

Evidence and Interpretation

Activity

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This is a seminar plan for a discussion-based session lasting 50 minutes and focused on the topic of evidence and interpretation. It is suitable for undergraduate historians at different levels and could form part of modules on historiography and historical theory.

Context and aim

This seminar activity uses extracts from Paul Corner's *Mussolini in Myth and Memory* to explore tensions between opinion, politics and historical interpretation. Professional historians rarely write books designed to show that their object of study was morally bad. Yet Paul Corner set out to do just that – to counter increasingly positive public perceptions of Mussolini and the Fascist regime while also adhering to the standards of professional history. As the cover blurb of the book says, it places Mussolini firmly in the company of Hitler, Stalin, Franco and other dictators. However, Mary Fulbrook criticizes the concept of totalitarianism on methodological grounds and because it is politically loaded. In this session, students should develop their ability to read critically, identify argument and assess the validity of different historical positions.

Preparation

Students must read:

Paul Corner, *Mussolini in Myth and Memory: The First Totalitarian Dictator* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 1–22, 80–92;

Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 93 (from ‘let us return to an example ... ’), to p. 96 (ending with ‘ ... different theoretical paradigms’). (Don’t worry about the references to Max Weber.)

Description of activity

Part 1: Concepts and evidence [15 minutes]

Divide students into two groups. Each group has 5 minutes to discuss the questions below and 5 minutes to report back to the larger seminar group.

Questions for Group 1:

- What are Mary Fulbrook’s grounds for describing the concept of totalitarianism as politically loaded?
- Why does she see ‘big concepts’ such as totalitarianism as having limited usefulness for historical research? What other concepts does she criticize?

Questions for Group 2:

Looking at Corner’s introduction -

- Why has Corner written this book? Who do you think it is for?
- Does he see it as a work of history, as a political intervention or both?
- Does Corner distinguish between politics and history? If so, how?

Part 2: Large group discussion [10 minutes]

After each group has briefly reported back, the whole group should discuss the following questions:

- Does Corner fall foul of Fulbrook’s arguments concerning the danger of concepts such as ‘totalitarianism’?
- Does the time of writing shape their views of totalitarianism?

The tutor may want to provide some contextualization as the discussion develops. Fulbrook was one of those historians of communist East Germany who rejected the idea that communism and fascism could be grouped together as totalitarian. Advocates of the totalitarianism thesis accused Fulbrook and others of sympathy for communism, and indeed of minimizing the differences between East and West Germany. Corner writes at a time

when Western democracy is under threat from the far right and criticism of democracy may seem particularly dangerous. Note also that on the one hand, Fulbrook sees the concept of totalitarianism as an ideological product of Western democracy, but on the other, she also sees mutual criticism as essential to the historical method – arguably, that it is only possible in a democracy.

Part 3: Small group discussion [10 minutes]

In this part of the class, students will examine Corner's arguments in more detail, with each group discussing different sections of the book. Each group should discuss the following questions:

- How, on the topics considered, does Corner make his case that things were not 'better under Mussolini'?
- What evidence does he present? (Look at his endnotes.)
- Are his arguments and methods historical or political? Or are they just 'opinion'?

Group 1: Answer these questions with reference to pp. 80–85 on 'The social state: pensions, social insurance, assistance'.

Group 2: Answer these questions with reference to pp. 85–92 on 'Domestic Fascism: family, health and housing'.

Part 4: Report back and large group discussion [10–15 minutes]

This part of the seminar encourages students to reflect on the relationship between academic history, politics and activism, related in turn to the use of concepts and evidence and the nature of historical 'truth'. These are big topics and there is no expectation that students will resolve these issues to their own satisfaction by the end of the session – the purpose is rather to help them to start thinking about these types of questions and to encourage a critical reflection on the nature of the discipline.