

The Ever-Changing Shape and Texture of the Past

Static and Dynamic Concepts of History

A conversation I had at a cocktail party years ago made me acutely aware of some common misconceptions about my chosen field of study. After being introduced to a psychologist, I listened with keen interest to his enthusiastic account of some of the latest approaches and interpretations in his discipline. Having expostulated on this topic with obvious relish, he said, “I don’t suppose there’s much new going on in your field.” Stunned by this remark, I scrutinized his face for signs of either humor or intentional offense. Seeing neither, I was forced to conclude that he genuinely believed history to be a passive, if not dormant, discipline. I attempted to disabuse him of this unfortunate view by explaining some of the recent – and important – developments in history: social history, women’s history, cliometrics, psychohistory, microhistory, and postmodernism. The mention of psychohistory produced a detectable flash of interest, and I would like to think that he has since begun to question his assumption that history is a dull, lifeless chronicle.

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Reflecting later on this encounter, I realized that my companion's attitude was by no means unusual, even among highly educated persons. The reasons for this are readily apparent. The popular conception of history simply as a record of past events seems to have the idea of history's basic unchangeability as an obvious corollary. Many see history as a vast array of facts, largely political and military in character, arranged more or less chronologically. Thus conceived, history is unalterable, except through the occasional unearthing of a lost city or the discovery of a trunk full of letters in an attic. At its best, it is an exciting and vivid costume drama; at its worst, it becomes a tedious, turgid catalog of dates and names designed to torment the young. We should not be surprised that it is the latter viewpoint that predominates. Not only is modern American culture remorselessly present-minded, but quite often the way in which history is taught in our precollegiate schools only confirms its reputation as dull.

Things tend to improve at college level, where those who have not already developed an attitude of unremitting hostility toward history often discover that it offers them an exciting new set of intellectual challenges and vistas. Yet, even at this level, introductory courses sometimes only solidify students' negative attitudes. This is not a matter of bad teaching; knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and articulate history teachers abound at every level. The problem lies in presenting history as a story with a fixed plot and cast of characters. It is true that this approach is natural and to some extent unavoidable, particularly with students who receive their first systematic exposure to history. But it is also possible, indeed critically important, to offer at least a glimpse of a very different concept: history as a dynamic process. By this I mean a rich, varied, evolving intellectual system that allows us to achieve a deeper and better understanding of our world, indeed of ourselves. In this vein history still deals with the past, but it conceptualizes a past in constant dialog with an ever-advancing present, one that responds to new questions and reveals fresh insights into the human condition. This is history as it is understood (and enjoyed) by professional historians, and it is high time that others were let in on the secret.

Obviously this concept of history stands in sharp contrast to the static one that prevails when we think of history merely as a fixed story. In the former, the past becomes kaleidoscopic, offering different answers to each inquirer. This should not be taken to mean that every person can fashion whatever he or she wishes and call it history. There are rigorous procedures one must observe in the framing of historical questions, in the selection and interpretation of sources, and in the presentation of one's findings. Moreover, the pursuit of objectivity, though impossible to achieve fully, must remain a central concern of the historian. Not everyone finds the dynamic concept of history appealing; there is, after all, something comforting in the notion that the past is unchangeable. A shift from the static to the dynamic can be as disconcerting as our recent awakening (and I mean "recent" in terms of natural history) to the fact that the *terra firma* on which we walk is in fact an array of seething, grinding tectonic plates (an example all too familiar to a native Californian). The difference, of course, is that, while shifting tectonic plates seem to promise only devastation in the form of violent earthquakes and tsunamis, the concept of a dynamic historical past holds the promise of intellectual growth.

Revising Our View of the Past

Rather than simply presenting a rigidly fixed view of the past, historians constantly search for fresh sources, approaches, methodological tools, and interpretations, in an effort to offer an ever-new past to whatever the present is. It may be more precise to say that historians offer us a multitude of new pasts, since each historian's view of the past is at least slightly different from another's, and sometimes dramatically so. In other words a vigorous, many-sided debate among scholars is not only unavoidable but essential to the discipline. Even when differences are subtle, they can be important. When an interpretation entails a more sweeping challenge to an established way of interpreting a past event, process, or person, we call it revisionist.

Revisionism, together with less extensive shifts in approaches and interpretations, has been practiced since at least the time of the ancient Greeks, as anyone who has examined the history of historiography (that is, of history writing) will know. Revisionism has, however, become particularly pronounced in the last few centuries, with the dramatic transformations that have taken place in social, economic, and political life. As the pace of change quickens and the magnitude of change increases, a corresponding pressure arises that we revise our presently held accounts of the past. This happens because one of the most fundamental dimensions of our identity is provided by history and, as we change, so must it, too. When a young United States was mainly an agrarian society with few large cities, no complex technology, and no vital role to play in the world, one kind of history sufficed. As the nation grew, became industrialized, and developed an array of perplexing social problems, Americans needed to ask new questions about their past: What was life like on the frontier, and how had these experiences shaped the development of our national character? What was the historical experience of hitherto disempowered or exploited groups: African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics, Asians, and women? How did mass immigration affect politics, society, culture, and the economy? How did the different social classes interact historically, and how and why are the old patterns changing? How was the United States' posture vis-à-vis the rest of the world changing? These are only a few of the questions that have been posed by generations of historians since the late nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, a multiplicity of new approaches and interpretations has been offered in response, and hitherto neglected records and remnants of the past have become primary-source material.

Americans did not, of course, initiate these new ways of looking at the past. Many European societies had begun to experience social and economic change much earlier, and this was reflected in their historical accounts. The *philosophes* of the European Enlightenment developed a decidedly revisionist view of history and used it to great effect in their campaign against ignorance, superstition, and tyranny. Writers like Voltaire and Gibbon broke with long-established tendencies to write reveren-

tially about states, rulers, and legal and ecclesiastical institutions. Their works, still rightly regarded as great classics in the writing of history, served as manifestos in the eighteenth-century struggle to advance the cause of liberty and reason.

New Forms of Historical Consciousness

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the attendant political unrest and demographic change at the end of the eighteenth century, some writers were moved to ask novel questions about the past. Thomas Malthus, that “gloomy” economist who began to point with alarm to the rapid and accelerating growth of population, complained that “the histories of mankind which we possess are, in general, histories only of the higher classes.” He went on to suggest the composition of a history of the habits and mores of the general population on the basis of accurate statistical information. Malthus was well aware of the massive intellectual labors that would have to be expended on such a project, but he nonetheless called upon future scholars to shoulder the burden:

A satisfactory history of this kind, of one people and of one period, would require the constant and minute attention of many observing minds in local and general remarks on the state of the lower classes of society, and the causes that influenced it; and to draw accurate inferences upon this subject, a succession of such historians for some centuries would be necessary.¹

Thus, almost two hundred years ago, Malthus outlined an agenda for the diligent historical demographers and social historians of our time, whose labors are bearing rich fruit. Fortunately the invention of the computer has significantly shortened the time he predicted would be required for such investigations.

The miseries thrust upon humanity by the early Industrial Revolution, coupled with the rise of a large and militant working

¹ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on Population* (London: J. M. Dent, 1952 [first published 1798]), vol. 1, 16.

class, prompted others to look for the historic roots of social conflict. Karl Marx is, beyond question, the most important of these commentators, and many historical studies have been immensely enriched by his powerful and trenchant analyses. When he and Friedrich Engels issued *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, that text was intended as a clarion call to arms, not as a work of scholarship. But the manifesto's assertions that the economic organization of society is the key to the past and that human history is driven by class struggle represent perhaps the most sweeping revisionist claims ever offered.

Marx's insistence that each historical epoch can be properly understood only by reference to its economic and material bases has profoundly altered the discipline of history. Virtually all subsequent historians, most of whom would object to being described as Marxists, are deeply in Marx's debt. This is not a question of embracing Marxism as an ideology or of accepting its critique of capitalism and its vision of the future – elements that can be readily detached from the Marxist perspective on the past. The point is that Marx, like Malthus, forced people to question whether humanity is really well served by confining its historical attention to the doings of kings, statesmen, and generals – a questioning that, admittedly, had been initiated earlier, by writers like Voltaire. It is by no means the case that political history, military history, or biography has withered on the vine as a result of these new perspectives. Indeed some of the best work being done in those more traditional forms of history is the better for taking economic and social forces into account. Overall, the juxtaposition of the old forms with the new perspectives has created a complex, multifaceted debate – another manifestation of the vitality of history as a process.

Toward a “People's History”

I do not mean to suggest that without Malthus or Marx historians would have continued in their accustomed mold. Society was being transformed in too many ways for this to have been pos-

sible; the emergence of a variety of new approaches to historical inquiry was inevitable. One example is provided by a maverick English clergyman named John Richard Green, who wrote a very influential book published in 1874 and entitled *A Short History of the English People*. In the preface to his work, Green declared:

I have preferred to pass lightly and briefly over the details of foreign wars and diplomacies, the personal adventures of kings and nobles, the pomp of courts, or the intrigues of favourites, and to dwell at length on the incidents of that constitutional, intellectual, and social advance in which we read the history of the nation itself.²

The striking inclusion in the title of Green's book was the word "people": the author clearly believed that he was shifting the spotlight away from historic elites to the mass of the population.

While many consider Green's *Short History of the English People* less innovative than he claimed, the book was enormously successful, because the late nineteenth-century public thought it was breaking new ground in a way they considered necessary and important. It was reprinted 16 times before the second edition appeared, posthumously, in 1887. Numerous pirated editions were published in the United States, and before the end of the century Italian, French, German, Russian, and Chinese translations had appeared. Such an astonishing publishing success was due to something more than Green's literary gifts. Much of the world was then in the grip of vigorous populist and nationalist impulses, and the idea of a history of a "people" proved irresistibly attractive. It was a history, or rather a kind of history, whose time had come.

Needless to say, Green's *Short History* did not put an end to revisionism – no work ever has, or will. It might even be said to have intensified the ferment and accelerated the revisionist process. Making the "people" the centerpiece of historical inquiry

² John Richard Green, *A Short History of the English People* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899 [first published 1874]), xvii.

begged a number of essential questions. Just who was, or were, the “people”? Was it the entire population or some segment of it – workers, or the middle class perhaps? Was the focus to be on city dwellers or on peasants? Should ethnic or religious minorities be taken into account? What about women – never a minority but hitherto ignored by historians – was their story to be considered, too? Furthermore, Green’s focus on the English people implied that national entities were appropriate units of historical investigation; yet there were many others, ranging from institutions to small communities – and the latter could be confined to regions or expanded to the entire world.

Minorities and Women Enter History

Revisionist efforts to recover and develop the history of minorities have, by necessity, been undertaken in political movements for the expansion of civil rights and the attainment of economic and social equality. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the great African American historian W. E. B. DuBois stood as a major figure in the struggle for racial equality. His own writings, along with his participation in the founding of the *Journal of Negro History*, enhanced the visibility of African Americans and helped rescue their history from the patronizing or frankly racist attitudes of most white historians of the period. An expansion of interest in black history during the last several decades is obviously linked to the intensification of the struggle for civic, social, and economic equality. In revealing the historic patterns of race relations, this new body of scholarship has served to enhance the pride and clarify the goals of African Americans. Moreover, it has educated other Americans about the nature and consequences of racism, thereby fostering progress toward a society of greater justice and opportunity. Much the same can be said of the burgeoning scholarship on the history of Hispanics, American Indians, and other ethnic minorities.

Women’s history has been particularly active during the last few decades, and, as with the history of ethnic minorities, its

creation is correlated to vigorous political and social movements. Since historical invisibility is a virtually universal corollary to powerlessness, the campaign to establish gender equality necessarily required a historical component. Just as the "people" in the title of Green's *Short History* served as a rallying cry for populist and national groups many years ago, June Sochen's title *Herstory* (1974) did the same for the women's movement. Although many important works in women's history had appeared before, *Herstory*, the title of this volume, evoked in a single word the need for a story very different from those that had been told for so long by male historians.³

It should not be assumed, however, that histories of minorities or of women are designed or undertaken merely to serve as appendages to political causes. The writing of these histories requires satisfying the same demanding criteria regarding the evaluation of sources, the marshaling of evidence, and the deployment of literary skill upon which all histories rely. This takes a blend of diligence, skepticism, imagination, judiciousness, and humor that pays big dividends to historians in any field. Nor should these newer bodies of scholarship be seen as representing some sort of ethnic or gender-related orthodoxy. None is any more monolithic than any other field of history. Indeed, some of the most vigorous and interesting debates within the profession occur in these newer, albeit politically charged, areas.

One important point of disagreement within minority history involves the same type of concern as the one manifested in the nineteenth century over whether to focus on an elite group or on the entire population. Many of the earlier studies tended to concentrate on the achievements of extraordinary persons. Critics have charged that, whatever the merits of these works in producing positive role models, they often serve to obscure the historical realities around the lives of the masses of the disempowered. As a result, there has been a shift in women's and minority history toward incorporating some of the methods and approaches of

³ June Sochen, *Herstory: A Woman's View of American History* (New York: Alfred Publishing, 1974).

social history. This particular application of “history from below” exemplifies not only revisionism but also the process of cross-fertilization among various fields of history. Furthermore, while women’s history continues to exist as an important field, there has been a broadening from its base into “gender studies” – a field devoted to investigating the ways in which gender identities, both overt and latent, have shaped all aspects of the human experience.

So far, the examples of historical scholarship we have examined, while exhibiting the concept of history as process, can be fitted into the “history as story” format. That is, in most cases the historian renders a narrative structure in which a sequence of connected events occurring within a particular span of time is analyzed so as to create pattern and meaning. Even when large social aggregates like classes or ethnic groups rather than individuals are the centerpiece of the story, usually they can still be made to function as (individualized) characters in a complex story. Marx’s scheme of history, with its rising bourgeoisie deployed (at one stage) against a crumbling feudal nobility, is a good example. The unfolding of the Marxist story of class conflict is marked by such significant events or movements as the rapid growth of towns, the Protestant Reformation, the invention of the steam engine, the French Revolution, and the “scramble for Africa” by colony-hungry European powers in the late nineteenth century. But the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of varieties of history that largely abandon the investigation of change over time. We will briefly examine two of them: the Annales School and cliometrics.

The Annales School and Cliometrics

A historical journal established in France in 1929 provided the forum for a new kind of historical scholarship: one that aimed at nothing less than recapturing the totality of human experience. By employing the methods and techniques of social sciences, the scholars connected with this new enterprise sought to delin-

enate all aspects of past societies, placing an emphasis on those enduring patterns of culture that changed slowly, if at all. The mouthpiece of this new school of historians was a journal called *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*; hence practitioners of this kind of history came to be called *annalistes*. Central to the *annalistes'* approach was a disparagement of event-oriented history. Those innumerable events that historians had charged with significance and arranged in various configurations to produce narrative accounts were regarded by the *annalistes* as mere surface ripples on the ocean of society. In the new school, the traditional concern with events was replaced by a search for society's *mentalités*, the ways of life and the values that persisted despite major political and social upheavals.

One of the foremost *annalistes* was Fernand Braudel, whose magisterial study *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* appeared in 1949. Braudel's revisionism involved not only an emphasis on persistent patterns of life but also the use of the Mediterranean basin as the setting for his analysis – as opposed to the use of some political entity like Spain or France. A favorite phrase of Braudel and other *annalistes* was *la longue durée*, a vast sweep of time during which little change occurred. Regarding the difficulty of gaining acceptance for this new and radically different perspective in the historical profession, Braudel commented:

For the historian, accepting the *longue durée* entails a readiness to change his style, his attitudes, a whole reversal in his thinking, a whole new way of conceiving social affairs. It means becoming used to a slower tempo, which sometimes almost borders on the motionless.⁴

Although Braudel himself by no means neglected “events” altogether, it is clear that the *annaliste* approach in its purest form tends virtually to preclude any sense of history as story.

⁴ Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 33.

A close partnership between historians and other social scientists is an important tenet of the Annales School. The attempt to delineate cultural patterns with little attention to change over time is an approach similar to that employed by many anthropologists and sociologists. An even newer field of history, called cliometrics – after Clio (pronounced *CLY-oh*), the Greek muse of history – evinces a similar determination to utilize social science methodologies. Cliometricians are scholars who employ quantification to reveal historical patterns and change over time. Obviously something a good deal more is requisite than an ability or willingness to count, which historians have been doing since Herodotus (the ancient Greek historian). Cliometricians use computers, sophisticated programs, and social science models in their analyses. They also tend to disparage source material that cannot be quantified, so they devalue many of the records that other historians rely on; in cliometrics these are considered “soft” or “impressionistic” evidence, to be used only reluctantly and in strict subordination to the numeric data. Clearly, only those areas of historical study for which there is an ample supply of records yielding quantifiable data are amenable to such an approach. For this reason economic history has been a particularly active area of cliometric investigation – and a particularly controversial one.

Among the most controversial of the cliometric studies is Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s ringingly revisionist book *Time on the Cross* (1974), a study of slavery in the United States. Deploying a formidable array of charts, graphs, and statistics, the authors set out to disprove a number of time-honored beliefs about slavery, such as its alleged inefficiency by comparison to a free economy. The picture of American slavery in *Time on the Cross* is that of a thriving, expanding institution in both its agricultural and its industrial components. Besides promoting their own revisionist view of slavery, Fogel and Engerman made sweeping claims about the ability of cliometrics to transform economic history across a broad front:

The cliometricians have downgraded the role of technological change in American economic advance; they have controverted

the claim that railroads were necessary to the settlement and exploitation of the West; they have contended that the boom and bust of the 1830s and early 1840s were the consequences of developments in Mexico and Britain rather than the policies of Andrew Jackson; and they have rejected the contention that the Civil War greatly accelerated the industrialization of the nation.⁵

Despite this assertion, none of these new interpretations has gone unchallenged. Indeed Fogel and Engerman's work helped trigger a major counterattack, not only against some of the cliometricians' interpretations, but against much of their methodology as well. Perhaps the most vigorous assault came from Jacques Barzun, whose *Clio and the Doctors* appeared in the same year as Fogel and Engerman's study. Barzun made an eloquent plea for keeping history within the humanist tradition and for resisting the temptation to use the latest piece of technology or scientific model. And, as the title of his book indicates, Barzun was writing not only about the cliometricians but about another new group as well: the psychohistorians.⁶

Psychology and History

Psychohistory represents an attempt to apply to historical study the methods and insights developed by Sigmund Freud and other psychological theorists during the past hundred years or so. In dealing with the question of motives, historians often have to look beneath the surface, in an effort to discern the real – as opposed to the alleged – reason for an action or policy. Generally they recognize that to move beyond the manifest content of the sources tends to render such judgments tentative and problematic. Psychohistorians, however, are less disposed to be tentative

⁵ Robert Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, MA and Toronto, Canada: Little, Brown, 1974), vol. 1, 7.

⁶ Jacques Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors: Psycho-History, Quanto-History, and History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

when it comes to making assumptions. They undertake to expose what is claimed to be the real but hitherto hidden face of the past. One of the leading practitioners of psychobiography, the late Fawn Brodie, described in her revisionist study of Thomas Jefferson the nature of the psychohistorical approach as well as the barriers to its acceptance:

The idea that a man's inner life affects every aspect of his intellectual life and also his decision-making should need no defense today. To illuminate this relationship, however, requires certain biographical techniques that make some historians uncomfortable. One must look for feeling as well as fact, for nuance and metaphor as well as idea and action.⁷

One important distinction between psychohistory and some of the other, newer approaches to history that draw upon social science methodology is that the former is altogether compatible with history as story. Indeed it has assisted in the revival of biography, a traditional genre generally disparaged by the *annalistes* and others concerned with broad, enduring patterns of social life and culture. In some respects, psychobiography and the Annales School are opposite poles; it is hard to imagine points of focus more different than the life of an individual on the one hand and the *mentalité* of an entire civilization across a vast sweep of time on the other. Of course, psychohistorians are not necessarily biographers. The methods and insights of social psychology can uncover many other dimensions to the study of social history: the phenomenon of crowd psychology during times of political or social turbulence, for example. They can prove useful to the *annalistes*, provided that the mass psychological patterns being examined are of an enduring nature.

Microhistory and Macrohistory

In recent decades some historical scholars have produced very tightly focused studies of a single community, while others have

⁷ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York: Norton, 1974), 16.

written histories from a global perspective. A leading example of the former kind is the French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's study of the medieval French village of Montaillou over a 30-year period.⁸ The chance survival of Inquisition records for this village allowed the author to plumb the depths of the local peasants' views on such matters as childhood, marriage, magic, religion, and the afterlife – a kind of *annaliste* approach with an extremely local focus. As for global history, although there were important early precursors such as the great North African scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), the pioneering figure in the twentieth century was the British scholar Arnold J. Toynbee. His 12-volume *A Study of History*,⁹ with its vast sweeps of time and comparisons between major civilizations, inspired others to broaden their approach far beyond the confines of the nation-state, or even of a particular culture. An especially avid disciple of Toynbee was the American historian William H. McNeill, whose numerous studies of the same type¹⁰ have had an enormous impact on historical writing. With rapidly increasing globalization, this kind of historical scholarship is certain to expand further.

Postmodernism

The last few decades have seen the rise of a cluster of methodologies that go under the name “postmodernism.” Originating in European, and especially French, literary theory, this approach represents what some have called the “linguistic turn” in historical studies. Some of the key formulators of the body of theory on which postmodernism is based are Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan.

⁸ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: George Braziller, 1978). The book was first published in French in 1975.

⁹ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1948–61).

¹⁰ See, for example, William H. McNeill, *The Global Condition: Conquerors, Catastrophes, and Community* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

A method known as “deconstructionism” lies at the heart of the postmodernist analysis of many forms of art and literature, as well as of historical literature. Essentially, a historical deconstructionist analysis explores the operation of key “texts” and “discourses” around which societies are organized. These texts and discourses, which are largely constructed to bolster the power of social elites and dominant ideologies, can range from formal political or constitutional documents through works of literature to all forms of social commentary and popular entertainment. Such “discourses,” unrecognized as such by the vast majority of the society being studied, can include nonlinguistic sources as well – for instance architecture, photography, and all kinds of images. Deconstructionists endeavor to strip away the positive or idealistic façades of dominant discourses in order to expose them for what they believe them to be: tools for legitimating political, social, economic, and cultural oppression. This approach is called postmodernist in part because it challenges the essentially modern belief (dominant since the Enlightenment) that human institutions, guided by reason and science, have tended to become progressively more tolerant and humane.

In the United States postmodernism was brought forcefully to the attention of most historians in the late 1970s, through the translation into English of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*,¹¹ a book first published in France in 1975. This impressive, though still controversial, postmodernist analysis is concerned with the evolution of the idea of the modern prison in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whereas previous historians had tended to see marked progress in the treatment of criminals (the end of barbaric forms of execution, new standards of decency in prisons, recourse to the concept of rehabilitation), Foucault depicted the new rehabilitatory regimen instituted in prisons as being far more intrusive than the old system, and also as being destructive of the individual and totalitarian in its implications. Indeed Foucault tended to see the prison as almost a microcosm

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979).

of modern society, whose increasingly powerful and sophisticated devices for marginalizing and suppressing deviant behavior are part of a relentless drive to produce a single acceptable human type: rational, docile, and materialistic.

There are few elements in any society that cannot be “deconstructed” to reveal the manner in which they bolster the power of elites, maintain hierarchical distinctions, and marginalize those whom the majority see as different. Postmodernism, which is prominent today in the field of cultural history, has had a particularly marked effect on women’s history, gender studies, and the history of imperialism; yet it remains controversial. Critics claim that its emphasis on oppression and marginalization is a distortion of the past, and that it too readily lends itself to present-day polemical purposes and political causes, to the detriment of scholarly rigor. Another concern is that postmodernism’s emphasis on the slipperiness and infinite malleability of language, together with its denial of the possibility of objectivity in our understanding of human affairs, amounts to a kind of philosophical nihilism.¹² Some of the more ideologically driven works in this genre do indeed bear out these concerns. However, a postmodernist approach, when used sensitively, selectively, and with sufficient detachment from ideological commitments and identity politics, can be a helpful tool in studying history.

A Multitude of Avenues to the Past

The foregoing examples of changes in the way historians have approached the past during the last couple of centuries were introduced in an attempt to illustrate the concept of history as a dynamic process. While the above is only a cursory survey at best, clearly “history as story” is not a dead form. In spite of the appearance of new kinds of analysis, the narrative mode of writing history is still dominant. What is crucial to grasp is that

¹² S. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1995), especially 198–237.

there is an enormous variety of narrative approaches, and new ones will continue to appear. There is, quite simply, no such thing as a “definitive” treatment of any topic. Although this qualification is sometimes applied to particularly impressive works of scholarship, its application would, if taken literally, foreclose all subsequent inquiry on a given topic. Then history would indeed evolve into that static body of knowledge so often imagined by those with too little exposure to it as a discipline.

Historiography, which in its broadest sense means the history of historical writing, is a demanding and vitally important branch of the discipline of history. Students who have not taken a course in historiography before embarking upon advanced undergraduate research projects would be well advised to read some of the general works on the subject.¹³ It is important to have some notion of historiography in this broad sense before turning to our discussion of bibliographic research on a given topic. Once you are engaged in research for a project, the term *historiography* will be encountered in its narrower meaning: the various ways scholars have approached and interpreted the subject(s) you have chosen to investigate. Every topic has its own historiography, and an understanding of its dimensions is essential not only for constructing a historiographic essay, but also for writing a research paper using primary sources. These are the two types of historical writing that will be explored in later chapters. Before undertaking the writing of either a historiographic essay or a research paper, however, it is necessary to know the different types of historical sources and how to find them – matters we will explore in the next two chapters.

¹³ See, for example, Ernst Breisach, *Historiography, Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).