

Reading Historiography (i.e., Secondary Sources): Some Suggested Guidelines

History, historiography, and historiographical conversations – Stated most baldly, history refers to what happened in the past, while historiography refers to what historians write about what happened in the past. Often, though, and confusingly so, the two terms – history and historiography – are used synonymously, as in "a work of history." Works of *historiography*, to be more precise, are not simply chronologies of historical evidence (i.e., names, dates, places, events, etc. from the past). Rather they are arguments/interpretations about the past that emerge from an immersion in and are built upon a foundation of historical evidence – the echoes and fragments and shards from the past that historians cull from archival collections and other primary sources. The novelist William Faulkner once asserted that the past is not dead – it's not even past. Historiography attests to this. Though the "facts" of the past do not necessarily change, the interpretive spins that historians give to the facts that they cobble together are constantly changing. Shifting historiographical postures sometimes owe to the discovery of new primary sources. More often, though, they owe to changing ideas, mores, attitudes, etc. in the present. Such changes not only reorient how we see/understand the here and now, but also the there and then. As the historian Carl Degler writes about changing interpretations in the historiography of American slavery, "At virtually each shift in interpretation the catalyst to reinterpretation has been a new assumption derived from a concern about the present." In light of this, one helpful strategy for getting a handle on historiography is to look for the historian's discussion – usually in the introduction, sometimes in the footnotes, sometimes at critical analytic junctures in the chapters – of the historiographical conversation with which his/her work is in dialogue and his/her position vis-à-vis it. Think of works of historiography as snippets from a broader conversation among historians. Entering those conversations requires familiarization with the contours of those conversations, the historiographical "so what" upshot. Here are a couple of examples to illustrate:

George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4-13.

"Handlin's account emphasized the loss of European peasant roots John Bodnar called his 1985 synthesis of the recent literature on immigration to the United States *The Transplanted* so as to leave no doubt that most immigrants had maintained their cultural roots, even when planted in different soil Most historical writings on Chicanos that were influenced by this nationalist position emphasized cultural continuity in almost all geographical settings I argue that the emphasis in Chicano history on bipolar models that have stressed either cultural continuity or gradual acculturation has short-circuited a full exploration of the complex process of cultural adaptations."

Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 4-5.

"The 'underclass' debate has moved in three – sometimes overlapping – directions. The first, and most influential, focuses on the behavior and values of the poor, and the role of federal social programs in fostering a culture of joblessness and dependency in inner cities The second offers structural explanations for inequality and urban poverty A third explanation focuses on politics, emphasizing the marginalization of cities in American social policy, particularly in the aftermath of the urban unrest and racial conflict of the 1960s [W]hat is largely missing from the 'underclass' debate is the perspective of history. My examination of Detroit in the quarter-century after World War II suggests ..."

What is the question (or questions) to which the work of historiography offers an answer?

Historians arrive at their projects in a number of ways. Sometimes they identify (or stumble upon) a curious or anomalous set of circumstances or confluence of historical events. Other times, they are driven by more presentist concerns - a current issue or event whose historical lineage they'd like to trace. Still other times, perhaps most of the time, they simply have an issue or event from the past about which they'd like to know more. Starting points such as these, in turn, give rise to a research question or questions to which historians propose to offer an answer (or, more accurately, an interpretation or argument). Sometimes historians make that question explicit to their readers, usually in the introduction. Sometimes it's only implicit. Identifying the question to which a work of historiography proposes to give an answer often provides an important leverage point for grappling with the onslaught of historical details that follow. Here is an example to illustrate:

Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 1:

When I ask students to describe the 1950s, they offer two types of adjectives and images. *Conservative, suburban, apathetic*, they begin. Stay-at-home mothers in aprons, fathers coming home from work, teenage girls in poodle skirts at high school dances – these are some of the images that come to the minds of those reared on reruns of *Happy Days* and *Leave It to Beaver*. But many of these same students also associate this period with the early years of the civil rights movement: they use adjectives like *rebellious, courageous, and dignified* to describe Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama, the "Little Rock Nine" in Arkansas, and other icons of grassroots activism.

I began this book with similar associations. It was not clear to me what they had to do with each other. It was difficult to understand why, what Betty Friedan later called the "feminine mystique," flourished in the same era that the civil rights movement gained momentum. How was it that liberal ideas about race relations gained ascendance in the same period that conservative ideas about gender relations seemed so entrenched?

What is the thesis? The thesis is the analytical heart and soul of any work of historiography. Thesis statements almost always appear somewhere in the introduction. They may vary in length from a few sentences to a few pages. They may be straightforward or multifaceted, comprised of a number of different strands or sub-theses. Sometimes the historian cues you into the thesis with statements such as "I argue," or "I contend," etc. Other times the thesis is less explicitly presented. Whether explicit or implicit, the thesis is the interpretive posture assumed, argument to be made, position to be defended, etc., in its most pithy analytic articulation. If history is, as an old adage goes, philosophy reasoning by example, then the thesis statement of any historical

work is the philosophy as yet embellished by example, the analysis as yet buttressed by evidence, the entire spool of interpretive thread that the historian will subsequently unravel. Identifying the thesis is absolutely essential for framing and understanding the chapters that follow. Here is an example of a thesis statement:

Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5-6:

This book is devoted to explaining how it was possible and what it meant for industrial workers to become effective as national political participants in the mid-1930s, after having sustained defeats in 1919 and having refrained from unionism and national politics during the 1920s. Why did workers suddenly succeed in the thirties as both CIO trade unionists and Democratic Party faithfuls? Certainly, changes in the larger political environment mattered; repressive measures like government's and employers' use of Red Scare tactics in 1919 and facilitating factors such as the Wagner Act of 1935 influenced whether workers' political efforts failed or flourished. But I will argue in this book that these external influences by no means tell the whole story, that their effectiveness in thwarting or encouraging workers' efforts depended as much on working people's own inclinations as on the strengths of their opponents or allies. This book will contend that what matters most in explaining why workers acted politically in the ways they did during the mid-thirties is the change in workers' own orientation during the 1920s and 1930s. Working-class Americans underwent a gradual shift in attitudes and behavior over the intervening decade and a half as a result of a wide range of social and cultural experiences. Daily life both inside and outside the workplace and factors as diverse as where workers turned for help in good times and bad, how they reacted to their employers' "welfare capitalist" schemes, and whether they were enticed by the new chain stores, motion picture palaces, and network radio shows or preferred the comfort of more familiar ethnic associations all are important in analyzing how workers' politics evolved. To understand why a bacon packer risked her job in the depths of the depression by joining a union or why a Polish immigrant steelworker registered and voted for the first time in 1936 requires investigation into many facets of workers' lives during the 1920s and the early depression that might not at first glance have seemed relevant.

Chapters as building blocks – Think of individual chapters in a work of historiography as building blocks in the construction of the overarching thesis. As you descend into each chapter, try keeping one eye fixed on the chapter-level thesis and another eye fixed on how the chapter-level thesis fits into and advances the overarching thesis. Doing so often requires you to return to the introduction as you read to reacquaint yourself with the big picture.

Template for taking notes – Besides underlining and writing notes in the margins, you might consider a more systematic approach to note taking. For example, I try to distill each book or article I read into a couple pages worth of notes. To this end, I complete a template with the following categories: Central Question(s), Thesis/Themes, Chapter Summaries, Comments/Critique. These categories are by no means exhaustive, but they do at least offer one way for thinking about how to break down a book or article.