

What is Historiography?

Activity

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This is a seminar plan for a discussion-based session lasting 50 minutes. The session is aimed at undergraduates with little or no previous experience of studying historiography or historical debate. It could serve as an introductory session on first- or second-year skills and methods modules.

Context and aim

This seminar activity focuses on different views of the Great Chinese Famine (1959–61). It aims to help students read for argument and identify the causes of historical disagreement. This debate is sharply drawn, in that Cormac Ó Gráda is directly critiquing Frank Dikötter's account. Using a clearly delineated disagreement helps to build skills in identifying potential reasons for different lines of argument that students can then apply to less immediately obvious instances of historical disagreement.

Preparation

Students should prepare for the seminar by reading two articles and then jotting down answers to some questions. Instructions for preparation should emphasize that: students should read the two items in the order listed; that they do not need to know anything about the Great Chinese Famine, because the purpose of the activity is to read for argument, not information; and that students often find it difficult to identify argument and to relate primary sources to a historian's interpretation, so they should not worry if they find

this difficult, because the seminar discussion will be an opportunity to share ideas and to hone these skills.

Reading:

- Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–62* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 'Preface' and 'Essay on Sources'.
- Cormac Ó Gráda, 'A Review Essay: Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962 by Frank Dikötter', *Population and Development Review*, 37:1 (2011), pp. 191–202.

Questions:

- In Frank Dikötter's view, what caused the great famine that followed the Great Leap Forward?
- What types of primary sources does Dikötter use?
- On what grounds does Cormac Ó Gráda criticize Dikötter's methods and arguments?
- What does Ó Gráda argue caused the famine?
- Which historian's argument do you find most convincing? Explain your decision.

Description of activity

Introduction: Large group discussion [5 minutes]

Tutors should provide students with a brief introduction to the aims of the session and how it fits into the wider module. You may want to provide a very brief overview of the context for the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent famine, but this is not essential.

To set the scene for subsequent discussion, ask students to define 'historiography', to explain how 'historiography' relates to 'historical debate' and to suggest some reasons why historians might disagree. If you note key points on the whiteboard, you can return to these points later to wrap up the session.

Part 1: Small group work [15 minutes]

Divide the students into small groups, allowing them 10 minutes to discuss the questions and 5 minutes to report back to the wider group. Each group

should discuss both questions. Explain that the first step to identifying reasons for differences is to isolate the key argument of the historian. They may find it difficult to briefly summarize the overall argument, but it is an essential skill to develop.

Questions:

- In Frank Dikötter's view, what caused the great famine that followed the Great Leap Forward?
- In Cormac Ó Gráda's view, what caused the great famine that followed the Great Leap Forward?

Part 2: Small group work [15 minutes]

In the same groups, students should discuss EITHER the questions on Dikötter's use of sources OR Ó Gráda's critique. Tutors should ensure that there is an equal number of groups discussing each historian's argument. Allow 10 minutes for small-group discussion and 5 minutes for groups to report back. The post-small group discussion provides a good opportunity to emphasize that Dikötter and Ó Gráda both use valid evidence, but that each draws on a primary source base that reflects very different perspectives and ways of thinking about the famine, which partially explains their divergence.

Group 1:

- What types of primary sources does Dikötter use?
- Is his evidence base convincing? Does it allow him to interpret aspects of the famine differently from previous historians?

Group 2:

- On what grounds does Cormac Ó Gráda criticize Dikötter's methods and arguments?
- What evidence does Ó Gráda use?

Part 3: Large group discussion [10 minutes]

As a group, discuss the following question:

- Which historian's argument do you find most convincing? Explain your decision.

Part 4: Wrap-up [5 minutes]

Return to students' initial ideas about the reasons for historical disagreement and ask whether there is anything they would change, or add, to this list. You can also emphasize the importance of engagement with a wide range of evidence; that historians' initial questions shape their choice of sources, and that in turn shapes interpretation and argument; and that it's crucial for students to read widely to access those different perspectives, because historians using a wide range of valid evidence can nevertheless reach different conclusions. This underlines the importance of engaging with the historiography on a topic and reaching an independent conclusion on the relative merits of different arguments.

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