
Introduction:

History and Historians

Most students are usually introduced to the study of history by way of a fat textbook and become quickly immersed in a vast sea of names, dates, events, and statistics. The students' skills are then tested by examinations that require them to show how much of the data they remember; the more they remember, the higher their grades. From this experience a number of conclusions seem obvious: the study of history is the study of "facts" about the past; the more "facts" you know, the better you are as a student of history. The professional historian, whether teacher or textbook writer, is simply one who brings together a very large number of "facts."

Of course, only the most naive of students fail to see that the data of history, the "facts," are presented in an organized manner. Textbooks describe not only what happened, but also why it happened. For example, students learn that Puritans began coming from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the New World in 1630, but they also learn why the Puritans came when they read about the religious persecutions in seventeenth-century England. Similarly, they read of the steady trek of people westward during the nineteenth century; however, at the same time they learn details that explain this movement of people—the availability of fertile lands in the West, the discovery of gold in California, the improvement of roads and other transportation facilities.

But beginning students, even as they come to recognize that their teacher and their textbook are explaining as well as describing events in the past, still have no reason to alter their notion of what history is all about. They are still working in the realm of "fact." The "fact" of the movement of people into Ohio is explained by the "fact" that fertile land was available there. They may learn more details about the event—how many people went to Ohio, when they arrived, where they settled—and about the explanation—the cost of land in Ohio, the availability of credit, the exhaustion of soils in the eastern states. Or they may be introduced to a fuller explanation when they read that some people came to Ohio to escape their creditors or to seek adventure or to speculate in land. In either case, they are simply learning more "facts." An advanced course in American history in high school differs from the sixth-grade course in American history in that it gives more detail; the older students must remember more "facts."

Students who have been introduced to history in this way may become confused upon discovering in a book like this one that historians often disagree sharply. To be sure, historians present their material in familiar ways; they tell us

what happened and why it happened by presenting a mass of historical data. But students soon discover that two or three or more historians dealing with the same event may come to quite different conclusions about it. Sometimes two historians will use two very different sets of "facts" in describing an event, and this leads them to different conclusions. At other times, however, the same "facts" are given different meanings by different historians, and their conclusions therefore differ.

Experience and common sense might lead students to conclude that when historians disagree, one must be right while the others must be wrong. Just as students remember being marked down on their exams when they presented incorrect or inadequate information, they conclude that some historians are wrong because they have their "facts" wrong. But in this case, both common sense and experience can be profoundly misleading. Not only do students find that all historians argue reasonably and persuasively, but they also discover that the "facts" historians present—the names, dates, events, figures—usually turn out to be correct. Moreover, complicating matters even further, they often find that contending historians often agree on the facts and that they regularly use much the same data to come to different conclusions. To state that all are right when they say different things seems irrational; in any case, such an approach is often unacceptable to teachers who expect their students to take a position. The only way out for the baffled students is to choose one point of view for reasons they cannot fully explain. History, which had seemed to be a cut-and-dried matter of memorizing "facts," now becomes a matter of choosing one good interpretation from among many. Historical truth becomes a matter of personal preference, like the choice of one brand-name item over another in a supermarket.

This position is hardly satisfying. And when their teachers inform them that the controversy over historical interpretations is what lends excitement to the study of history, students can only respond that they feel more confusion than excitement. They cannot help but feel that two diametrically opposed points of view about an event cannot both be right; yet they lack the ability to decide between them.

Obviously, there is no easy solution to this problem. Historians do not disagree in order to spread confusion or to provide the raw material for "problems" books such as this one. Historians disagree because they view the past from different perspectives and because they ask different questions and therefore get different answers. Once students grasp this, they have taken the first step toward being able to evaluate the work of various historians. But before pursuing this matter, we must consider a problem that we have more or less taken for granted: What is history?

The word *history* has several meanings. In its broadest sense, it denotes the whole of the human past. More restricted is the notion that history is the *recorded* past, that is, that part of human life which has left some sort of record such as folk tales, artifacts, or written documents. Finally, history may be defined as that which historians write about the past.

Of course, the three meanings are related. Historians writing about the past base their accounts on the remains of the past, on the artifacts and documents left by people. Obviously they cannot know everything for the simple reason that

not every event, every happening, was fully and completely recorded. And the further back one goes in time, the fewer are the records that remain. In this sense, then, the historian can only approximate history in the first meaning above—that is, history as the entire human past.

But this does not say enough. If historians cannot know everything because not everything was recorded, neither do they use all the records that are available to them. Rather, historians *select* from the total those records they deem most significant. Moreover, to complicate matters a bit more, they also recreate parts of the past for which they have no recorded evidence. Like detectives, they piece together evidence to fill in the gaps in the available records.

Historians are able to select evidence and to create evidence by using some theory or idea of human motivation and behavior. Sometimes this appears to be easy, requiring very little sophistication and subtlety. Thus, for example, historians investigating America's entry into World War I would probably find that the sinking of American merchant ships on the high seas by German submarines was relevant to their discussion. At the same time, they would most likely not use evidence that President Woodrow Wilson was dissatisfied with a new hat he bought during the first months of 1917. The choice as to which fact to use is based on a theory—admittedly, in this case a rather crude theory, but a theory nonetheless. It would go something like this: National leaders contemplating war are more likely to be influenced by belligerent acts against their countries than by their unhappiness with their haberdashers.

The choice, of course, is not always so obvious. But, before pursuing the problem further, it is important to note that a choice must be made. Historians do not just present facts; they present *some* facts and not others. They choose those facts that seem significant and reject others. This is one of the reasons that historians disagree: they have different views or different theories concerning human behavior and therefore find different kinds of information significant.

Perhaps it might appear that the subject matter being investigated, rather than any theory held by the historian, dictates which facts are significant. But this is not really so. With a little imagination—and poetic license—one could conceive of a psychological explanation for Wilson's actions that would include mounting frustration and anger fed in part, at least, by his strong disappointment with his new hat. In this case the purchase of a new hat would be a relevant fact in explaining Wilson's decision to ask Congress for a declaration of war. If readers find this outlandish, it is only because their notions of presidential motivation do not include this kind of personal reaction as an influence in determining matters of state.

If the choices were always as simple as choosing between German submarines and President Wilson's new hat, the problem would be easily resolved. But usually the choices are not so easy to make. Historians investigating the United States's entry into World War I will find in addition to German submarine warfare a whole series of other facts that could be relevant to the event under study. For instance, they will find that the British government had a propaganda machine at work in the United States that did its best to win public support for the British cause. They will discover that American bankers had made large loans to the British, loans that would not be repaid in the event of a British defeat.

They will read of the interception of the "Zimmermann Note," in which the German foreign secretary ordered the German minister in Mexico, in the event of war, to suggest an alliance between Germany and Mexico whereby Mexico, with German support, could win back territory taken from Mexico by the United States in the Mexican War. They will also find among many American political leaders a deep concern over the balance of power in Europe, a balance that would be destroyed—to America's disadvantage—if the Germans were able to defeat the French and the British and thereby emerge as the sole major power in Europe.

What, then, are the historians investigating America's entry into World War I to make of these facts? One group could simply conclude that America entered the war for several reasons and then list the facts they have discovered. By doing so, they would be making two important assumptions: (1) those facts they put on their list—in this case, German submarine warfare, British propaganda, American loans, the Zimmermann Note, and concern over the balance of power—are the main reasons, while those they do not list are not important; and (2) those things they put on their list are of equal importance in explaining the United States's role. But another group of historians might argue that the list is incomplete in that it does not take into account the generally pro-British views of Woodrow Wilson, views that stemmed from the President's background and education. The result will be a disagreement among the historians. Moreover, because the second group raise the question of Wilson's views, they will find a number of relevant facts that the first group would ignore. They will concern themselves with Wilson's education, with the influence of his teachers, with the books he read, and with the books he wrote. In short, although both groups of historians are dealing with the same subject—America's entry into World War I—they will come to different conclusions and use different facts to support their points of view. The facts selected, and those ignored, will depend not on the problem studied but on the points of view of the historians.

Similarly, a third group of historians might maintain that the various items on the list should not be given equal weight, that one of the reasons listed—say bankers' loans—was most important and that the others seemed to be significant only because of the overwhelming power of the bankers to influence American policy. The theory here would be that economic matters are the key to human motivation and that a small number of wealthy bankers have a disproportionate ability to influence government. Again, these historians will disagree with the first two groups, and they will find relevant certain facts that the others overlook—for example, bankers' opinions, the lobbying activities of bankers, financial and political connections between bankers and politicians, and the like.

In the examples given, historians disagree and use different facts or give different emphasis to the same facts because they begin from different premises; in other words, they have different theories of human motivation. But to put the matter in this way is somewhat misleading. It makes it appear that historical scholarship is merely a matter of deduction, as in Euclidean geometry, where conclusions are deduced from a set of given premises termed axioms and postulates. If this were so, historians would have it very easy. They would begin with a premise—for example, human beings are primarily motivated by selfish eco-

conomic interests—and then they would seek whatever evidence they could find that showed people acting in that manner. They would ignore contrary evidence as unimportant or explain it away as being mere rhetoric designed to hide real motivations. The results of such efforts would be foreordained; the actors and the details might be different, but in the end the explanations would always be the same.

Historians term this approach or method “determinism,” and most modern historians reject it. They argue that the premises cannot be merely assumed but must be proved or at least supported by concrete historical information. Nevertheless, historians cannot even begin their investigations without adopting some theory, even if it is expressed vaguely and held tentatively. In the course of their investigations they might alter or refine the original theory or replace it with another. But their final product will always rest upon some kind of theoretical base. Thus, if two historians become convinced by their evidence that different factors motivated the behavior of the people involved in a particular event, they will disagree, presenting different facts and giving different meanings to the same facts.

But there is still another realm of disagreement that, although it often appears similar to that just discussed, in fact stems from something rather different. Historians sometimes disagree because they are not really discussing the same thing. Often they are merely considering different levels of cause and effect. A few examples will illustrate this point.

The simplest level of analysis of cause and effect is to recognize what may be called proximate cause. “I was late for class,” you explain, “because I overslept.” Or, to use a historical example, “The Civil War began because South Carolina shore batteries under the command of General Beauregard opened fire on the federal garrison at Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861.” Neither statement can be faulted on the grounds that it is inaccurate; at the same time, however, neither is sufficient as an explanation of the event being considered. The next question is obvious: Why did you oversleep, or why did relations between one state and the federal government reach the point where differences had to be settled by war? To this you may answer that you were out very late last night at a party, and the historian may respond that the authorities in South Carolina concluded that the election of Abraham Lincoln and his subsequent actions in threatening to supply the federal garrison at Fort Sumter were a clear menace to the well-being of South Carolina.

We have now dug more deeply into the problems, but the answers may still not be sufficient to satisfy us. Again we ask the question why and the answer takes us more deeply into the causes of the events under consideration. As we probe further, of course, the answers become more difficult and more complex. The problems discussed earlier—a theory of motivation and the selection of facts—begin to become increasingly important, and disagreements among historians will begin to emerge. But the potential for another kind of disagreement also arises. The further back or the deeper the historian goes, the more factors there are to be considered and the more tenuous the connection between cause and effect becomes. Historians may disagree about the point at which to begin their analysis—that is, about the location of a point beyond which the causal connection becomes so tenuous as to be meaningless. You might argue that the

ultimate cause of your being late to class was the fact that you were born, but obviously this goes back too far to be meaningful. That you were born is, of course, a *necessary* factor—unless that had happened, you could not have been late—but is not a *sufficient* factor; it does not really tell enough to explain your behavior today. Similarly, we could trace the cause of the Civil War back to the discovery of America, but again, this is a necessary but not a sufficient cause.

The point at which causes are both necessary and sufficient is not self-evident. In part, the point is determined by the theoretical stance of historians. If they decide that slavery is the key to understanding the coming of the Civil War, the point will be located somewhere along the continuum of the history of slavery in the United States. But even those historians who agree that slavery is the key to the war will not necessarily agree at what point slavery becomes both necessary and sufficient. The historians who believe that slavery was a constant irritant driving the North and South apart might begin their discussion with the introduction of blacks into Virginia in 1619. They would find relevant the antislavery attitudes of Northerners during the colonial period, the conflict over slavery in the Constitutional Convention, the Missouri Compromise, the militant abolitionist movement of the 1830s, and the Compromise of 1850. But other historians might argue that the slavery issue did not become really significant until it was associated with the settlement of the western lands. They would probably begin their discussion with the Missouri Compromise, and the facts they would find most relevant would be those that illustrated the fear many people had of the expansion of slavery into the new western lands.

Ostensibly, both groups of historians would be discussing the role of slavery in the coming of the Civil War, but actually they would be discussing two different things. For the first group, the expansion of slavery to the West would be only part of a longer and more complex story; for the second group, slavery and the West would be the whole story. Sometimes the same facts would be used by both, with each giving them different weight and significance; at other times one group would find some facts relevant that the other would not.

An important variant of this kind of disagreement among historians may be illustrated by returning to our earlier example of the causes of American entry into World War I. Some historians might set out to discover the effects of British propaganda efforts in molding public and official views toward the war. German submarine warfare, the Zimmermann Note, bankers' loans, and other matters would enter the discussion, but they would all be seen from the perspective of the ways in which the British propaganda machine used them to win American support for the British side.

Historians emphasizing the role of British propaganda would disagree with those emphasizing the influential role of bankers, although both groups of historians would be using many of the same facts to support their points of view. In reality, of course, the disagreement arises at least in part from the fact that the two groups of historians are not really discussing the same things.

The reader should now be in a position to understand something of the sources of disagreement among historians. Historians arrive at different conclusions because they have different notions about human motivation and different ideas about what constitutes necessary and sufficient cause, and because they

seek to investigate different aspects of the same problems. All supply their readers with data and information—that is, with “facts”—to support their arguments. And, with rare exceptions, all of the facts presented are accurate.

Clearly, then, historical facts as such have no intrinsic meaning; they take on meaning and significance only when they are organized and presented by historians with a particular point of view. The well-used phrase “let the facts speak for themselves” therefore has no real meaning. The facts do *not* speak for themselves; historians use the facts in a particular way and therefore they, and not the facts, are doing the speaking. In other words, historians give meaning to facts by assessing their significance and by presenting them in a particular manner. In short, they *interpret*. Because different historians use different facts or use the same facts in different ways, their interpretations differ.

Once we understand the sources of differences among historians we are in a better position to evaluate their work. To be sure, our ability to understand why historians disagree will not make it possible to eliminate all disagreement. Only if we could devise a model of unquestioned validity that completely explained human behavior would it be possible for us to end disagreement. Any analysis that began by assuming a different model or explanation would be wrong.*

But we do not have such a complete and foolproof explanatory model. Nor can we expect to find one. Human life is too complicated to be so completely modeled; different problems require different explanatory models or theories. And because historians cannot agree as to which is the best model to employ for any given problem and because they are constantly devising new models, disagreements are destined to remain.

For the readers who have been patient enough to follow the argument to this point, the conclusions stated here may appear somewhat dismal and unrewarding. In convincing them that evaluating a historical interpretation is not like picking an item off a supermarket shelf, have we done more than move them to another store with a different stock on its shelves? If there are many explanatory models to choose from, and if no one of them is complete, foolproof, and guaranteed true, then it would appear that we are simply in another store with different merchandise on display.

Such a conclusion is unwarranted. In the first place, students who are able to understand the premises from which historians begin will be able to comprehend the way historians work and the process by which they fashion interpretation. Moreover, this understanding will enable them to evaluate the work of the historians. For at this stage students are no longer simply memorizing details; nor are they attempting to evaluate a historical essay by trying to discover whether each of the facts presented is true. They can now ask more important questions of the material before them. Are the premises from which historians begin adequate

*It should be noted in passing that even if we had such a theory, there would be much room for disagreement because we would often lack the required data. Some essential information would be lost through deliberate or accidental destruction. Other information might leave no record. Records of births, deaths, income, and so forth are now required by law, but in earlier days these records were not kept or were kept only sporadically. And telephone and personal conversations might leave no concrete record even though they could have a profound influence on behavior.

explanations of human behavior? Do the facts they present really flow from their premises and support their conclusions? Are there other data that would tend to undermine their arguments and throw doubt on the adequacy of their premises?

As students attempt to answer these questions, they begin to learn history by thinking and acting like historians; they begin to accumulate knowledge, understanding, and insight in much the same ways that historians do. And they begin to understand more fully how historians gain new information, how they reassess information others have used, and how they come to new and different conclusions.

Historians are constantly getting new information that had been unavailable to their predecessors. Diaries, letters, business records, and family Bibles are always being found in attics, in basements, and even in remote corners of large research libraries; and government agencies, private organizations, and individuals regularly make their letters, reports, and other papers available to historians. This new information sometimes supports and enriches earlier interpretations by providing more concrete details about matters that earlier writers merely suggested or surmised because they lacked the newly available information. Often, however, the new information leads historians to revise earlier interpretations by revealing actions, thoughts, and behavior that were unknown to earlier historians because the documents were unavailable to them.

But the availability of new information does not fully explain the sources of disagreement among historians and the regular process of revision of older interpretations. Much of the "new" information that later writers use is not new in the sense of being newly discovered or made available. The information was in the archives and libraries all the time, but historians did not use it, or they used it in very different ways. In short, the "facts" were there, but until historians asked different questions, the facts had no meaning or relevance, and historians ignored them.

Historians ask new questions and therefore seek new facts to answer the questions for a variety of reasons. They often gain new insights from the research of social scientists such as economists, political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists. Investigations by these scholars into such problems as family relationships, the influence of propaganda on behavior, the effects of the money supply on economic change, the relationship between voting patterns and racial and ethnic origin, and the psychological effects of racism all suggest new questions that historians might find valuable in investigating the past and in turn new kinds of data—facts—that they should seek in answering the new questions. In seeking such answers, historians also master and use new techniques and methods. For example, modern statistical methods and the computer permit the historian to handle huge masses of data quickly and accurately.

Historians also learn from one another. For example, when one historian discovers the existence of certain political, social, and economic relationships in a given city at a certain time, he or she provides other historians studying other cities, either at the same or different times, with what may be important and enlightening insights. International comparisons of similar events and institutions can also reveal important features that will be invisible or obscure when

these events and institutions are viewed from the perspective of a single nation's history.

Finally, and perhaps most important, their own experiences often help historians to relate the past to the present; that is, they interpret the past through a frame of reference that is influenced by the world in which they live. During World War II, for instance, historians reexamined the causes and consequences of World War I, just as the war in Vietnam provided a new perspective on the Cold War years. The civil rights movement and black radicalism in the 1960s inspired a number of historians to reinterpret the role of abolitionists in the events leading up to the Civil War and to give more attention to race and racism in American life. In a similar way the feminist movement spurred them to reexamine the role of women and the family in the American past, while urban violence, the black revolution, and increasing ethnic identity led them to reassess the importance of violence, slavery, and ethnicity in American history.

When historians use the insights and techniques of the social scientists and when they make comparisons over time and place, the results may be enlightening and valuable. But they may also be misleading. By mechanically applying one or another theory of human behavior taken from the social sciences or by using behavior patterns in one place or time to explain behavior in another place or time, historians run the twin risks of determinism and anachronism. The attitudes, perceptions, and outlooks of people in one area or time in the past may differ considerably from those of another area or time. Therefore, for example, evidence that would explain certain kinds of behavior in the United States in the 1990s would not necessarily explain similar behavior in an earlier time.

A concrete example will illustrate the point. In recent years, some historians have provided evidence that in the pre-Civil War decades Southerners who owned slaves and grew cotton earned a rate of profit that equaled or exceeded that of investments in other enterprises elsewhere in the nation. From this evidence, some conclude that Southerners continued to invest primarily in slaves and cotton production (rather than in commerce and industry) because of the high rate of return earned in such investment. Others add that Southerners were willing to go to war to protect this profitable enterprise. A crucial assumption concerning behavior underlies this reasoning: Southerners acted like modern businessmen, making their investment decisions based upon the highest expected rate of return. That assumption may indeed be valid, but students should be aware first, that it *is* an assumption, and second, that the assumption is not necessarily supported by the evidence that Southerners continued to invest in slaves and cotton production. Southerners might have continued to buy slaves and grow cotton for reasons other than expected high rates of profit; social or political benefits that came with being a slaveowning cotton planter may have been their primary motivation.

In short, then, insights from the social sciences as well as those from other times and places are invaluable—indeed, essential—for historians. But they must be used with care, because they carry assumptions about behavior that may not be appropriate when applied to other times and places. By recognizing the theories and assumptions that guide historians when they formulate questions to investigate and then gather, evaluate, and present the evidence to answer these

questions, students may more readily understand how historians work and why they disagree, and will thus be able to evaluate more accurately the work of the historians they read.

At first it may seem frustrating to realize that there is no one easy answer to the problems historians raise and that "truth" is but an elusive yet intriguing goal in a never-ending quest. But when students realize this, they have *begun* their education. At that point, they will find the study of history to be a significant, exhilarating, and useful part of their education. For coming to grips with conflicting interpretations of the past is more than an interesting classroom game; it is part of a larger process of coming to terms with the world around us. Every day we are asked to evaluate articles in newspapers and magazines or reports of events provided by friends or media commentators. A knowledge of history provides a background for interpreting these accounts; but more than that, the past and the present are so interconnected that one's interpretation of the American Revolution, slavery, the progressive movement, or American foreign policy after World War II is intimately related to one's views toward civil rights and domestic and foreign policy today.

The discussion thus far has emphasized the element of disagreement among historians and has attempted to show beginning students how these disagreements arise and how they should deal with them. But if disagreements arise because historians often start their analyses from different perspectives, it does not follow that there is no agreement at all among historians. On the contrary, groups of historians have tended to assume similar theoretical postures, and the result has been the emergence of "schools" of historical writing. All differences among members of a particular school do not disappear, but their approaches remain similar enough to differentiate them from members of other schools.

Identifying schools and placing historians in them is seldom easy and is always somewhat arbitrary. The reasons are obvious enough: the amount and complexity of work about America's past are so great that it is possible to identify a large number of schools. Moreover, because few historians begin with an explicit ideology or philosophy of history, their work may fit into a number of possible schools. Finally, most good historians do not cling dogmatically to a particular approach. As their research and writing proceeds, as they learn more, or as contemporary events alter their perspectives, their interpretations tend to change.

In organizing this book we have chosen two recurrent and important schools, or interpretive themes, in the writings on American history: conflict and consensus. Admittedly, the choice, in one sense at least, is arbitrary; we could have chosen from a number of other unifying themes. On the other hand, the choice has not been completely arbitrary in that these themes—conflict and consensus—expressed either explicitly or implicitly, may be found in virtually all major interpretations of our country's past. The student who reads the following pages and attempts to evaluate the arguments presented will be faced with two real and meaningful ways to understand the American past and, indeed, to judge the contemporary American scene.

Stripped to its essentials, the task of historians is to deal with change. And nowhere do historians find change more manifest than when they study the United States. Almost in the twinkling of an eye, a vast, scarcely populated conti-

ment was transformed into a major industrial power of phenomenal complexity. Overnight, virgin forests became fertile farms; Indian trails became roads, highways, and railroads; and empty spaces became bustling cities. Matching this transformation of the physical face of the continent were equally momentous changes in politics, social relations, ideas, and attitudes. For most Americans, constant and rapid change was inevitable if only because it was so obvious. "Ten years in America are like a century in Spain," wrote the German immigrant Francis Leiber soon after his arrival in the United States early in the nineteenth century. "The United States really changes in some respects more within ten years than a country like Spain has within a hundred."

But who could argue that Europe was static and unchanging? True enough, Europe had little in the way of trackless wilderness to be discovered, settled, and transformed; and, true also, Europe was crowded with the remnants of what might appear to be an unchanging past—cathedrals and monuments, aristocratic and royal institutions, and ways of doing things that seemed to have existed time out of mind. But at the same time, Europe periodically exploded into change. Indeed, time after time, Americans saw Europe swept by rebellion and war as one group after another sought, often successfully, to revolutionize European lives and institutions.

Generations of American historians have tried to describe and to explain the vast alterations that have taken place on the North American continent. As they did so, many kept one eye on the changes in European institutions, seeking to compare and to contrast the nature of changes in Europe with those of North America. But even as they read the historical documents, often in the light of European history and experience, the historians themselves were living through vast and rapid changes taking place around them in the United States, changes that often influenced their historical scholarship. From the rich and varied work by American historians two rather distinct traditions or interpretive themes have emerged, each of which has sought to provide a general explanation for American historical development.

One tradition stresses conflict, finding American history to be similar in this respect to that of Europe. Historians within this tradition often speak of revolutionary changes and emphasize the importance of conflict in bringing these changes. They stress the class, ethnic, racial, and political *differences* among Americans and the fundamental nature of the conflicts these differences created: democrats versus aristocrats, debtors versus creditors, workers versus businessmen, North versus South, farmers versus railroads, blacks versus whites. Change, they argue, is a result of this never-ending conflict; it arises from the efforts of particular groups and classes to impose their hegemony over American society, or at least to increase their influence over that society.

The other tradition stresses the uniqueness of the American experience by finding a basic consensus in American society. According to this tradition, all Americans of whatever class or station shared what was essentially a common outlook. To be sure, Americans did not all live alike nor did they always agree with one another. But their disagreements, especially when compared with the dissensions that divided European society, were not fundamental. Consensus historians do not ignore class and sectional differences, and they do not deny

conflicts between groups such as workers and employers; but they do deny that these conflicts were basic. Americans, they argue, achieved a consensus on fundamentals; if they disagreed, their disagreements were minor differences within an underlying consensus. Change, then, is the result of a fundamental agreement that change is required and does not arise from a struggle for power.

Although both these themes can be found in the earliest writings on American history, they became dominant interpretive themes only during the twentieth century. The theme of conflict was central to the writings of those Richard Hofstadter has called the "Progressive Historians": Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles A. Beard, and Vernon L. Parrington. Growing up in the midst of the nation's rapid industrialization and living in a time of increasing protest against the problems created by that industrialization, these historians saw the past in terms of bitter conflict. Their influence, as the reader of the following pages will discover, was profound.

The theme of consensus, with its roots in the nationalistic histories of the nineteenth century, became especially important beginning in the early 1950s, in part as a reaction to what some considered to be the overstatements of the conflict school and in part as a reaction to world conditions. For many American historians at the time, European revolutionary and ideological conflicts seemed strangely alien to the United States, making historical interpretations cast in the European mold completely inappropriate. Looking at the past, these historians discovered that America had always been different from Europe. For the most part, the United States had been spared the bitter conflicts that divided European countries, because Americans from the beginning had agreed on fundamentals. Consensus historians therefore stressed the uniqueness of the American experience and sought to explain the origins of this uniqueness.

Like the conflict historians of an earlier generation, the new consensus historians had a great influence on American historical thought. An especially important part of the consensus school was the American Studies movement, an interdisciplinary effort to combine history, literature, and the social sciences to describe and explain the special and unique American experience and to define an American "character" that was molded by that experience.

But the consensus historians were not without their critics. John Higham argued that they were "homogenizing" American history; he accused them of "carrying out a massive grading operation to smooth over America's social convulsions." He and other critics did not simply call for a return to the history of the progressive historians. They argued that the consensus historians had made the American past bland and meaningless because they ignored real and significant differences that produced sharp conflicts. Even some of the consensus historians began to have second thoughts about the interpretation. Richard Hofstadter, who had been a sharp critic of the conflict historians, felt that the consensus interpretation had gone too far. "Americans may not have quarreled over profound ideological matters, as these are formulated in the history of political thought, but they quarreled consistently enough over issues that had real pith and moment," he wrote in 1967 in a new introduction to his book *The American Political Tradition*. He added that "an obsessive fixation on the elements of consensus that do undoubtedly exist strips the story of the drama and the interest it has."

The responses to the concern over the seeming domination of the consensus school and the homogenization of American history were not long in coming. Indeed, many were already under way. Sometimes the responses became little more than arguments over the meaning given to the words *conflict* and *consensus* or were simply reassertions of the old conflict interpretations. Most historians, however, did far more. They used new techniques, often drawing upon the scholarship of other disciplines. They adopted fresh approaches, asking new questions that led to the discovery of new sources and the reevaluation of existing evidence. The result was not only new interpretations of the nation's past but also a considerable redefinition of what constituted that past, that is, a redefinition of what kinds of questions historians should ask about the past.

Quantitative historians, aided by the computer and modern statistical methods and using theories borrowed from economics, sociology, political science, linguistics, anthropology, and psychology, conducted massive investigations of such matters as economic growth patterns, voting behavior, family life, social mobility, changes in standards of living, and fashions. Social historians, using both quantitative and more traditional methods, attempted to write what they called history "from the bottom up," seeking to investigate and even emphasize the lives of ordinary people rather than members of the political and economic elite. Labor historians who had traditionally concentrated on organized labor gave increasing attention to the culture and ideology of workers in unorganized shops and factories. Many social historians as well as political and economic historians argued that most Americans, especially in the years before the changes in technology allowed for the rapid dissemination of news and information, experienced history on a local level. Hence they studied local developments in great detail, concerning themselves with small communities, villages and towns, and neighborhoods within larger cities; they also gave considerable attention to local religious and political institutions.

Intellectual and cultural historians, investigating ideology and the use of language to discover how people perceived and made sense of the world in which they lived, described what they called "republican" and "liberal" syntheses. The republican synthesis, essentially a consensus interpretation with its emphasis on all Americans united in a quest for republican virtue, was sharply challenged by historians who found that many Americans, even as they mouthed the words of republicanism, gave these words very different meanings. Indeed, some Americans used republican language to attack republicanism. Other historians argued that the republican synthesis was never universal, that it always found itself challenged by liberalism, that is, by the ideas and practices of the modern free market. Some intellectual and cultural historians began to give increasing attention to popular culture, insisting that the concentration on the study of "high culture" was elitist, unrepresentative, and therefore misleading.

Another sign of change came with the appearance of a group calling themselves "new western historians." These historians broke sharply with Frederick Jackson Turner, arguing that the frontier experience was not the whole of American western history and that even the frontier experience was more diverse and complicated than Turner had argued. Indians and Mexicans, miners and environmentalists, ranchers and urbanites, and women along with men were some of

the diverse groups of people who became important actors in the new western history.

The work of the new western historians reveals what perhaps has been the most significant change in the writing of American history: the increasing attention historians began to give to gender, race, and ethnicity.

Fueled in part by the feminist movement and in part by the belated recognition of the absence of women in so much of the writings on American history, historians began to investigate the parts played by women in events and areas—for example, the Revolution, the Civil War, and the West—that they had traditionally studied as male dominated. This added a new dimension to the study of traditional subjects by showing that the role of women was often an important part of the story. Sometimes such investigations led historians to challenge the traditional periodization of history as marked by wars, elections, and political movements. While some historians sought to overcome the neglect of women's voices in traditionally studied areas, others began to look into matters involving women—for example, courtship, the family, and the household economy—that had received little or no attention previously, but that, their studies showed, were important factors in historical development.

Another area experiencing a rush of new and innovative scholarship was that of African-American history. In addition to more subtle and meaningful discussions of traditional areas of race relations, racism, and race conflict, the new work dealt with the development of a distinctive African-American culture and ideology. Much of this new work in such diverse areas as, for example, slavery, the transition from slavery to freedom after the Civil War, the fight for integration, black political action, and South to North migration told the story from the black perspective and stressed the importance of blacks as actors rather than as powerless victims.

Much of the same perspective marked the new studies of other racial and ethnic groups. Historians no longer viewed Indian history as simply the story of wars, defeat, and historical oblivion on the reservations as told from the perspective of the victorious and "civilized" whites; new work emphasized Indian culture and indigenous religious and social practices. Historians studying other racial and ethnic groups gave similar emphasis to cultural persistences as well as to changes over time, sharply calling into question older notions of the melting pot and providing evidence of significant differences among ethnic groups that earlier historians had ignored.

What much of this new work has in common is its emphasis on diversity, on differences among Americans that usually led to conflict rather than consensus. Americans, it suggests, have always been divided by race, class, gender, and ethnicity, and these differences are significant enough to mean that it is wrong and misleading to speak of an American history that is shared by all who reside within the nation's borders. There is not *an* American mind or *an* American culture, but many American minds and cultures, and this diversity has often—indeed, has usually—led to significant conflicts.

This new work, which mounts a strenuous attack on the consensus history that critics such as John Higham charged had homogenized American history, has not been universally accepted. Critics, although they do not deny the differ-

ences among Americans, nevertheless argue that those who emphasize diversity, that is, the differences among Americans, create a history without a central synthesis, without a general unifying theme that would give meaning to American history. Those who emphasize diversity usually find the lack of a general synthesis to be a virtue, not a problem; diversity aims at inclusiveness, they insist, and inclusiveness is closer to reality than a general synthesis that could only be artificial. But their opponents insist with equal vigor that recognition of diversity and inclusiveness does not preclude the existence of a general synthesis; indeed, they argue, giving exclusive attention to differences hides underlying themes and cultural features that unite Americans within their diversity.

In sum, then, new work has enriched historical writing and has often provided a more subtle and complex story of the nation's past. Nevertheless, the themes of conflict and consensus, although significantly altered in emphasis and content, continue to be relevant and therefore continue to be important ways to view the complexities of American history.

The lines that divide the conflict from the consensus historians are not as sharp as they once were. If many contemporary historians draw from both in their analyses of America's past, the emphasis on one or the other remains, both in studies of particular movements and periods as well as in general assessments of the course of American history. Differences in interpretation will persist even as historians continue their work, and, although their efforts will never end the debate, they will give us a richer understanding of our nation's past. This ongoing quest for understanding gives historical scholarship its interest and excitement. The readings that follow, by introducing students to the two traditions of conflict and consensus and their variations through the words of some of their most able proponents, will also introduce students to some of that interest and excitement.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

When historians seek to determine how to evaluate evidence, they are really attempting to answer a whole set of very complicated questions. Is their goal to achieve fairness, objectivity, and balance? If so, what exactly do these words mean when applied to historical scholarship? Is it possible to find truth in history? Can the study of the past be made scientific? Are all conclusions by historians relative because historians cannot escape bias and because they make assumptions that they cannot support with adequate evidence? A few volumes on the theory and practice of history have been written specifically for the beginning student; examples are Walter T. K. Nugent, **Creative History* (Philadelphia, 1967), and Allan J. Lichtman and Valerie French, **Historians and the Living Past* (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1978). More sophisticated but eminently readable are four classic studies: Marc Bloch, **The Historian's Craft* (New York, 1953); Allan Nevins, **The Gateway to History* (Garden City, N.Y., 1962); Louis Gottschalk, **Understanding History* (New York, 1963); and E. H. Carr, **What Is History?* (New York, 1964). Several more recent studies deserve attention. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, **Telling the Truth About History* (New York, 1994) is a clearly written and sensible survey that