CHAPTER 1

What Is History Like?

1.1 The Size and Shape of History

The characteristic that most obviously makes History as a discipline different from other fields of knowledge is the enormous range of its subject matter. The field of inquiry of History is the entire human experience in every aspect, in every part of the world, since the invention of writing about 5,000 years ago (and historians draw on the neighboring field of archaeology to push that starting date back several thousand years). The one word that best describes the discipline in this respect is "capacious" – meaning roomy, ample, large, capable of containing a great deal. This is a quality that historians have treasured throughout the modern history of History. As the great German historian Leopold von Ranke remarked some 160 years ago, the creed of History is that "everything human is worth knowing." The American Historical Association put it even more plainly in 1990: "History is an encompassing discipline."[1]

This breadth is one of the greatest strengths of History instruction in higher education. At the university or college level learning is motivated by interest. In a well-designed History course, and in a well-designed curriculum for the History major, there is room for topics that will engage the particular interests, concerns, and experiences of almost any student. Beyond that, though, History as an extremely broad discipline gives students the opportunity to make complex connections across multiple fields of inquiry. In doing that, they can widen their interests and concerns, and come to understand better how their own particular interests and concerns are connected to a wider field of knowledge and understanding – and also to a wider world. By the very nature of the discipline, the study of History encourages students to expand their

[1] Leopold von Ranke, "A Fragment from the 1860s," in *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (Cleveland, OH: Meridian, 1956), pp. 60–62, here p. 61; AHA Staff, "Liberal Learning and the History Major," *Perspectives* 28:5, p. 14.

horizons. That is intrinsically exciting. In my experience, it is in fact part of what makes higher education an extraordinary experience and a turning point in many students' lives.

In seminars with graduate and undergraduate students, I often use a simple exercise to encourage students to think about what the scope of the discipline entails for the practitioner: I ask students to identify the various subfields or areas of specialization in History, the kinds of sources that historians in each area of specialization use, the methods that are useful in the analysis of those sources, and the interpretive or theoretical traditions (historians sometimes call them "frameworks" or "lenses") that can be useful in making sense of what they find. Each year the list my seminar students construct includes at least the following:

- Military history
- Political history
- Intellectual history
- Religious history
- Cultural history
- Social history
- Microhistory
- Urban history
- Psychohistory
- The history of sexuality and gender
- Biography
- Economic history
- Population history
- Environmental history
- The history of science and technology
- The history of medicine
- Women's history
- Diplomatic history
- Imperial, colonial, and postcolonial history
- The history of childhood
- The history of the family
- Intersectional history
- Counterfactual history
- Historiography, the philosophy of history, and methodology

Given how enormous the field of history is, this is a partial list. In particular it does not include related fields that are historical in content but have developed their own very distinct specialist methods, questions,

techniques, and traditions and their own journals, conferences, academic departments, and professional societies. They include archaeology, art history, historical sociology, dance history, music history, historical anthropology, historical geography, and more technical fields like historical preservation, numismatics (the history of coinage), paleography (the study of historical handwriting styles), epigraphy (the study of historical inscriptions), ethnomusicology, and heraldry. Finally, it does not include the historical work that scholars in other disciplines (and academic departments) produce, which is very often quite influential in the discipline of History – for example, the work of political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and scholars in science and technology studies, cultural studies, religious studies, linguistics, literature and comparative literature departments, and the many disciplines of ethnic studies (Asian studies, African American studies, Chicano and Latinx studies, American studies).

What is more, these fields of specialization very often overlap considerably in practice. No historical problem can be fruitfully considered *only* from the perspective and using the methods of just one of these subfields. In fact, it is in the nature of History as a discipline that studies everything that no specialist is ever fully specialized; every historian has to look beyond the boundaries of her own particular interest to consider broader contexts. The outcome of political struggles for power in a particular city might reflect processes of social change driven by economic development. Religious conflicts might influence them. The capacities and functions of particular institutions (churches, military establishments, professional groups like guilds or lawyers' associations) might shape them. Individual people can help drive them. The tides of war can radically change the context in which they play out. They can be impacted by epidemic disease, by environmental change, or by natural disasters. To take one example, my own book on the history of child welfare policy in modern Germany required me to draw together research on the history of religion, social history, the history of medicine, political history, military history, the history of popular culture, urban history, and the history of academic disciplines like social statistics (a branch of sociology).

It is a consequence of the vast reach of History as a discipline that in colleges and universities History is sometimes housed organizationally in a grouping ("college," "division," or "school") of social science disciplines, while in other institutions it is grouped with the humanities. This is not a result of confusion about the nature of the discipline. History as a field of

knowledge is distinctive in that it draws on the methods, traditions, and resources of both kinds of disciplines. Historians draw on the techniques of literary and textual analysis developed by scholars of literature and language, on the major theories developed by sociologists, on anthropologists' understandings of the dynamics of kinship networks or of ritual processes or of categories like "sacred" and "profane," on the findings and insights of historical geographers and cartographers, on the terminology and categories developed by political scientists, on the understandings of symbolic codes developed by art historians, on theoretical frameworks developed by feminist theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory, and so on. The techniques of postmodern discourse analysis (which help us, for example, to understand how particular professions or institutions interact with their target populations, or how understandings of social categories evolve through negotiation, debate, struggle, or conflict) have been enormously influential in History. Quantitative and statistical analysis can turn out to be an essential skill for almost any historian, studying almost any subject. One could go on for pages; the point is that breadth, interdisciplinarity, and eclecticism are fundamental qualities of the discipline.

Of course historians draw on the natural sciences as well. Environmental historians draw extensively on the findings of the hard sciences and of the social sciences (e.g., geology, geography, biology, or hydrology). Economic and population historians use medical knowledge to determine the health and nutritional statuses of historical populations by examining skeletal remains. Other historians draw on the findings of archaeologists, who use radiocarbon dating techniques to discover how old structures or other physical remains are. Historians of agriculture make use of the findings of biologists who use pollen counts in lake-bed deposits to reconstruct how local plant communities looked centuries or millennia earlier. Historians in multiple subfields (such as urban history, agricultural history, environmental history, even military history) now make use of geographic information systems (GIS) to analyze spatial relationships within human societies. There is even a field of "Big History" (as advocated, for example, by the International Big History Association) that draws on the findings of astrophysicists, evolutionary biologists, and planetologists to place human history in the context of the history of the universe, the planet, or the biosphere.[2]

[2] See, for example, Leonid Grinin, David Baker, Esther Quadackers, and Andrey Korotayev, eds., *Teaching and Researching Big History: Exploring a New Scholarly Field* (Volgagrad: Uchitel, 2014); Fred Spier, "Big History: The Emergence of an Interdisciplinary Science?" *World History Connected* 6 (2009), https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/6.3/spier.html.

Historians have long treasured this expansive character of their discipline. As John Tosh reflected in the sixth edition of his widely influential study, *The Pursuit of History*, in 2015, "History is a hybrid discipline which owes its endless fascination and its complexity to the fact that it straddles" the division between the humanities and the social sciences, and "cannot be defined as either . . . without denying a large part of its nature." The philosopher Wilhelm Windelband used more enthusiastic language 121 years earlier: "History produces images of . . . human life in the total wealth and profusion of their uniquely peculiar forms and with their full and vital individuality."[3] To do that, it draws on almost every field of human knowledge.

The range of different kinds of sources on which practitioners of History draw to study these many aspects of the past is enormous. Obvious examples include the texts of laws (whether they were chiseled into stone in ancient Mesopotamia 4,000 years ago or published on the internet 10 years ago); business receipts (on clay tablets from the ancient city-state of Ur 3,000 years ago, or in electronic files generated in the 1990s); newspaper and magazine stories and advertisements in such publications, posters, pamphlets, and handbills; video clips of modern dance; the enormous volume of photographs generated by news organizations; the minutes of confidential meetings of charity organizations, women's groups, government committees, veterans' organizations; records of births, deaths, and marriages kept by local governments or by religious institutions; paintings, mosaics, inscriptions on headstones, sculptures, houses, and buildings; floor plans, blueprints, fire safety regulations and citations, local ordinances of every kind; novels, stories, myths, sagas, plays, chronicles, the lyrics of songs, poetry, parables and sayings, and language itself (the way grammar changed, the way people borrowed words from other languages, the frequency with which specific words were used, the ways that the meaning of words evolved); interviews with eyewitnesses, private letters, photographs, appointment calendars, or account books; memoirs, autobiographies, and diaries; tax records, court records in criminal or civil cases, census records, periodic surveys of landholdings and property (historically called catasters), deeds and conveyances in business transactions, wills and testaments, hospital records, school records, administrative documents of every imaginable kind (of fire services, police services, tax agencies, government ministries, provincial authorities, school authorities,

[3] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 6th edition (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 43; Wilhelm Windelband, "Rectorial Address, Strasbourg, 1894," *History and Theory* 19:2 (1980): 169–185, here p. 179.

medical authorities, and so on); government statistical publications; the stenographic records of parliamentary sessions, constitutional conventions, school board meetings, or trade union conferences; almanacs and yearbooks; city guides and directories; city planning documents; scientific, medical, and professional journals; or the inexhaustible range of publications of scientific, philanthropic, professional, academic, religious, economic, charitable, recreational, public health, patriotic, cultural, educational, welfare, or advocacy organizations.

Historians value the careful analysis of all of these sources, but they also value the analysis, in a single investigation, of a multiplicity of sources. As Richard English put it in 2021, the "complex particularity" of any historical situation can be best grasped through "engagement with a vast range of mutually interrogatory sources," through "the attempt to hear as many competing voices as possible and to evaluate their implications."[4]

Working with even a small slice of these sources is one of the greatest benefits of studying History at university, and History instructors should ensure that their students get that experience. Few historical studies rely on just one form of evidence, and neither should History courses. As Leon J. Goldstein wrote in 1962 in a reflection on the nature of historical evidence, ideally in historical study "[t]here emerges in the course of research a constellation of kinds of historical evidence."[5] It will be of great benefit to students if that is true of History syllabi as well.

Such research sharpens our ability to see the limitations of evidence, it develops our capacity to widen our inquiry, and it fosters intellectual flexibility. It also poses exciting puzzles, demanding that we figure out what the juxtaposition of different kinds of information can tell us. The challenge of solving puzzles is intellectually exciting, and – again – intellectual excitement motivates learning.

1.2 How History Thinks I: Holism and Historicism

The extraordinary scope of History derives in part from its long-term evolution. History emerged and defined itself in the course of the nineteenth century, but has been expanding in methods, subfields, forms of evidence, and its relations with other disciplines ever since. This chapter and the next will review some of the specific consequences of that history.

[4] Richard English, "History and the Study of Terrorism," in *The Cambridge History of Terrorism*, ed. Richard English (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 3–27, here p. 11.

[5] Leon J. Goldstein, "Evidence and Events in History," *Philosophy of Science* 29:2 (1962): 175–194, here p. 182.

Most historians are very familiar with it, but it is worth reviewing here briefly as a way of establishing some of its implications specifically for the *teaching* of History.

In the first place, then, many of the central postulates of History as practiced today derive from the nineteenth-century tradition of historicism. That term has a long and complex history and has meant different and sometimes diametrically opposed things in different contexts and times – so much so that one historian concluded by 2000 that it "has so many different or even contradictory meanings that it is all but useless."[6] In many cases it has been – as one recent study has remarked – "a term of abuse, a word of warning, and a derogatory concept" and a "convenient polemical device" used to denounce intellectual opponents. It has sometimes been associated with corrosive relativism, at other times with the intellectual and social arrogance of English liberal imperialism or, earlier, with Prussian authoritarianism and militarism or even the cultural and intellectual matrix in which Nazism thrived.[7] I will use it here instead in the sense that has come to be common among intellectual historians, to refer to a specific epistemological position that still commands widespread loyalty among historians.

As I have written in the Introduction, the central assumption of historicism in this specific sense is that every human phenomenon – social, cultural, intellectual, economic, psychological – is conditioned (that is, influenced though not absolutely determined) by its particular, specific, and unique historical context. As the historian of historicism Frederick Beiser explained it, to be an historicist is to

> recognize that everything in the human world – culture, values, practices, rationality – is made by history, so that nothing has an eternal form, permanent essence or constant identity which transcends historical change . . . The particular causes that have brought human things into being make them what they are . . . they depend on a specific context, a definite time and place . . . particular circumstances at a particular time.[8]

[6] Willie Thompson, *What Happened to History?* (London: Pluto, 2000), p. 5.

[7] Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen, "Introduction: Historicism as a Travelling Concept," in *Historicism: A Travelling Concept*, ed. Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 1–12, here pp. 1, 3. On English historicism, see Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), p. 3. Karl Popper famously used the term to mean exactly the opposite of what it meant in its original (German) intellectual context; see Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Ark, 1957).

[8] Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 2–3. For good historical overviews, see Georg G. Iggers, "Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56 (1995): 129–152; Otto Gerhard Oexle, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus: Studien zu Problemgeschichten der Moderne* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).

This is what makes History capacious not just collectively as a discipline, but also in individual practice as a mode of inquiry. History assumes that we understand any object of study to the extent that we know its unique historical context in depth and detail, from multiple angles (e.g. social, economic, political, intellectual, environmental, epidemiological, etc.) and in multiple chronological registers (e.g., short-term, medium-term, long-term, or proximate). The more we know about that historical context, the more we understand our object of study.

The dynamic of historical inquiry, in this persisting historicist tradition, is therefore expansive. Most academic disciplines seek to define and delimit their subject matter with some precision; to develop a "tool kit" of recognized, defined, and approved methods, techniques, and practices appropriate to that delimited subject; and to establish a clear roster of accepted and legitimate forms of evidence and ways of applying methods and techniques to them. They also in most cases aim to refine their findings, to make them more precise and certain, often specifically to define *causation* as narrowly and definitively as possible. By doing that, they mean to codify the critical postulates that hold true in all related situations – for example, physical constants, the laws of thermodynamics, or the principles of atomic bonding and molecular structure.

This is the logic of the sciences – to focus inquiry narrowly in order to achieve unique and powerful insights. For the most part the sciences seek to limit the number of variables they must consider in any given inquiry in order to achieve analytical clarity and precision. Natural scientists in particular, but many social scientists as well, often aim for what is called parsimony, by which is meant reducing the number of variables involved in an explanation in order to come up with something reliable and actionable – a policy recommendation, for example, or a physical law governing the behavior of electronic circuits or chemicals or spacecraft. The sciences seek to extract predictable simplicity from confusing complexity. Often they aim as well for insights that will ultimately be useful for some particular practical purpose, such as curing disease, building more powerful machines, pursuing more effective economic or social policies, or dealing with the threats posed by radical sects or terrorist organizations. The centrality of the idea of statistical correlation in fields such as political science, psychology, economics, and much sociology is a reflection of that tendency. Its aim is to tell us which were the important or significant determining (causal) factors, and which we can leave aside as unimportant or incidental.

The discipline of History has usually done the opposite. For historicists the idea that a statistical measure can help us eliminate some factors as not particularly worthy of consideration is intuitively mistaken. Chapter 4 will examine more closely the characteristic ways in which historians tend to approach causation. For now, suffice it to say that historians are generally not much interested in establishing "a" cause or "the most important" cause because they assume that societies are extraordinarily complex, that many things are always going on in them in dynamically connected and related ways, and with multiple and complex consequences.

Historians therefore usually seek to expand their subject matter to encompass more of the complexity of historical contexts. They are interested in how *multiple* causes contributed in dynamic interaction with each other, not to one singular outcome, but to a range of outcomes, to the development of an entire society or of an important process (social, cultural, economic, demographic, political, etc.) within a society. As Keith Barton and Linda Levstik wrote in 2004, History relies on analysis of "the connections, relationships, and structures that tie together individual events" – again, of complex and dynamic contexts, not of disaggregated and isolated causal factors or variables.

A study published by the National Academy of Sciences put it this way already in 1970: whereas the social scientist aims to "simplify his problems by the exclusion of all but a few paramount variables," in "History . . . the matter to be studied is inherently complex (some would say, infinitely complex) and resistant to simplification." (An historian would likely observe that the matter social scientists study is also infinitely complex; social science method merely oversimplifies it.)[9]

Historians are therefore not much persuaded of the likelihood that one can ever find out what one thing caused a singular result and will cause it again under similar circumstances. History aims to analyze and to understand the integrated totality of the human experience – not a narrow slice of it cut out and isolated for study. And there are no similar circumstances. Given how complex societies are, and given the universality of change over time, every historical situation is irreducibly different, unique. Sam Wineburg has put the point with – ironically – beautiful parsimony: in History, "Determining cause is less about isolating a mechanism than knitting together a textured understanding . . . Parsimony in historical explanation often flirts with superficial reductionism."[10]

[9] Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), p. 69; Landes and Tilly, *History as Social Science*, p. 7.
[10] Wineburg, *Why Learn History*, p. 109.

The analytical approach the historicist tradition favors, then, seeks insight not by picking the human world apart into distinct and discrete fields and examining each in isolation, but rather by putting it together, by considering many aspects of a particular historical situation in dynamic relationship. History is holistic. It is true that there are many subfields and fields of specialization in History, each with its own traditions, interests, and conventions. Those subfields have multiplied and ramified for some two centuries now as the discipline has expanded far beyond its historicist roots, often in dialog with scholars and ideas from other disciplines. Nevertheless, historians in every subfield still tend to draw extensively on the methods, findings, questions, and research of those in multiple other subfields. As Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier put it in a 2001 handbook of historical method, historians for the most part still aim to "see social systems as integrated wholes" in which "economic, political, and ideological" – and we can add religious, cultural, environmental, intellectual, and so on – factors all interact and interconnect.[11]

Alan Booth put it this way: in History, "the more numerous, varied and structured the connections" a study makes between different facets of social life, "between different types of evidence; between rival interpretations of a topic; between the event or situation in question and the wider context ... the deeper the understanding." History is "fundamentally integrative."[12]

This holistic orientation is a thread that runs through discussions of History from its inception to the present. Leopold von Ranke defined the basic orientation already in the 1830s: "Since these [varied and multiple] aspects of society are never present separately, but always together – indeed, determining each other ... equal interest must be devoted to all of these factors."[13] One hundred and seventy years later American historian John Lewis Gaddis offered a particularly careful characterization of History as "ecological" in perspective, in that it aims to understand events in the totality of their social context. That word is particularly apt because ecology is not just the study of the entire environment, but rather the study of the ways in which the elements of the environment interact. At its most exciting, this is how History approaches studying "everything."

[11] Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 91.

[12] Booth, *Teaching History at University*, p. 20.

[13] Leopold von Ranke, "On the Character of Historical Science (A Manuscript of the 1830s)," in Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg C. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke, trans. Wilma A. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. 40.

Historians seek to understand how multiple different factors interacted dynamically in any given historical situation, "because 'so much depends on so much else.'" To the social scientific goal of "parsimonious" explanation Gaddis contrasted the historian's "web-like sense of reality" that sees "everything as connected in some way to everything else." The historian would "think it irresponsible to seek to isolate – or 'tease out' – single causes for complex events. We see history instead as proceeding from multiple causes and their intersections. Interconnections matter more to us than does the enshrinement of particular variables." In most social science fields a "successful project is one that explains a lot with a little" – by identifying the really important and determining factors, the ones that really matter. In contrast, historians generally explain a lot with a lot, because the complexity and reach of History leads them to assume that "multiple causation is the only feasible basis" for real understanding.[14] John Tosh, in a 2008 essay, "Why History Matters," made the same argument using the term "holistic" rather than "ecological." Historians, he wrote, are "committed to a holistic approach, in which the object of inquiry is placed in its full social and cultural context . . . This respect for context distinguishes them from economists and sociologists, who often draw on historical material, but in a highly structured way, designed to match a specific set of research questions" rather than in an open-ended and expansive inquiry.[15] I am particularly drawn to the concise formulation offered by Stefan Tanaka, an historian of modern Japan, in a reflection published in 2013 about the nature and potentials of the discipline of History in the digital age. His goal, as he described it, is to enable a "more expansive and heterogeneous" understanding of the past, one that appreciates the full "diversity of human experiences."[16] I have sometimes tried to encapsulate the point in an image: If the discipline of History ever dies, what will be written on its gravestone is "It was more complicated than that."

Again, historians often use the concepts of *context* and *contextualization* to define this fundamental characteristic of the discipline, of how historians think and work. History investigates things in complex, holistic, dynamic, messy context – as far as realistically possible in *full* context, encompassing *many* aspects of society at a particular time in dynamic

[14] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 54–55, 57, 64–65, 105.
[15] Tosh, *Why History Matters*, p. 22.
[16] Stefan Tanaka, "Pasts in a Digital Age," in *Writing History in a Digital Age*, ed. Jack Doughtery and Kristen Navrotzki (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), pp. 37, 44.

relationship with each other *and* as they changed over time.[17] Sam Wineburg has brilliantly analyzed how historians assess context in practice. Historians place documents and statements (for example) in context by comparing different texts with each other. They assess the author's background, experience, assumptions, and motives or aims. They evaluate the conditions under which a text was produced. They analyze the institutional, intellectual, and political incentives, constraints, and possibilities the author faced. They assess both explicit and implicit concepts, patterns, and biases evident in the vocabulary used in the text, or the references it contains, or the metaphors it uses. They often explore the contemporary usage and conceptual associations or connotations of key terms in a text. They establish its relationship to other texts. They investigate the social connections and commitments of the author in order to establish their place in the collective biography of the full range of people with whom they engaged and who might have influenced them.[18] The aim is often specifically to understand the minds of people in that past moment – how they thought, how they saw the world, what they experienced, what meaning they derived from their experience, what their conscious motivations and understanding of their lives were, how they understood their position in the conditions and events around them, what they sought to achieve, what resources they had to achieve it, or to define it, how they thought they could use those resources, and how they understood their own actions.

Many historians use two particular metaphors to describe this characteristic of their work: that of *immersion* in the past, or that of *listening* to the people who lived it. Stefan Tanaka formulated this agenda in 2015: "The pleasure of research for many historians, myself included, is in the immersion in the sensibilities of another era" – something one does by "returning [texts] to the social context in which they originated and from which they drew form and meaning."[19] Miles Fairburn, in one of the most useful available discussions of how historians work, offered another particularly clear formulation sixteen years earlier: Historians "'immerse' themselves in the documents so as to learn the meanings behind the idioms [patterns of speech] of another era." As practitioners of History, "we learn to understand how the people we are studying understood their own actions,

[17] There is a fine discussion of this point in Michael J. Salevouris and Conal Furay, *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 28–30; see also William H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (New York: Harper, 1958).

[18] Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, pp. 63–88.

[19] Stefan Tanaka, "Reconceiving Pasts in a Digital Age," in *Historein* 15:2 (2015): 21–29, here p. 27; Tanaka, *History without Chronology* (n.p.; Lever, 2019), p. 157.

desires, beliefs, and rules."[20] One former chairman of the American Historical Association gave a concise summary in 2022: History "requires learning about other people, understanding them, and letting their voices and sensibilities be heard." One can say that a scholar is a fine historian if she has "learned from his [*sic*] sources and engaged them in respectful conversation . . . This is what historians do. We listen."[21] Greg Dening, writing in 2007, defined History as "dialogic," as an act of "listening" to people we recognize in their humanity as our equals.[22]

Again, the aim of this "immersion," or of "listening," is to develop a holistic, integrative understanding, to place people and events in the context of a complex web of social relationships, connections, influences, and histories. It is important that students understand that this is a foundational assumption of the discipline of History, and one that distinguishes it from other disciplines. I have found that unless we give students a sense that History is a coherent way of understanding the world, based on clear and explicit postulates, it can be difficult for them to understand clearly *why* they are being asked to master the investigative and analytical approaches and methods that historians employ. I think this makes intuitive sense. Students need to know what we are trying to teach them. Merely hoping that if we can just expose them to enough complicated case studies or narratives they will come to understand that everything in human life is conditioned by its history is not effective. Being confronted with such broad and diverse subject matter without the aid of "laws" or of fundamental and universally valid principles can seem overwhelming. This is particularly true because students are often accustomed from their studies in other disciplines to seek clearly delimited explanations or "results."

Making clear that we are offering them a specific mode of understanding the world, one that seeks to integrate many other modes of understanding, can in contrast be exciting for them. I sometimes suggest to my students that the aim of History is to "put the world back together" so that we can gain not just *knowledge about* some particular part of it, but *understanding of* how the parts work together.

[20] Miles Fairburn, *Social History: Problems, Strategies, and Methods* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), p. 217.
[21] James Grossman and Waldo E. Martin, "A Tribute to Leon Litwack," *Perspectives in History* 60 (2022): 7–9, here pp. 7, 8.
[22] Greg Dening, "Performing Cross-Culturally," in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 98–107, here p. 98.

An influential essay by Edgar Morin offers a formulation that I have found helpful for students: Holism "seeks explanation at the level of totality, in opposition to the reductionist paradigm that seeks explanation at the level of elementary components . . . [T]he whole is more than a global entity – it has a dynamic organization . . . Complexity is not merely the phenomenal froth of reality; it is in the principles themselves."[23] That last sentence is a difficult one; I think the heart of it is that we understand human affairs not when we understand how discrete parts of it, each governed by principles that we can discover by studying those discrete parts, interact, but rather when we understand that the interactions among those parts shape the parts themselves. In other words, we are not simply adding up discrete vectors, but understanding complexity as a dynamic system.

Some historians take this fundamental historicist position two radical steps further, adopting what we might call an "unconditional" historicist stance. That stance was probably more common fifty years ago than it is now; few historians today would adopt it, I think. But it is useful to think about the reasoning behind it, because it can be quite productive in History teaching.

The first of these steps is to argue that historians should suspend judgment altogether in favor of observing in as unbiased a manner as possible what people in the past thought, or said, or did. The goal is to set aside our own ideas and values temporarily and focus on the thoughts and actions of people in the past. As Miles Fairburn described it, the aim is to "achieve empathy with the minds – the conceptual world, the consciousness – of the people belonging to another culture" of the past.[24] If we enter into historical investigation with the aim of *judgment*, of imposing our own values on the past, we are easily distracted from the goal of *understanding* the past. If we come to our investigation with the habit of determining whether what people thought or did was right or wrong, we can be diverted from the task of discovering *why* they thought or did it.

This is a very old idea, but it is still very much alive. Again, Leopold von Ranke remarked already in 1824 that while some sought to assign to history the task of "judging the past," his own ambition was merely to "show what actually happened" and to understand it deeply and comprehensively.[25] Michael Salevouris and Conal Furay put the same point succinctly in their 2015 book on *The Methods and Skills of History*: "to interpret the past using the values and beliefs of the present will distort and misrepresent that past.

[23] Edgar Morin, "From the Concept of System to the Paradigm of Complexity," *Journal of Social and Evolutionary Systems* 15 (1992): 371–385, here pp. 372, 374, 381.
[24] Fairburn, *Social History*, p. 216. [25] Ranke, *Secret*, p. 21.

A distinguishing mark of the good historian is the ability to avoid judging past ages by the standards of the present, and to see those societies . . . as those societies saw themselves."[26] And Joseph C. Miller – a former president of the American Historical Association and scholar of the particularly repellent history of slavery – offered a vehement restatement in 2012: "retrospective judgement," he argued, "contradicts the essence of thinking *historically*," the aim of which is to understand the past and the people who lived it, not to affirm our own values.[27] In brief: History should foster, and thrive on, not judgment but curiosity.

This is an idea that is very much alive, as well, in History pedagogy. As Kaya Yilmaz wrote in 2007 of History teaching in the schools, instructors very frequently aim to develop historical "empathy," an ability to understand "the past in its own terms," to understand how people in the past thought, in order to understand their motives in acting in the ways that they did. This is sometimes also called historical "perspective-taking" – the exercise of trying to understand how people in the past saw their own world and their place in it.[28]

This more extreme version of the historicist stance has been subject to vehement critique. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries historicism thrived within universities and History departments that were dominated by upper-class and upper-middle-class white men. An influential British example is George Macaulay Trevelyan, Regius Professor of History at Oxford and scion of a prominent family, who spent his youth shuttling between Wallington Hall, a mansion in the north of England, and Welcombe House, a mansion in Stratford-upon-Avon in the south of England. Another was Geoffrey R. Elton, a vehement advocate of historicist detachment who held the same position at Oxford 40 years after Trevelyan did.[29] In recent decades the insistence of such figures that the historian should understand the past rather than judge it has come to seem to many critics to be a product of their very privileged position within a particular structure of social and cultural power – not of objectivity, but

[26] Salevouris and Furay, *The Methods*, p. 66.

[27] Joseph C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 9 (emphasis in the original).

[28] Kaya Yilmaz, "Historical Empathy and Its Implications for Classroom Practices in Schools," *History Teacher* 40 (2007): 331–338, here p. 332.

[29] David Cannadine, *G. M. Trevelyan: A Life in History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). See, for example, George Macaulay Trevelyan, *An Autobiography & Other Essays* (London: Longmans, Green & Company, 1949), pp. 76–77; Trevelyan, *Clio, A Muse and Other Essays* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1913), p. 151; G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1967).

of self-interest. They did not want patterns of power in past times to be judged because they were beneficiaries of the same patterns of power in their own times. They sought to depoliticize knowledge about the past – to deny its relevance to present social issues.

Priya Satia offered a summary of this critique in 2020: Early twentieth-century British champions of historicism were "abettors of those in power ... Britain's imperial career," for example, "depended on a particular historical sensibility that deferred ethical judgment to an unspecified future time" or rejected it entirely, blanking out critique of the origins, methods, and consequences of the exercise of imperial expansion and colonial domination. At the same time, their "conviction that history is necessarily a story of progress" implicitly validated that domination as a natural stage in the evolution of humanity. Dipesh Chakrabarty agreed, concluding that "Historicism enabled European domination of the world."[30] Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot put the point in more general terms in 1995: the "traditions of the guild" of professional historians "forbid academic historians to position themselves regarding the present," seeing any such stance as "ideological" rather than scholarly. From "that viewpoint, power is unproblematic" – both power as it has been exercised in the past, and the forms of present social, institutional, cultural, and political power (often derived from historical forms of power and privilege) that shape historians' current assumptions and interpretations.[31]

Even aside from this principled and historically informed critique, students simply have a very hard time suspending judgment in the way unconditional historicism would favor. More important, they generally do not really believe that they should. They do not see any purpose in suspending judgment of, for example, slavery, mass murder, or ruthless and brutal economic or sexual exploitation. In fact, they often experience doing so as a kind of intellectual complicity. Further, my sense is that ever greater emphasis has been laid in the schools over the past decades on

[30] Satia, *Time's Monster*, pp. 1–2, 3; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 7. For a detailed study of the role of History in the formation of British imperial identity, see Reba N. Sofer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History and the Making of an English Elite, 1870–1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[31] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, pp. 5, 151. In defense of historicism, it should be acknowledged that numerous historians have pointed out that in its original formulation in Germany it meant exactly the opposite of what its critics now claim. As one study of 2021 pointed out, historicism explicitly "rejected stadial accounts of history" – that is, the belief that history unfolds in stages – "and universal theories of social evolution," and countered the "rationalist-teleological notion of ... progress" that imperialists used to assert their own societies' superiority. Paul and Veldhuizen, "Introduction," p. 64.

developing young people's capacity for independent judgment – their ability to form and expound or defend their own opinions. This is surely appropriate; it has been a response to and a part of a broader, long-term democratization of public culture that has put emphasis on citizen's own capacity for judgment and independent thought rather than on respect for authoritative traditions and figures. It is also probably a response in part to the increasing diversity of most democratic societies, which has led to a declining emphasis on consensus and a rising appreciation for the capacity for critical judgment as an important skill for people who will inevitably encounter, in their interactions with fellow citizens, a wide range of views and perspectives.

Many students will likely be more convinced, then, by recent arguments within the historical profession in favor of "engaged history" – History that seeks to address present concerns, specifically issues of social justice. Claire Norton and Mark Donnelly wrote in 2019, for example, of a new "'ethical turn' in history" away from epistemological debates and toward historians' "ethico-political responsibilities" to "help campaigns for socio-political justice." Echoing Satia's (and other's) critiques, they advocate for paying attention to the fact that "the ways in which historians 'do history' have ideological and political consequences which too often go unrecognized" – for example, the tendency of the historicist approach to depoliticize our understanding of the past.[32] A year later Donald Bloxham argued that judgment is in any case unavoidable. On the one hand, our choice of language usually requires us to make implicit judgments – for example, we can write "appropriated" or "stolen," "settlement" or "invasion." On the other hand, "'Neutralizing' non-neutral phenomena by one's descriptions is not neutral either" – that is to say, again, that suspending judgment can be a form of moral complicity.[33]

Arguments like these cannot be dismissed as simply fashionable political correctness. There is a history reaching well back into the previous century of debate within the discipline of History between scholars committed to

[32] Claire Norton and Mark Donnelly, *Liberating Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 1, 2. See also, for example, *The Engaged Historian: Perspectives on the Intersection of Politics, Activism and the Historical Profession*, ed. Stefan Berger (New York: Berghahn, 2019); Marcia Sa Cavalcante Schuback, "Engaged History," in *The Ethos of History: Time and Responsibility*, ed. Stefan Helgesson and Jayne Svenungsson (New York: Berghahn, 2018), pp. 160–174; Jorma Kalela, *Making History: The Historian and Uses of the Past* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011); Christopher C. Martell and Kaylene M. Stevens, *Teaching History for Justice: Centering Activism in Students' Study of the Past* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2021); Linda Symcox, "Internationalizing the U. S. History Curriculum: From Nationalism to Cosmopolitanism," in *National History Standards: The Problem of the Canon and the Future of Teaching History*, ed. Linda Symcox and Arie Wilschut (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2009), pp. 33–54.

[33] Donald Bloxham, *History and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 9.

social justice and those committed to scholarly disinterest. An example would be the work in the 1970s of Jean Chesneaux, a French communist and environmentalist professor of History who became disillusioned with the academic discipline and argued that the "basic characteristics of the historian's rhetoric . . . are those of capitalism as a whole" and "serve and reinforce the Establishment, the basic values of the capitalist system and the entire prevailing ideology." Those characteristics include the emphasis on the expertise of professionals, the focus on the technical requirements of work in the discipline, the interest in the past purely for its own sake, the goal of objectivity, the "publish or perish" imperative to produce scholarly work approved by colleagues and publishers, and the system of rewards that kept professors loyal to that conception of their work, such as prestigious jobs, fellowships, prizes, offices in professional and scholarly associations, media attention, publishing deals, and so on. Historians should instead, he suggested, embark on a "quest for the type of history the revolutionary struggle requires" and seek to "work not *on* but *with* the workers, the peasants, the people," assisting in creating "a history produced by the masses of people in terms of their own needs."[34] Oscar Handlin offered a blistering response to such views in 1979. Of those calling for relevant History, Handlin wrote "it is not knowledge they wish. Having already reached their conclusions, they seek only reassuring confirmation as they prepare to act . . . At best, the usable past demanded of history consists of the data to flesh out a formula . . . At worst, the demand made of the past is for a credible myth that will identify the forces of good and evil and inspire those who fight . . . on one side of the barricades or the other."[35]

The balance between these positions has shifted in recent decades in favor of a more activist or engaged approach. But both positions remain very much alive – as, for example, the debate within the American Historical Association over "presentism" in the summer of 2022 (referenced in the Introduction) suggests. The discussion has been particularly active since about 2010, but in essence this is yet another long-lived and fundamentally unresolvable division within the discipline of History.[36]

[34] Jean Chesneaux, *Pasts and Futures, or What Is History For?* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978 [1976]), pp. 3, 53, 107. For Chesneaux's environmental concerns, see esp. pp. 91–96 (emphasis in the original).

[35] Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 403–404. For a good recent review of the discussion, see David Motadel, "The Political Role of the Historian," *Contemporary European History* 32 (2021): 38–45.

[36] We might date the more recent discussion conveniently from 2011, when Duke University Press began publishing the journal *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*. The following provide some orientation in the literature: Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Introduction: Whose

The terms of the current discussion are far less stark than those of the debate in the 1960s or 1970s; nevertheless, the epistemological questions – questions regarding the nature, purposes, and social functions of knowledge of the past – are fundamentally unchanged. But regardless of where individual professors of History stand on those questions, in my admittedly limited experience the great majority of students, whatever their political convictions, see the fundamental idea that History should serve our present needs, interests, and causes as self-evident. They are deeply interested in what a recent article on teaching history in higher education called "the history of now."[37] A very large proportion of students have, in other words, an operational conception of the value of the formal study of the past.

And yet, it has also been my experience that an emphasis on moral and political judgment *can* contribute to a real superficiality of historical understanding. I have found that students do sometimes stop investigating once they have formed an opinion of the rights and wrongs of an idea or action, and do not pursue a deeper, more complex or sophisticated comprehension of it – an *historical* understanding. The intellectual exercise of setting aside our own scale of values while we investigate someone else's can encourage students to examine in depth ideas that they find either particularly objectionable or particularly sympathetic.

I will give two brief examples. In my courses on twentieth-century Europe I have for some years now assigned excerpts from a particularly heinous misogynistic British anti-suffrage tract of 1913, Almroth Wright's *Unexpurgated Case against Woman Suffrage*.[38] Many students simply dismiss his ideas as reactionary and toxic – which they certainly were. But reading the essay closely, in the context of Wright's biography (which included many high honors for his medical work), is an excellent way to explore the relationships in early twentieth-century Britain between and among imperialism, political reform, biomedical science, racism, and gender relations. Making those connections can give students a much clearer understanding of the depth and intensity of opposition to women's suffrage, and of the profound implications, at that time, of the expansion of

Present? Which History?" in *Modern Intellectual History* 20 (2023): 559–570; David Armitage, "In Defense of Presentism," in *History and Human Flourishing*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 59–84.

[37] Patrick Iber and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, "The Present Is a Foreign Country: Teaching the History of Now," *Modern Intellectual History* 20 (2023): 651–662.

[38] Almroth Wright, *The Unexpurgated Case against Woman Suffrage* (1913), in *Controversies in the History of British Feminism. The Opponents: The Antisuffragists*, ed. Marie M. Roberts and Tamae Mizuta (London: Routledge/Thoemmes, 1995), pp. 1–86.

women's political and social rights. To undertake that analysis – to understand what was at stake for people at the time – students must set aside their visceral and, from any sane early twenty-first century perspective, entirely justified contempt for Wright's views.

As a second example, in the same course I often assign excerpts from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's *Communist Manifesto* as a way of giving students a greater understanding of the appeal of socialism in the early twentieth century. A very large proportion of my students have been told that Marxism was "wrong," and that history has proven that it was. They tend therefore to read the *Manifesto* cursorily on the assumption that something that was wrong cannot be very interesting. But obviously what is interesting to the historian about the *Manifesto* is not whether Marx was right that capitalism would lead to the progressive impoverishment of the working class, the enrichment of an ever-shrinking elite, the seizing up of the capitalist mechanism of accumulation, and revolution. What is interesting is not the answer ("Marx was wrong") but a question: What about the context of that period made Marx's reasoning persuasive to so many? The reasons for that were quite complex and would include at least three broad elements. One is that in the economic crisis and transformation of the period from the 1840s into the 1890s the experience of industrial societies appeared to be rather precisely predicted in Marx's pamphlet. Another is that the form of Marx's argument (social evolution through distinct stages, often called the "stadial" model) had a very long history in European societies, was very familiar to most Europeans, and had considerable intuitive intellectual appeal at that time. A third is that Marx's prediction of a future of harmony and peace echoed the Christian expectation of the Kingdom of God on Earth. Particularly when paired with autobiographies in which socialist workers recall their encounter with socialism as something like a conversion experience, in which they felt that scales had fallen from their eyes and they both understood their world for the first time, and for the first time had hope, this can give students a much deeper understanding of the appeal of socialism in that period.[39]

I think it is also important to recognize, however, that the dichotomy between "engaged" and "objective" History is not always very clear. Consider, for example, the observation by historian of Africa Emma

[39] There are useful worker's autobiographies in Alfred Kelly, ed., *The German Worker* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). For a third example, explored in greater detail, see Wineburg, *Why Learn History*, pp. 84–91, and general reflection on p. 76. I believe many historians would regard Wineburg's argument as an example of the politically conservative bias of historicism, but it is interesting partly for that reason.

Hunter in 2022 that "the recovery of radical ideas" from the past by intellectual historians "can be a direct resource for political action in the present . . . Exploring past ideas can pose specific challenges when sources speak in unexpected ways, with ideas which do not fit easily into dominant contemporary global frameworks." This sometimes "enables a critical questioning of the unspoken frameworks of the present."[40] In other words: Sometimes the best way to address our present concerns is to set them aside and listen to what people in the past have to say. Maria Elena Martinez made a similar point eight years earlier, in an essay addressing historical sexual identities. Martinez recognized the importance of "avoiding the collusion with power" that can result from relying on the concepts or perspectives we find in historical sources. But she also pointed out that imposing a familiar category (and the assumptions and expectations we associate with it) on historical people "who may not have recognized the practices, lifestyles, notions of body and self, and so forth that it references" can sabotage an "opportunity to discover in the past human possibilities and imaginings that were suppressed or left unfulfilled but that can provide guidance in the present for creating better worlds in the future."[41] This is, as Beverley Southgate put it in 2007, part of the unavoidable "schizoid nature of historical studies" – that very often the best way "to 'learn from the past'" things that are relevant to the present is to pursue "pure 'knowledge for its own sake.'"[42]

I think there is a fruitful way to approach this conundrum of historical "judgment" with students. That approach is to step back from politics or morality and consider the ethical stance that is at the foundation of the historicist tradition.

First, historicism asks that the historian respect the full humanity of the people she studies. People in the past are not simply "objects" of our study; they were (and are) "subjects" in the sense of being autonomous agents – with their own ideas, experiences, views, values, and lives. Again, the

[40] Emma Hunter, "Dialogues between Past and Present in Intellectual Histories of Mid-Twentieth-Century Africa," *Modern Intellectual History* 19 (2022): 630–638.

[41] Maria Elena Martinez, "Archives, Bodies, and Imagination: The Case of Juana Aguilar and Queer Approaches to History, Sexuality, and Politics," *Radical History Review* 120 (2014): 159–182, here pp. 173, 174. For a more abstract formulation, see Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: New Press, 1998), pp. 315–316.

[42] Beverley Southgate, "'Humani nil alienum': The Quest for 'Human Nature,'" in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 67–76, here p. 69. See also Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "The Future of the Past: History, Memory and the Ethical Imperatives of Writing History," *Journal of the Philosophy of history* 8 (2014): 149–179.

historicist does not reduce them to the status of *things* to be studied; she recognizes them as *people* to be understood. This is the *ethical* message of Leopold von Ranke's observation that "everything human is worth knowing."[43]

Second, historicism also asks the historian to respect history and its role in shaping people. The people of the past were shaped by their own contemporary context and their own histories, which made them who they were, just as our own history has made us who we are. They had "historicity" – they were shaped by their own historical context, which we need to understand in its full complexity and scope if we are to understand *them*, their thoughts, and their actions. The people of the past, in short, are not simply markers that we shove around on a piece of paper until we have an arrangement that confirms our own beliefs, whether moral, political, religious, or whatever. *We* enter into *their* world, we "immerse" ourselves in it; we strive to understand where they stood in it, and how it looked to them.

This is an ethical stance, not a moral one. It defines how we approach or treat people, not what we think of them. Understanding what people thought, and how their history led them to think it, does not mean that we do not regard their beliefs or actions as moral or immoral. It does not mean that they "have an alibi" for deplorable actions, or that their admirable actions had no merit. Moral standards apply to beliefs and behaviors regardless of their origins or motives. An action (or an idea) is moral or immoral in the eyes of the person judging it; it is not moral or immoral only if the person who commits (or believes) it thinks it so. Understanding how people thought and where they stood in their world can mean seeing clearly how corrupt, cruel, self-serving, dishonest, or cowardly they were. It can mean appreciating how devoted, loving, principled, and courageous they were. To take only the most obvious examples of enslavement and genocide, the central aim of the historian is to understand how these practices came about and what consequences they had, but only a sociopath would not regard them as morally repugnant or see efforts to defend people against them as a matter of moral indifference. This response is in no way incompatible with the desire to understand them as historical realities. In fact, the historical literature on both is enormous precisely because our sense of their repugnance is so urgent. There is no reason students should try to suppress the feelings of disgust, grief, admiration, or enthusiasm that encountering the people of the past and the

[43] Ranke, "A Fragment from the 1860s," p. 61.

things that they said and did can elicit. On the contrary, these responses – judgments – can fuel the desire to understand.

This approach also does not imply a rejection of political judgment – it does not mean that we regard injustice or heroism in the past as not relevant to the present. History can often give us a sense for how precious some of our institutions and traditions are by revealing the terrible, vicious, and destructive things that were done in their absence, before they were created. It can also reveal how profoundly some of our institutions and traditions were shaped by and derive from terrible, vicious, destructive actions and conditions in the past, and how they perpetuate similar and related actions and conditions in the present. In neither case does it make any sense to the great majority of students to deny the political implications of those linkages between past and present – and neither does it make intellectual sense to ask them to do so. On the contrary, the moral or political urgency with which students regard such linkages can be the most powerful of all motivators for learning. How did the obviously vicious practices of the past evolve into the less obvious but pervasive injustices of the present? Who accomplished that, and for what purposes? Did that even happen because someone wanted it to, or rather as a result of social dynamics that drove choices in policy or in individual social behavior? What enabled the emergence of institutions or the predominance of ideas that underpin substantive practices of justice, equity, freedom, or creativity today? Did historical actors deliberately accomplish that, and if so how did they do it? Many students care deeply about questions like these, and that can lead them to pursue historical inquiry and learning with exceptional energy and determination. Present concerns can open the doors of historical inquiry, not shut them.

In short, the discipline of History does not ask us to suspend our own present concerns, commitments, and purposes. It *does* ask us not to study *only* those aspects of people's lives and worlds in the past that seem relevant to our own concerns. It asks us to enter into an open-ended inquiry into their lives and worlds. It asks us to treat them not as mere things, which can be dismissed without further inquiry once we have decided whether they were good or bad, or once we have made them answer *our* questions. Encountering people in the past is not an on/off, yes/no proposition; it is an encounter with humanity in its complexity and historicity.

In discussing this approach with students, I think it can be helpful to draw on a term developed by John Tosh, who wrote in 2008 of the possibility of a "practical historicism" – responsive to our concerns in the present, but loyal to the "scholarly conventions of the discipline." Thomas

J. Sugrue offered another useful formulation in 1998: that historians should maintain both "responsibility to the past" and "engagement with the present."[44] It is usually pointless to ask our students entirely to substitute curiosity for judgment, or to regard the past as morally or politically irrelevant to the present. Most will find neither approach plausible. What we can suggest to them instead is that right and wrong are not analytical categories, that judgment is not the endpoint of inquiry, and that we advance our understanding of the past not by deciding what category to put people in the past into (right/wrong, good/bad), but by deepening and expanding our inquiry into their world and their understanding of it.

The second tenet of "unconditional" historicism is the notion that historians should be guided in formulating research questions by their *sources*, rather than by some agenda established in advance – for example, on the basis of current issues of concern to them, or by a particular theoretical framework, or by sympathy with or hostility to a particular cause or set of values. We often describe these historians as working primarily in the tradition of textual analysis called hermeneutics, by which is meant the process of understanding what a text meant to people at the time of its production. Their argument is that what should be important to the historian, what she should investigate, is what appears important in the sources that she explores. What needs to be explained is not something that she picks out of the historical record because it is of interest to her here and today, but rather what she finds to have been of interest to the people of the place and period she is studying. Further, the categories that she should use in analyzing the thoughts and actions of people in the past are logically the categories that she finds in her sources, not in her own society, or in a currently influential theory. People in the past were not motivated by our ideas; their view of their world was not shaped by our categories; we can only understand their thoughts, words, intentions, and actions if we understand not how *we* think, but how *they* thought. If they thought something was important, that is a strong argument for looking into it.

German historian of Russia Jörg Baberowski puts it this way: History "does not encounter things armed with abstract concepts, but rather seeks to derive its concepts from close and verifiable observation of particular things."[45] In other words, ideally the encounter with what is in the sources

[44] Tosh, *Why History Matters*, p. 22; Thomas J. Sugrue, "Responsibility to the Past, Engagement with the Present," *Labor History* 39 (1998): 60–69.

[45] Jörg Baberowski, *Der Sinn der Geschichte: Geschichtstheorien von Hegel bis Foucault* (Munich: Beck, 2005), p. 67.

will define the historian's research agenda and the categories and concepts she uses in her analysis. Ludmila Jordanova explicitly used the familiar metaphor of immersion in suggesting something similar: "Much of the best history has proceeded by a kind of immersion in the sources, taking its explanatory devices out of those sources."[46]

A relatively small proportion of historians today believe that this can be a realistic description of how historians develop research agendas. At a minimum, most would probably agree that working with sources does not "define," but rather "refines" or "revises" an historian's research agenda. Any historian will begin the research process with her own interests and ideas, derived from many sources – her personal history and experiences, prior research, specific theoretical frameworks she finds interesting, or her own political commitments. This is a subject that will be addressed further in Chapters 2 and 4. But whether we call it revision or definition, the principle is the same, and it grows directly out of the idea of the historian's immersion in the sources as a path to understanding the people of the past, as people. Miles Fairburn put it this way: what I am calling unconditional historicism "does not impose exterior concepts or theories on the [historical] actors"; it instead seeks to "grasp the concepts and conceptual schemas of past people as they grasped them, and describe their values and beliefs with words that accurately convey the meanings that the values and beliefs had to the actors."[47] This means that when we discover that something was important to people in the past, we should investigate *that* – not something that *we* think *should* have been important to them.

Again, this is a very old idea, but not one that is dead. Jim Cullen offered a very practical formulation in 2009 (in a book subtitled "How to Read, Write and Think about History"): "Where do you get good questions? The answer is: from your sources . . . Only by delving into the sources . . . can a question really come into focus. And as often as not, a good question is the result of a *process*" of continual refinement as one deepens and broadens one's knowledge of the sources.[48] There are times when this approach can allow us to see what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls "the unthinkable" – "that which one cannot conceive within the range of possible alternatives" because one does not have the categories that would permit one to ask

[46] Ludmila Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2nd edition (London: Hodder, 2006), p. 62.
[47] Fairburn, *Social History*, pp. 25, 204.
[48] Jim Cullen, *Essaying the Past: How to Read, Write, and Think about History* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 35 (emphasis in the original).

about it – or "that which perverts all answers because it defies the terms under which the questions were phrased."[49] This is where History really becomes an adventure – when we discover that we do not have a map, that we do not have categories that people fit neatly into, that we have to do some more thinking and investigating before we will be able to understand what people were. As I suggested in the Introduction, that adventure can give us a new perspective on the present, as well, by forcing us to confront our own assumptions and categories, revealing to us our own historicity.

One great disadvantage of this approach is of course that as a rule there is very significant systematic bias in the sources themselves. The published record, archival collections, even, for example, the architectural record usually disproportionately reflect the interests, concerns, and perspectives of powerful and wealthy people. As Trouillot remarked, "the presences and absences embodied in sources . . . are neither neutral nor natural. They are created . . . They reflect differential control of the means of historical production" by people with differing degrees and kinds of social power. "Something is always left out while something else is recorded," and those inclusions and omissions reflect "uneven historical power."[50] Laura Doan put the point economically in 2013: "Archival materials come with their own agendas."[51] Middle- and upper-class people write and publish far more than poor people; colonial administrators and imperialist social scientists write and publish – or commit to archives – far more than colonial subjects; historically, in most societies women have been systematically excluded from the educated professions and administrative and government power, and therefore have left fewer published or archived traces; governments and nongovernmental organizations dominated by particular social groups have preserved records of their own activities or relevant to their own concerns, not those of people excluded from participation in them. If we simply follow the sources to our questions, it is easy to end up primarily writing the history of people with a disproportionate share of wealth and power. As Trouillot observed, historians must have "strategies for countering inequalities of power in knowledge of the past."[52] The unconditional historicist approach might predispose an historian to set aside that "doubt about the innocence of the archive" (including the published record) that, as Patrick Joyce pointed out in 2007, "is axiomatic to historical method."[53]

[49] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, p. 82. [50] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, pp. 48–49.
[51] Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, p. 49. [52] Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, p. xiii.
[53] Patrick Joyce, "The Gift of the Past: Towards a Critical Theory," in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 88–97, here p. 89.

For this reason, again, this kind of unconditional historicism is often regarded as inherently politically conservative. While historicism was the primary theoretical orientation of academic historians up until the middle of the twentieth century, since then the historicist position has been questioned by scholars who regard it as not neutral or dispassionate at all. Instead, they see it as shaped by profound social bias, and by an unspoken desire to depoliticize investigation of the past. More activist critics – engaged historians – on the political Left have argued that it should instead be a function of History to call power and exploitation, discrimination, privilege, and injustice into question by using the tools of scholarship to show how current social arrangements were created, thereby proving that the commonsense defense of them ("this is just the way things are") is artificial and self-serving. This is sometimes called "denaturalizing" current social arrangements, revealing them to be ideological and created rather than inevitable.[54] To quote influential working-class historian Howard Zinn, History can "expose the ideology that pervades our culture" and our current social arrangements, by showing precisely how they came to be. John Tosh made the same point: History can benefit us by "overturning the belief that 'things have always been this way' ... as a corrective to ... static thinking, and especially any thinking with determinist or essentialist overtones. Confident assumptions ... melt away when measured against the diversity of historical experience."[55] Of course the historicist approach can contribute to precisely this aim. Exploring the ways in which the past was quite different from the present can be the first step in understanding how the present came to be. Understanding how the assumptions and ideas of people in the past differed from our own can lead us to examine how people in our own time came to think as they do. Critics of historicism argue, however, that the focus on understanding the past "on its own terms" can too easily divert attention from topics that are relevant and lead the scholar or the student into "antiquarian" meandering without political purpose – again, it can "depoliticize" scholarship, rendering it effectively useless for our present.

For some on the political Right, similarly, History can be a tool for debunking the pious lies of the Left. History can be used to question a progressive story of the achievements of liberal democracy or of the

[54] Laura Doan discussed this approach in *Disturbing Practices*, pp. 2–3; there is a particularly clear statement in Jürgen Kocka, "Geschichte – wozu?" in *Über das Studium der Geschichte*, ed. Wolfgang Hardtwig (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1990), pp. 427–443, esp. p. 438 – unfortunately not, to my knowledge, available in English.

[55] Quoted in Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*, p. 74; Tosh, *Why History Matters*, p. 32.

welfare state or of racial justice; or to undermine heroic stories told by the Left about noble figures who have struggled for social justice and freedom. History can show us, for example, how murderous communist parties, regimes, and leaders have been; or how corrupt the people, events, institutions, or developments the Left celebrates actually were; or how creative and democratic free-market capitalism has been. In any case, both camps argue – as Jo Guldi and David Armitage did in a "manifesto" for History in 2014 – that we should "use history to criticize the institutions around us and . . . return history to its mission as a critical social science."[56]

Even aside from this question of the wider purpose and social or political function of historical study, however, my own experience is that asking students to let their sources guide them to their questions can be demotivating. In the view of many students, it amounts to rendering History irrelevant. A History that ignores the present is likely to encourage many students to look for intellectual pursuits they believe to be more relevant to their concerns. Again, most students do not come to university to engage in detached intellectual labor. Most come to make sense of their world, to find their way in it (if they are older, to find a better way in it). Suggesting that their agenda should not be set by their interests is pointless.

In more positive terms, though, doing so would throw away one of the great strengths of History, which is that we all know that we are up to our necks in history. We all understand the validity of the historicist postulate that we, our lives, are the products of history. History is very often interesting to students because they understand that it has created the conditions in which they must live their own lives. I will return to this issue in Chapter 5; for now, I hope it is sufficient simply to say that a very great deal of the intellectual excitement that History classes can generate derives directly from their relevance to students' own concerns. This is of course not always true, nor true for all students. The two most intellectually exciting History classes I took as an undergraduate were on thirteenth-century China and medieval Russia. But current enrollments in college and university courses on, for example, medieval history do not lie. Most students want to learn about things that seem relevant to their interests, experience, concerns, and lives. Offering them the opportunity to do so makes more than just financial, "butts in seats" sense; it is pedagogically sound to engage students, as the saying goes, "where they live."

[56] Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 85.

And yet immersing ourselves in the sources and listening to what seemed important to people in the past – rather than bringing to the sources our own list of topics that *we* have defined as important – can help us broaden our focus from matters that seem very important in our own society to take in matters that were important in the past. It can, in other words, prevent us from ignoring aspects of past historical situations that had significant influence on events and outcomes, including outcomes that shape the present. Focusing on what is of interest to us, not to the people of the past whom we are studying, can sabotage our understanding of them and of ourselves. I think this is a common problem, for example, for secular historians in our own time, who sometimes have a hard time understanding how profoundly religion shaped the thinking of people in the past. It can be very difficult for people who have no experience of religious faith to understand the language, the conceptual universe, the motivations, and hence the actions of people who understood their faith to be the center and purpose of life.

I can give my own work as an example of both the strengths and the weaknesses of the unconditional historicist approach, because I have largely followed it. I wrote my master's thesis on the law pertaining to children born out of wedlock in the 1920s. This was a subject I stumbled upon while reading German parliamentary debates in a desperate last-minute search for a topic for my master's thesis after several other topics proved not to be viable. I found it interesting largely because of the extraordinary vehemence of the debate. This was a matter that was clearly important to the politicians involved, particularly communists, Catholics, and women's rights advocates. That topic led me to the broader topic of policy directed at children generally, and I wrote my first book about child welfare policy in Germany between 1890 and 1960. In the course of my research for that book, I found that questions of sexual morality were of central importance to people concerned about the welfare of children; my second book was about that. While working on that project I was struck by the intensity of the debate over the moral status of modern dance in the two decades after 1900, and I wrote a book about that. In each case I followed the sources to new topics that were important to people at the time. The unfortunate result is that I have spent my career writing mostly about middle- and upper-class intellectuals, administrators, activists, and professionals. Even the socialists and the women's or homosexual rights advocates I have written about were primarily middle-class intellectuals, not working people. I have, in other words, fallen victim to – and arguably reinforced – the bias inherent in my sources.

On the other hand, the women who created the new cultural form of modern dance were not in positions of social power, and yet I believe I have been able to establish that they had a profound impact in the first three decades of the twentieth century on the way that people around the world thought about culture, art, the ordering of gender relations, and even colonialism. Further, they were extremely successful pioneers in one of the most important cultural and economic processes of the twentieth century, the emergence of commercial mass culture. Probably a substantial majority of my professional colleagues regard the history of dance as an ancillary or marginal topic, a sideshow to the main events of the early twentieth century – war, diplomacy, revolution, mass murder, nationalism, industrial growth, and so on. The story of those big, important events is often assumed to have been, and analyzed as if it was, dominated by men in positions of social power. I hope that if my colleagues were to read my book on dance they would not be so sure. In other words, following the sources led me to a topic that has the potential to subvert histories of the twentieth century that are obsessively focused on the thoughts, actions, and concerns of men with wealth and power.

As a matter of experience, then, I think the question of whether to adopt an unconditionally historicist approach to choosing what to investigate is not an "either/or," "yes/no" question. There have been attempts to strike a balance between these approaches. John Tosh, for example, argued in 2015 that "our priorities in the present should determine the questions we ask of the past, but not the answers."[57] I think this is a useful shorthand way to address the issue with students, and Chapter 4 will show that it has a long tradition in History.

As I have suggested in the Introduction, however, I believe the ultimately irreconcilable disagreement between advocates of engaged scholarship in History (History that responds to contemporary concerns) and advocates of unconditionally historicist History is an important resource for teachers. In my experience more students lean toward activist instincts, but most are also committed to the idea that the historian should be impartial. Addressing this question explicitly as a question of *method*, rather than

[57] Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p. 49. For interesting discussions, see Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "Beyond History," *Rethinking History* 5 (2002): 195–215, here p. 206; Oliver J. Daddow, "The Ideology of Apathy: Historians and Postmodernism," *Rethinking History* 8 (2004): 417–437, which offers a history of the idea of ideologically neutral History; A. Dirk Moses, "Hayden White, Traumatic Nationalism, and the Public Role of History" and Hayden White, "The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses," in *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 311–332 and 333–338.

simply of common sense or simple preference, can encourage them to confront epistemological issues that are of central importance for the discipline of History. I will address this issue at length in Chapter 4. For now, I want to suggest that in my experience it is fruitful to teach this problem (so to speak) of unconditional historicism in our History classes, and that a reasonable proportion of students find it to be a profound and interesting one.

1.3 How History Thinks II: Inductive and Idiographic Principles and Practices

While there is broad agreement among historians regarding the foundational historicist postulate that all human things are shaped by history, then, there is profound division regarding the more unconditional historicist position. A further divergence is less vehement, but still profoundly important in the discipline. Whether "unconditional" or not, historicists generally agree on a further fundamental characteristics of historical inquiry. They generally see History as almost uniquely committed to a particular form of *inductive* as opposed to *deductive* reasoning. Deductive reasoning proceeds by first developing a generalization or hypothesis, then developing a provisional prediction based on it, and then testing that prediction – through experimentation in the natural sciences, and in the social sciences often through quantitative statistical analysis or structured observation. If the prediction is correct (or the statistical correlation high), the hypothesis is supported; if not, an alternative hypothesis should be tested. In the sciences, formulating a hypothesis after performing the experiment is considered a fundamental methodological flaw – it is sometimes pejoratively called "HARKing" (hypothesizing after the results are known). In contrast, inductive reasoning begins with observations – in History, the sources – and derives its hypotheses and conclusions from analysis of them. Using the term "inductive" to describe what historians do is a bit confusing, because in the most common usage inductive reasoning leads to generalizations, and many historians do not do that. They reach conclusions, but do not generalize them. This is a point discussed in the next pages. But it is true that historicists usually rely, in constructing interpretations, on complexity, synthesis, and a standard often referred to as the "preponderance of the available evidence." They arrive not at yes/no answers based on decisive experimental or statistical results, but at more or less firm (or speculative) conclusions supported by a large body of suggestive evidence. Again, in History a persuasive

conclusion is often one that rests on a holistic or integrative approach to the topic, drawing on multiple bodies and forms of evidence.

This is in practice true not just of historians particularly attached to the historicist tradition, but also of those more skeptical of it. The simple reason, of course, is that historians cannot conduct experiments or make direct observations. As the last section of Chapter 2 will discuss, many historians are very much committed to particular theoretical frameworks. But they cannot test them experimentally. They also very seldom have the quality or quantity of numerical data that would permit statistical testing. And they cannot directly observe historical events. Even historians committed to particular theoretical traditions, therefore, are largely confined to inductive methods. They examine the indirect, fragmentary, and often biased evidence that has survived from the past and interpret it with the help of their theoretical apparatus, or framework.

A further useful terminological contrast was developed in the late nineteenth century by Wilhelm Windelband, who characterized history as "idiographic" rather than "nomothetic."[58] In practice, historians more influenced by the historicist tradition devote themselves primarily to developing a full picture or description (*graphic*) of particular, unique, and individual (*idio*, as in idiosyncratic) phenomena, rather than to discovering or positing (*thetic*, as in "thesis" or argument) general laws (from the Greek *nomos*) that apply to a broad category of events, situations, people, or societies that are fundamentally "the same" or "similar." A nomothetic discipline seeks to find laws that govern how things work in general, consistently. Fundamentally, it *explains* a category of phenomena in the sense that it determines what causes things in that category to happen – whether the category is revolutions, wars, economic growth, bursts of religious innovation, or whatever. An idiographic discipline in contrast seeks to *understand* a particular and specific individual phenomenon. It aims to understand not "revolutions" generally but, for example, specifically the French Revolution; not "religious innovation" in general but specifically the revitalization of Buddhism in the late nineteenth century; not "what happens when differing human groups encounter each other" but nineteenth-century European racism. In History the aim is not to determine what causes things in a particular category to happen; it is to develop a detailed, multifaceted, descriptive analysis of an individual

[58] Windelband, "Rectorial Address," p. 175. See Christopher Lloyd, "History and the Social Sciences," in *Writing History: Theory & Practice*, ed. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner, and Kevin Passmore (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 83–103, esp. pp. 90–92.

phenomenon, including an expansive multicausal analysis of what went into its making. As philosopher of History William Dray put it in 1993, the aim is to study phenomena "in their unique occurrence, in their particularity."[59]

Nomothetic disciplines are primarily deductive. They posit hypothetical laws, and then test individual cases to see if the hypothesis holds up. Idiographic disciplines are primarily inductive. They explore a phenomenon through investigation in depth and detail, without necessarily arriving at generalizable conclusions – "laws" – at all. Philosopher Michael Oakeshott offered an extreme formulation of the historicist position in 1933: in History, "nothing . . . is negative or non-contributory"; the entire historical context is relevant. Accordingly, "History accounts *for* change by means of a full account *of* change," and not by means of "an appeal to some external reason" or causal law. The "method of the historian is never to explain by means of generalization but always by means of greater and more complete detail."[60]

A particularly uncompromising variant of the idiographic approach is generally called "nominalism." Nominalism is the view that general categories are merely convenient abstractions.[61] They have no reality in and of themselves, independent of specific phenomena or cases. Rather, they are just ways of organizing our thinking about specific phenomena or cases. Specific phenomena, real things, are not examples of general or abstract categories ("class," "the state," "religion"); instead, each thing is unique. Specific phenomena therefore do not conform to general laws that govern all phenomena in the category in which we place them, when we organize our thinking about them. Such categories do not have any explanatory or "predictive" (in hindsight) power. There are no laws governing phenomena that we organize, for convenience, into categories, because those categories are not real things. Historians therefore cannot say: "this specific phenomenon is an example of general category X; we know how general category X behaves; therefore, we know how this specific phenomenon will behave."

[59] William Dray, *Philosophy of History*, 2nd edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 13. See also Louis O. Mink, "The Autonomy of Historical Understanding," *History & Theory* 5 (1966): 24–47, here p. 28. The last widely cited attempt to persuade historians to look for "laws" of history appears to have been Carl G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," *Journal of Philosophy* 39 (1942): 35–48. Hempel was not an historian, did not publish his ideas in an historical journal, and as far as I can tell had no measurable impact on the practice of historians. William Dray's *Law and Explanation in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957) was an influential rebuttal.

[60] Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933, reprint 1966), pp. 142, 143 (emphasis in the original).

[61] For a particularly clear exposition, see Miller, *The Problem of Slavery*, pp. 25, 26, 27–28.

On the idiographic character of History there is even less agreement among historians than there is regarding the primacy of an inductive approach. Nominalism, moreover, at least as a matter of intellectual preference and practice, is not at all common today – in part because trying to reason without the convenient conceptual shorthand of categories like "state," "revolution," or "religion" is very difficult. The last section of Chapter 2 will address the importance of social science theory and the generalizations that social science generates – the categories and the "laws" it posits – for a large proportion of historians.

Nevertheless, again, in practice most historians do of necessity adopt an idiographic approach to their work. They go about investigating a particular historical phenomenon, not a range of historical phenomena that they hypothesize belong to a class or category, governed by common laws or principles. Some historians attracted to social science frame their work as an attempt to determine whether a particular social science theory describes ("predicts") the specific development they are looking at. A wonderful example is German historian Jürgen Kocka's *Facing Total War*, a book that posed an explicitly Marxist hypothesis about the impact of the First World War on German society, examined primarily quantitative sources (regarding employment and wages) in order to test it, and reached sophisticated, nuanced, and insightful conclusions regarding the degree to which Marxist theory seemed to account for the developments he found.[62] His book was exceptionally rigorous in its statistical approach, but the idea is common: Historians determine whether and to what degree a theoretical framework helps them understand the specific historical phenomenon they are investigating. And it is quite rare for historians to investigate multiple, much less many individual cases within the hypothesized class, to see whether the theory holds across multiple cases. There is a simple explanation for that: comparative the discipline is a gigantic amount of work. Writing a book about three revolutions, or three religious changes, or three encounters between different human groups, is three times as much work as writing about one. Given the expansive nature of historical research, it is just not very practicable.

Historians tend, then, not to think in terms of universal laws; more often, they think in terms of *patterns*.[63] They use general categories as follows: "this

[62] Jürgen Kocka, *Facing Total War: German Society, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985 [original 1975]).

[63] See, for example, William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 5, and Paul Christianson, "Patterns of Historical Interpretation," in *Objectivity, Method, and Point of View: Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. W. J. van der Dussen and Lionel Rubinoff (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 47–71.

phenomenon seems to be similar in some nontrivial ways to a distinctive wider group of phenomena; it is useful therefore to think of this as part of a broader pattern." Each individual phenomenon can then be investigated with that broader pattern in mind, as part of what guides the historian's inquiry into its specific characteristics. In short, History is not like chemistry, physics, or Marxian sociology; it does not study phenomena that are "the same" and governed by universal "laws" of interaction or development. Historians are in practice not very interested in general rules governing all human societies across time or space. Their operating assumption is usually derived from the historicist view that each human society is subject to the unique conditions of a particular time and place.[64] British historian George Macaulay Trevelyan was particularly explicit about this: History, he wrote in 1913, has "failed to discover laws of 'cause and effect' which are certain to repeat themselves in the institutions and affairs of men" because an "historical event cannot be isolated from its circumstances . . . none of which will ever recur . . . no causal laws of universal application [can] be discovered in so complex a subject."[65] One hundred and four years later Sarah Maza, an historian of modern France, agreed: "Human behavior in a specific place and time is much too messy to be pressed into general laws."[66]

This fact that History is in practice primarily an inductive and idiographic discipline is a profoundly important resource on which History instructors can draw, and one of the characteristics that make History particularly pedagogically valuable. These characteristics make historical thinking and historical inquiry radically open, intellectually empowering, and liberating.

Of course in university and college History courses, particularly at the introductory level, students have to master factual material, the chronology of events, basic historical statistics. But most of the assessed work that students do in higher education History courses requires them to reach their own conclusions. In some classes, in some institutions, instructors cannot do without multiple-choice questions; I have used them myself. But most assignments at this level are not assessments of factual knowledge. Research essays, interpretation of documents, interpretive work with visual sources, reflection papers, class presentations, research journals,

[64] Still useful and thought-provoking on the nature of generalization in History: *Generalization in the Writing of History: A Report of the Committee on Historical Analysis of the Social Science Research Council*, ed. Louis Gottschalk (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

[65] George Macaulay Trevelyan, "History and Literature," *Journal of the Historical Association* 9:34 (1924): 82–91, here p. 89; *Clio, A Muse and Other Essays*, p. 144.

[66] Sarah Maza, *Thinking about History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 162.

annotated bibliographies, book or article reviews – all the primary forms of assessment used in higher education History courses ask students to analyze material for themselves and to develop and present their own conclusions from that analysis. Almost nothing students do in college or university History courses requires them to assume, or to confirm by demonstration, that certain theories or principles that they have been taught as general rules hold true in particular cases – experimentally in the chemistry lab, for example, or statistically in economic analysis.

History courses, therefore, essentially force students to adopt a posture of intellectual autonomy, because they are not given any "right" answers. They are not required to memorize and apply basic principles or laws; they are not tasked with testing the fit between their experimental or investigational results and general schema developed and validated by natural or social scientists. The historical cases they examine are not specific instances of general classes, categories, or rules. There are no right or wrong answers; there are only analyses and interpretations that are coherent or garbled, methodologically sound or flawed, insightful or trivial.

Studying History is therefore in important ways not just a critical but also a creative endeavor. Creative thinking is exciting and invigorating, and it requires students to be self-aware and self-critical, to decide for themselves whether they have got it right. Chapter 5 will discuss in some more detail how to maximize this potential benefit for students. For now, it is important simply to say that History as a holistic, inductive, idiographic practice is uniquely powerful training in independent thinking.

This can be psychologically difficult for some students.[67] In History there is no recipe, there are no fixed points of reference, and students never know if they have got the "right" answer. Their work is assessed with respect to its methodological and formal qualities – whether the research is thorough, whether the sources used are narrow or broad in variety and origin, whether the argument is well supported by evidence, whether the text is read "closely" (that is, with attention to multiple characteristics such as central concepts, rhetorical strategies, references, language, and values), whether multiple possible interpretations are considered, whether the writing is clear, whether the exposition of the interpretation the student has developed is well-structured and logical, whether the sources have been referenced to

[67] For research and theory on the cognitive development demanded by History, see W. G. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1970); P. M. King and K. S. Kitchener, *Developing Reflective Judgment: Understanding and Promoting Intellectual Growth and Critical Thinking in Adolescents and Adults* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

ensure transparency and verifiability, and so on. The answers cannot be found in the back of the book. This can be challenging for students, who may not be comfortable with the idea that they are not being offered "knowledge," or as many call it today "information" – authoritative, confirmed, validated, and reliable. In my experience, many students find this unsettling. Most students I encounter believe that knowledge of the past is important (obviously – they are in my History classes), but the discipline does not offer any certainty about that knowledge. Instead, they discover that they have been drawn into an endlessly expanding field of inquiry in which they deepen and broaden their understanding but never arrive at any proof.

The conventional language that historians have adopted to define for their students this open-ended character of study in History is that History is interpretive – that the student must make sense for herself of what she learns. History instructors also conventionally suggest that interpretation is perspectival. The sense one makes depends on the tools one has, the information one gathers, and the conceptual and experiential context one brings to bear on a problem. For many students, these qualities make History itself exciting. It is a place where one is never quite certain what might happen. History can be unsettling, even frustrating; but it is also an adventure.

But History poses for students still knottier problems. It confronts them also with difficult epistemological choices, with methodological questions for which there is no "right" answer but that they, rather, must answer for themselves. This chapter has laid out some fundamental characteristics of the discipline that are derived primarily from its early history. But as numerous qualifying statements in this chapter have indicated, the historicist tradition is only one of the traditions that have shaped History. Again, History today is a hybrid discipline that draws on the methods and epistemological assumptions both of the humanities and of the social sciences, and also on the endlessly ramifying field of critical social theory. There is no consensus in History on the inductive, idiographic, or holistic traditions of historicism. History not only asks students to decide what they know; it also asks them to choose between quite different ways of going about knowing it. This too can be challenging for some students, who may not be comfortable deciding for themselves what their own epistemological position is. Chapter 2 addresses these characteristics of the discipline, and some of their pedagogical implications.