

# DOING HISTORY

The book cover features a composite image. The background is a faded, sepia-toned photograph of a classical Greek temple with many columns. In the foreground, there is a modern computer workstation on a desk, including a monitor displaying a website, a keyboard, a mouse, a stack of papers, and a mug. The overall color scheme is a monochromatic reddish-brown.

Research and Writing in the Digital Age

Michael J. Galgano • J. Chris Arndt  
Raymond M. Hyser



# Doing History

Research and Writing in the Digital Age

**MICHAEL J. GALGANO**

**J. CHRIS ARNDT**

**RAYMOND M. HYSER**

James Madison University

**THOMSON**  
  
**WADSWORTH**

Australia • Brazil • Canada • Mexico • Singapore  
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To all students of history—past, present, and to come



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Michael J. Galgano, J. Chris Arndt, Raymond M. Hysler

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## **THE HISTORY OF HISTORICAL WRITING: AN OVERVIEW**

Although the public generally conceives of history as a nonfiction **narrative** largely devoid of interpretation, historical study requires interpretation. Because of this requirement, historical interpretation has changed over the years. Historical understanding as currently conceived began in the early nineteenth century

with the Romantic Movement and the associated rise of romantic nationalism. At a time when German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel offered the concept of the *volkgeist* (loosely translated as spirit of the people), it became important to discern what that spirit was. History, with its emphasis on the common experience that bonded a people together, was soon enlisted to support this new ideology. In some nineteenth-century countries, historians played important roles in fashioning how a culture thought about itself, nowhere more so than in Czechoslovakia, where the historian František Palacký became the father of Czech nationalism.

It was also during the nineteenth century that a modern way of thinking about the past and writing history was born. The first to offer a philosophy of history and a guide of how it was to be done was Leopold von Ranke, a German scholar. While Ranke was more interested in looking to the past to discover the handiwork of a Christian god, his sense that each past age was distinct (a concept known as **historicism**) and that past events shaped what came later brought about the first beliefs of history's significance. Ranke argued that while the historian could attempt to understand the past on its own terms, it required a certain leap of imagination. More important than Ranke's philosophical position was his methodology, both as a historian and an instructor. Ranke's method, which in turn became the standard for the profession, rested on rigorous examination and critical evaluation of written primary sources synthesized into a scholarly presentation for a research seminar. This seminar enabled students to engage in careful discussion and further analysis of their ideas.

Ranke's method survived, but his philosophical approach to history came under attack by the late nineteenth century. In an era when science seemed capable of unlocking all of the universe's secrets, historians enlisted scientific approaches in a quest for truth. For example, Karl Marx developed a universal theory for understanding the past based on its relationship to the means of production and class struggle, while Henry Adams applied the Second Law of Thermodynamics to understanding the Jefferson and Madison administrations. The seminar survived, but the earlier historicism of Ranke had yielded to a **positivist** interpretation of history. **Positivism** claimed to be objective, and in the extreme, argued that by using the scientific method, historians could efface themselves of their biases, report what had occurred, and ultimately uncover laws of human behavior. By claiming to be scientific, historians could confidently make truthful claims about the past.

If the positivists were right, ultimately all historians would come to the same conclusions, because they sought objective universal laws. But such a claim would be hard to support. The first serious attacks against positivist-minded historians came from the **Progressive** school. The Progressives included important philosophers such as John Dewey; the most important progressive historians were Charles Beard, Carl Becker, and James Harvey Robinson. Progressive historians, reacting against the certitudes of late nineteenth-century thought, sought to examine the historical roots of social problems. This shifted the attention of historians from the study of politics and the state to the study of society. In addition, the Progressives were attracted to the methodologies of the emerging social sciences. This increasingly interdisciplinary approach, coupled with a shift of focus, led to controversial

findings. Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* replaced the historical orthodoxy that viewed America's founders as great men who disinterestedly implemented the American system of government with an interpretation that the founders pursued a stronger central government as a means to secure their own financial interests. Robinson's contribution to the study of society led to the creation of the new history, which sought to more carefully examine society. By the 1920s, studies of everyday life appeared in both U.S. and European history. The Progressives' skepticism about the scientific claims of earlier historians ultimately led Carl Becker to claim in his 1932 presidential address to the American Historical Association, entitled "Everyman His Own Historian," that history is "an imaginative creation" derived from individual experience. Such statements reveal the growing relativism embraced by historians who believed that the author's point of view often colored the final interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

Historical writing took a decidedly different turn following World War II. The effort required to defeat the Axis powers caused historians to reflect on the common values that united Americans rather than the differences that divided them, so they began to look for that common thread of unity. The events of the Cold War reinforced this theme. The so-called **consensus** historians would assert that despite some differences, Americans had throughout their history been united around the concept of liberal democracy. Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* and many of Richard Hofstadter's works emphasized the basic agreement on core liberal (individual political and economic rights) principles from America's founding to the present. The consensus historians were challenged on a variety of fronts during the 1960s. The growth and democratization of the academy (community of professional historians) generated far more scholarship than in previous generations, and the types of questions being asked changed dramatically as well.<sup>3</sup>

Several schools of thought emerged during the 1960s that transformed how historians saw the past. One of the most important of these was Marxism. Although always evident in historical study, Marxist approaches to history had been something of an intellectual backwater in Great Britain and the United States before World War II. But the splintering of the British Communist party in 1956 enabled new forms of Marxism and Marxist historiography to flourish. Most important among the early British Marxists was Edward P. Thompson. His study, *The Making of the English Working Class*, carefully chronicled the rise of the English working class unified by a class consciousness, persuasively arguing that it was tied to the greater

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<sup>2</sup>Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1913); James Harvey Robinson, *The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1912); This essay appeared as Carl L. Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *The American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (January 1932): 221–236; Arthur M. Schlesinger, and Dixon Ryan Fox, series eds. *History of American Life*, 12 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927–44).

<sup>3</sup>Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955); Richard Hofstadter's two most important works that set the stage for the consensus school are: *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), and *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

structure of production. The importance of this work rested both with its subject matter, which shifted attention from rulers to the less articulate members of society, as well as its dynamic presentation of class relationships in nineteenth-century Britain. The work is also distinguished by the kinds of evidence used to present its thesis. Thompson's work deeply influenced the study of labor in postcolonial societies throughout the world. The emergence of Marxism in British historical writing also clearly influenced a second, somewhat related intellectual movement in the United States, the New Left.<sup>4</sup>

New Left historians in the United States drew inspiration from the Students for a Democratic Society's (SDS) call for the rejection of impersonal corporate society and sought a similarly inclusive, democratic interpretation of the American past. The New Left view of history saw more conflict than consensus in studies that broke new ground in the examination of slavery, race, ethnicity, class, and later gender. Many New Left historians embraced the methods of the social scientists, believing that such methodologies offered greater certainty for historical claims than could be made by previous generations of historians. In particular, the use of statistics and mathematical models held out the promise of realizing the positivist dream of uncovering historical truths.<sup>5</sup>

A third approach to history that challenged tradition was the *Annales* school. The *Annales* approach to history began with French historians Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929. Rebelling against the focus on politics and government, the *Annales* school sought to write "total history" that examined history over *la longue durée* (the long term). Their interest in studying the rhythms of everyday life and recapturing the *mentalité* of an era is perhaps best captured in the works of Febvre's student Fernand Braudel. The *Annales* approach to history influenced a growing number of British and American historians to focus on the history of previously inarticulate groups such as slaves, women, and workers using a new array of sources such as diaries, wills, and census data.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

<sup>5</sup>The term New Left became a popular term during the 1960s to categorize an emerging generation of historians who criticized the consensus school of the previous decade. These revisionists ran the gamut from disillusioned liberals to Marxists. Some of the more prominent New Left historians are Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Society and Economy of the Slave South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of American Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963); and William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Dell Publishers, 1962).

<sup>6</sup>The *Annales* school emerged with the establishment of the journal *Annales Economiques, Sociétés Civilisations* (*Annals Economics, Societies, Civilizations*) in 1929. The *Annales* school is closely associated with founders Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage Books, 1953); Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Febvre's student, Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 3 vols., trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) and *Civilization and Capitalism: 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, 3 vols., trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1982–84).

Because of the simultaneous emergence of and overlapping interests (and conclusions) of these three schools (Marxist, New Left, and Annales), lines between them blurred as historians from one approach borrowed promiscuously from the others. Combined, these trends helped give rise to a wave of the new histories. Perhaps most significant was the new social history. What characterized the new social history, whatever the approach, was the interest in previously inarticulate groups as a means to both democratize and flesh out the historical understanding of the past as well as identification of new methods for reconstructing the past. Social historians sought to reconstruct lives previously unrepresented, but also to uncover historical social structures as well. Each of these trends that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s initially represented the recreation of the past in an objective manner. But the variability of their findings undermined such claims.

The social scientific approach borrowed by all three schools and the claims of scientific objectivity made in particular by Marxists and New Left American historians soon came under attack. The book that undermined historians' claims of objectivity and truth-seeking was Thomas Kuhn's *On the Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In it, Kuhn showed that scientific explanations of how the universe works, such as Sir Isaac Newton's Theory of Gravity, were not immutable truths but instead the best interpretations that could be made based on the available evidence. Kuhn demonstrated that over time, scientists uncovered information that challenged important theories of how the universe worked, but the theory would hold with some qualifications until the weight of dissenting evidence forced a reinterpretation. According to Kuhn, the truth was merely what appeared to be true, relative to one's point of observation and available evidence. In challenging the truth claims of the hard sciences, Kuhn created doubt for those making similar claims in history and the social sciences. Such relativism and skepticism opened the door for **postmodern theory** that came into vogue in recent years.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).