposes some view of the present upon the past. But the opposite point of view – antiquarianism – is equally satisfying. We've argued for a study of the past that helps inform our understanding of the present.

What is history good for? Not predicting the future, not preventing the mistakes of the past (as Michael Herr memorably wrote, "those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it as well"). History helps us understand the world – constraints, forces of change, complexity, etc., helps us understand others, helps us understand our place in the world, helps us take a broad view, helps us cultivate intellectual humility.

How do we "map" the world – literally and figuratively? What are the challenges of projecting the three dimensions of the globe onto the two dimensions of a paper map? Note the ways in which such projections – the most famous is the Mercator projection from the 17th c. – distort the size of territories far from the equator. And think about the ways in which individuals see the world from their own perspective. That is inevitable, but we would like to complement our individual view of the world and our place in it with a broader grasp of the cultures and forces at work in the world.

Area Studies & Global Studies. Area studies approaches (which rose to prominence in the 1950s) emphasize understanding a cultural area – a region – in depth. They are institutionalized in programs (campus programs in East Asian Studies, for example) that emphasize deep interdisciplinary study of the history, culture, and language of regions. The downside, as we've discussed, is that such approaches can isolate regions from one another. Global History

approaches emphasize the connections between states and societies and regions. They underline *zones of interaction* (an important term from the 1980s and 1990s, referring for example to the Atlantic World or the Indian Ocean World) that are often more important than continents. Patrick Manning persuasively argues (in his 2003 *Navigating World History)* that "it is the connections that make world history, not the separations." (Berkshire, xvii) The danger of global history approaches is that they can sometimes gloss over important elements of cultural distinction in their rush to emphasize connections. As we said at the beginning of the course, we will apply both area studies approaches and global history approaches.

Eurocentrism. A view of world history that puts Europe and the West at the center, that discounts the agency of other peoples of the world, that views the world through European and Western values and ideas. See Robert Marks for a thoughtful explanation and critique. See Dipesh Chakrabarty for an influential discussion of the applicability of political concepts that come out of Europe, such as democracy and human rights.

Nationalism. The notion that the state should be defined according to the nation, a community of belonging based on culture, history, values. We've highlighted the relative recency of this political identity (esp. since the 19th c.) and explored the ways in which nations are not natural or inevitable groups, but (in the words of Benedict Anderson) "imagined communities."