

Evidence and Interpretation

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

Contemporary understandings of evidence and interpretation in historical research are shaped by two major controversies.

In 1961, E. H. Carr argued against the old idea that historians could first gather all the facts, interpret them and then assemble them into a narrative. Arguably, Carr did not give a clear alternative. On the one hand, he described a sort of to-ing and fro-ing between evidence and interpretation, in which historians formulated provisional questions or hypotheses that were modified by confrontation with evidence, revised and modified again. In this view, no final truth was possible, but some interpretations were better, perhaps more objective, than others. On the other hand, Carr argued that historians were more objective if they understood the way that history was moving. This contention opened Carr to the charge of shaping facts to a preconceived idea of progress and truth that could not be modified by confrontation with evidence. In response, Geoffrey Elton defended the traditional view that the properly trained historian could set bias aside and produce objective interpretations based on facts. Carr's interpretation became the orthodoxy.

The second controversy began in the 1980s. Influenced by the French thinkers Michel Foucault (1926–84) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), some historians contested both Carr's solutions to the problem of evidence and interpretation: there was no way of saying that one interpretation was superior to another; there was no truth of any sort, and no progress. Since these scholars saw truth and progress as defining beliefs of modern society, they were known as 'postmodernists' (see Robert F. Berkhofer for the fullest

exposition of this view). This annotated bibliography guides you through the ensuing controversies.

Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

Said's *Orientalism*, although written by a literary critic, has had an enormous impact on historical writing. It is inspired particularly by the work of Foucault, whose histories of topics from madness to punishment argued that truth claims were really about power. Likewise, Said contended that Western thinking – literary, historical and philosophical – has been fundamentally shaped by colonialism. Even books that were not ostensibly about the 'East', tended to assume that the 'West' was rational and progressive, whereas the 'East' was irrational, emotional and backward. Furthermore, these claims justified colonialism and even in the postcolonial age buttressed the power of the 'West' over the 'East'. The book was innovative in its way of reading sources, in that Said teased out subtle assumptions about 'East' and 'West' from a vast range of texts. While *Orientalism* is a powerful critique of the truth claims of Western knowledge, including historical writing, it did not entirely break with familiar historical methods. In effect, it is a history of Western thought in the age of imperialism, supported by evidence gleaned from canonical texts, however differently Said reads them.

Within the discipline of history, Joan W. Scott's approach was similar. In an influential article, she argued that all sorts of political and social ideas rested on the assumption of female irrationalism and male rationality, and thus buttressed male power. Otherwise, Scott too used a conventional historical method to write on topics such as the history of French feminism. Critics of Scott and Said focused less on their methods than on their focus on the powerful and their tendency to write about dominant views of the marginalized (Western view of the East and men's views of women), rather than about the marginalized peoples themselves.

Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991).

In this provocative and engaging book, Keith Jenkins popularized postmodern ideas for a wider audience. In so doing, he went much further than Said or Scott.

Following Derrida, he held that historical interpretations were just stories – narratives. They could not be verified against the 'real past', for only fragmentary 'traces' of it survived in archives and libraries, and historians have no idea about how they fitted together. Different historians put these traces together in different ways, thus producing different stories. We have no way of determining whether one story matches the evidence better than another. Controversially again, he argued that the only reason that some historical interpretations are accepted as 'truth' is that they are more powerful. Male interpretations are more powerful than female, white interpretations are more powerful than Black and so on. Jenkins suggested

that Carr should not have asked ‘what is history?’, but ‘who is history for?’ His answer: History is for white males. The parallels with the works of Said and Scott are obvious.

Yet, Jenkins faces a problem. The argument that historical works reflect the agendas of powerful groups rests on an interpretation of the history of history departments. Jenkins, however, treats the evidence for this claim cavalierly – his claim that it would be impossible to teach a course from a Marxist, feminist or Black perspective was demonstrably false even in 1992. The most important point is that he is torn between attacking historians’ claim to some kind of truth and making historical claims himself. A key issue is Jenkins’s understanding of evidence. Jenkins appears to think that evidence consists of what Mary Fulbrook calls ‘random debris’. However, the evidence used by Said and Scott consists of complex texts, with connections to other texts, and often an account, explicit or implicit, of the nature of their societies and cultures. They use these texts to write histories of how people in the past, albeit largely the powerful, saw their worlds, not about how the real world really was. And they demonstrate that assumptions about race and gender pervaded the worldviews of the powerful. This approach might help us to understand why history departments both excluded women and people of colour and yet often contained people who wrote radical history.

Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1996).

Postmodernists’ claims provoked a barrage of intemperate criticism (see for example the responses of Gertrude Himmelfarb and Lawrence Stone). The most measured contribution was that of Richard Evans. It is particularly interesting, because he was known for writing history from below (history designed to capture the experience and voices of the working class and of women); his first book was a history of German feminism, published in 1977. Evans was not universally hostile to postmodernism. He acknowledged that it encouraged historians to read their sources less literally. Like other critics, Evans thought that postmodern historians focused too exclusively on the role of the powerful in history. From our perspective, what is important is that he thought that the evidence proved that women and other marginal groups were able to create their own identities, albeit in circumstances of inequality. Furthermore, he argues that his interpretation is not just relatively better than others, but actually objective. He held that the facts of history are ‘discovered’ not invented by the historian, and that ‘the past does speak through the sources and is recoverable through them’.

In this, Evans broke even with Carr, who had argued, precisely, that facts were not there, waiting to be discovered, but only became historical facts if they were relevant to a historical interpretation. Carr famously provided the example of the murder of a gingerbread seller in 1850, which only became a historical fact because it was relevant to George Kitson Clarke’s interpretation of the history of Victorian England. Since Evans criticized

Carr's ideas, some reviewers thought that he had returned to the conservative position of Sir Geoffrey Elton, who held that objective history was possible. In fact, it is not always easy to pin down where Evans stands. *In Defence of History* is a fertile book. It's worth reading it for yourselves.

Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Fulbrook's book was published as the theory wars were drawing to a close. On the one hand, she agrees with postmodernists that historians cannot be objective. Historians necessarily bring moral and political concerns to the questions they ask, the hypotheses they develop and to the way that they approach the evidence. They quite legitimately bring explicit theories to their work. Yet, while interpretations are not objective, some are more compatible with evidence than others. In this, she is closer to Carr (minus his emphasis on progress) than to Evans.

Fulbrook argues first that historians have developed effective procedures for using a wide range of sources, without necessarily believing that sources have a single or an objective meaning. Secondly, she argues that the crucial issue is whether a particular interpretation is in principle open to revision through confrontation with evidence. For Fulbrook, some disputes between historians really can't be tested because they involve so many composite elements that eliminating one part does not undermine the whole – 'modernization' or 'totalitarianism', for instance. Most historical disputes, however, are testable – she gives the example of the erosion of the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution by decades of empirical research. Fulbrook's argument is open to the criticism that this change owed more to the global decline of Marxist ideology than to confrontation with sources. She might counter that Marxist historians did modify their arguments in the light of criticism, even if they didn't admit abandoning their original arguments – to the point that eventually there was little left of their original claims. Like many historical interpretations, the Marxist interpretation was not dramatically refuted but died the death of a thousand qualifications.

Fulbrook argues that through confrontation with evidence and criticism by other historians, it is possible for historians using different concepts, with different ways of looking at the past, to critique each other's work and arrive at more sophisticated interpretations of the past.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the more cautious postmodernism of Said and Scott has been integrated into the mainstream. Historians largely accept that their sources and historical works may be structured by unspoken assumptions about gender, race, or other aspects of identity. Historians are more likely to write about how a given group saw the world than about how the world

really was. Historical writing has rarely tackled such a broad range of subjects.

The radical critique of the historical discipline advanced by Berkhofer, Jenkins and others has remained marginal, however. Historians influenced by Foucault or Derrida are as likely as any other to cite supporting sources in footnotes. History departments continue to assess student essays according to the coherence of their arguments and their use of supporting evidence. Whether the failure of postmodern scepticism to make greater inroads was due to having lost the argument or because it looked dangerous in an age of conspiracy theories and distrust of experts is hard to determine.

Additional citations

- Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1995).
- E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1961).
- Geoffrey R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (London: HarperCollins, 1969).
- Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York: Vintage, 1994).
- Joan Wallach Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91:5 (1986), pp. 1053–75.
- Lawrence Stone, 'History and Post-Modernism', *Past & Present*, 135:1 (1992), pp. 189–94.