

## THE LEVELS OF HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTORY LESSON ON THE NATURE OF HISTORY AND THE HISTORICAL PROCESS

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Every history teacher who has practiced the craft for any time has had some well-meaning colleague from another discipline observe, "Well, at least you teach a subject that isn't constantly changing; once something has happened it can't be changed." Of course, those of us in the discipline understand both the denotative and the connotative meaning of this statement, with its insinuation that the historian does not need to keep abreast of new developments in his field as the speaker does in his. We may just laugh along with our self-satisfied colleague who has just delivered himself of some version of this (in his own mind) profound and humorous observation. We may not want to take the time to disabuse him of his naivete. I admit to having taken this path of least resistance at times.

But on further reflection, I have concluded that such naive views of the nature of history and the historical process need to be combatted, not humored. We may well have to adopt a passive approach with our colleagues, confronting them as opportunities arise. But we can and should be more aggressive in combatting equally widespread misconceptions among our students. To that end I have recently started introducing my basic Western Civilization course with a lecture on the nature of history and the historical process. I have built the lecture around the concept of the "levels of history," using a diagram (Figure 1) to help illustrate some of the key relationships between the "past" and "history." One goal of this lesson is to convince students that these terms are not synonymous and that the historical process may be thought of as the means by which historians transform the "past" into "history."

There is, of course, a sense in which the notion is true that once something has happened it cannot be changed. The base of the pyramid model suggests that there is a true, unchanging "past reality" that consists of everything that has ever happened. This level of the past serves as the objective basis for a reconstruction of the past, i.e., "history," but is not itself "history." It is not even the raw material from which the historian works to reconstruct the past, since so little of this level of "history" has even left a surviving trace of its existence. At this point an obvious inherent weakness of the model becomes apparent--it is in no way drawn to scale. The ratio between the totality of persons and events and those that have left some tangible evidence of their existence and occurrence could not begin to be estimated. I illustrate this point by asking my students what percentage of the events in their own lives have left any surviving record of their occurrence anywhere outside of their own memories, and for that matter, what percent exist even there. When the abstract principle is reduced to the personal level, students immediately grasp that of the totality of events and thoughts of their lives, only a minuscule percentage has left any trace of their existence even in the intangible form of recollections. They begin to see that a biographical sketch written about them relying only on tangible evidence would be brief indeed. The application of this principle to the process of writing "history" is simple and direct.

In the process of making this point, the discussion can easily move to a consideration of the second and even third levels of the model. Only events and persons about whom some tangible record exists are potential or possible components for a reconstruction of the past. But what percentage of surviving

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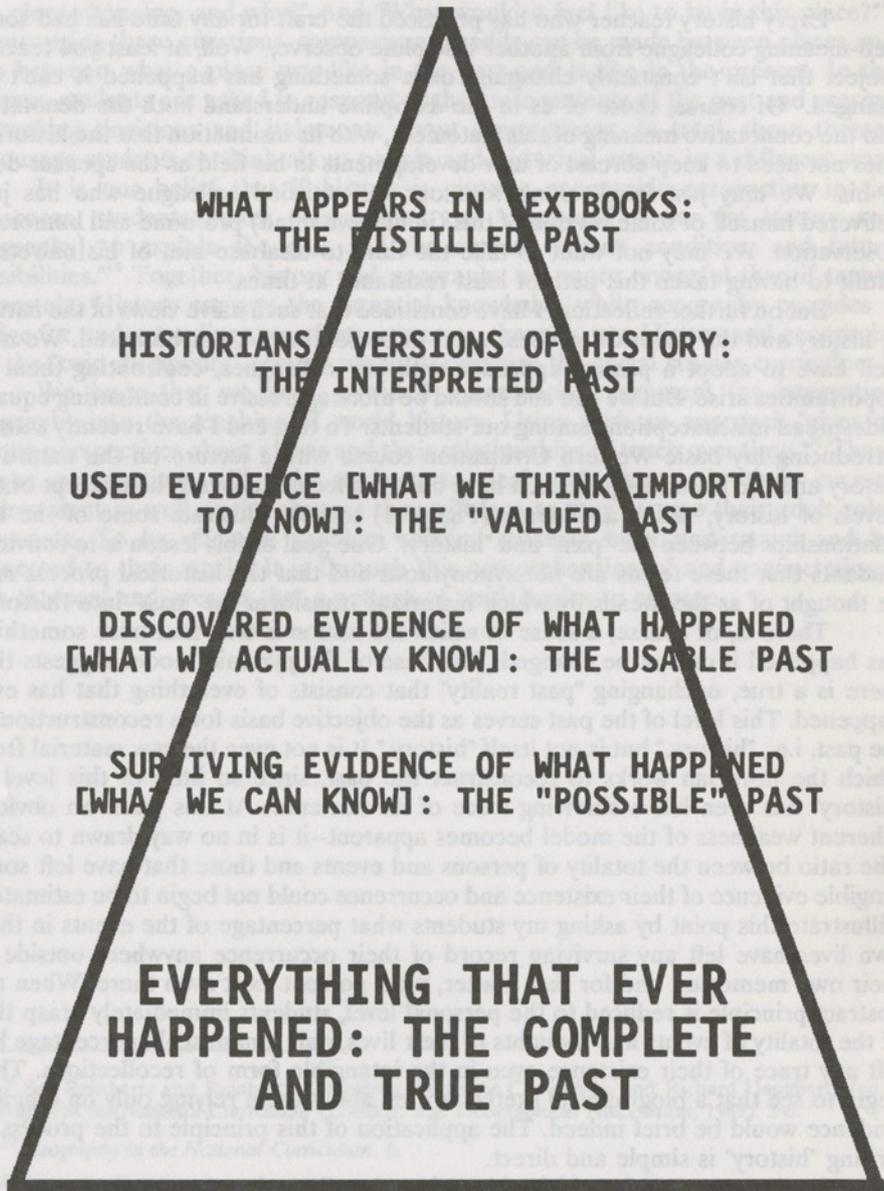


Figure 1

material is unusable because it is undiscovered, buried beneath a tel in the Middle East, covered by jungle growth in Southeast Asia, locked away in the archives of some governmental agency with "CLASSIFIED INFORMATION" stamped on it, or merely collecting dust in a trunk or box in someone's attic or garage. Every year archaeologists bring to light new information about ancient civilizations and enterprising researchers stumble onto hitherto unknown or long-forgotten caches of documents and records in a variety of both expected and unexpected places. This is the "usable past," for only at this point do we have the actual raw materials from which the past, or more accurately some facets of the past, can be reconstructed. And it is at this level that the "past" can and does change in ways unexpected by our original naive antagonist. Of course, the total volume of events occurring and even leaving surviving evidence grows daily. But only when we reach level three of the model do we see the potential for "history" (commonly thought of as the "unchanging past") to change, i.e., our understanding of events, personalities, and periods can be perceived differently today than these same events, personalities, and periods were perceived yesterday.

James Bacque's controversial book *Other Losses* is a recent and dramatic illustration of the process.<sup>1</sup> Using previously unknown military documents from the closing days of World War II, Bacque has alleged that approximately 1,000,000 German prisoners of war were allowed to die from exposure, malnutrition and dehydration in U.S. and French detention camps on the direct orders of Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, apparently out of his personal loathing for Germans. Although acclaimed Eisenhower biographer, Stephen E. Ambrose, has leveled a withering blast at Bacque's central thesis and prisoner mortality figures, he has noted that Bacque has uncovered a previously untold story of German prisoners' suffering in holding camps at the end of the war.<sup>2</sup> This illustrates how our understanding of *what* happened can be changed. The question of the potential impact of Bacque's allegations on Eisenhower's historical image anticipates another level of the model as we move to a consideration of the questions "why" and "so what." But more about that later.

To this point, questions concerning the ultimate philosophical and technical problems inherent in the concept of "knowing" anything about the past have been ignored; those involving the philosophical dimensions will continue to be ignored. But the observant reader will have noticed by this time the quotation marks around the word "know" in both the second and third levels of the model. This is merely to acknowledge that our ability to "know" the past, or even to know facts about the past, is intimately bound up in complex technical problems of document authenticity and reliability, i.e., the credibility of our sources, and our ability to make discerning use of those sources that have survived and been discovered. It is beyond the scope of this introductory lesson to explore the technical problems associated with source authenticity and credibility, but students must be made aware that it is a significant concern of historians. The exposure of a long-accepted source as a forgery or the discovery of evidence that calls into question the version of an event contained in

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<sup>1</sup> James Bacque, *Other Losses* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, "Ike and the Disappearing Atrocities." *New York Times Book Review*. February 24, 1991, 1.

a previously-relied-upon document may alter our perceptions of what actually happened; thus "history" changes.

Soviet historians are currently engaged in a major reconstruction of their country's history, a not unprecedented enterprise there. The generally held assumption here is that this time, in contrast to previous exercises, something much closer to the real truth will emerge from the reconstruction process. All who are concerned with the pursuit of objective truth as a goal of the historical process will applaud that outcome. One may legitimately wonder, however, if this current rewriting is not motivated by any fundamentally different aim than that which inspired previous revisions, i.e., is the pursuit of truth an end in itself in Gorbachev's U.S.S.R., or is the need to discredit predecessors as a foil for vindicating current leaders or policies the underlying motive? Of course, the keys to this reconstruction will be access to archival materials never before available to scholars with even a modicum of objectivity and the absence of ideologically-imposed interpretive guidelines. As this article was being written, the Soviet government finally released the official casualty figures for World War II (approximately 26 million) and the KGB body count from Stalin's party purges (approximately 780,000). For all their legitimate concerns for the reliability of government-generated data, Western historians have not had to be accomplices to official misrepresentations of their countries' "history," misrepresentations of the sort that moved one wit to define a Soviet historian as someone who could accurately predict the past. We can all hope that this witticism has now become as anachronistic as the Berlin Wall in the age of *glasnost*.

As we move to the next level of the model, we encounter a related, but qualitatively different dynamic behind the changing contours of history. Here history changes less from the discovery of hitherto unknown source material than from the exploitation of material that was either available but of little interest to historians or for which no satisfactory methodology for its effective utilization had been conceived. The famous dictum that "History is past politics" may not have been emblazoned above every historian's door in the nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> but judging from the content of published work, it was a widely-accepted definition of the discipline. That definition was extended, of course, to include von Clausewitz's equally famous dictum that "war is a continuation of politics by other means."<sup>4</sup> The traditional conception of history as essentially the development of political and military themes, occasionally supplemented by attention to the "high culture" of the socio-economic elite, was supported by the sources available to chroniclers and historians. Sources to support research focusing on these traditional themes were more numerous, more easily accessible in governmental archives, and required relatively little ingenuity or imagination to use. Of course, the preoccupation with these themes rendered irrelevant a vast array of potential source material that had to await a more comprehensive view of the proper scope of the historical enterprise.

<sup>3</sup> These words were inscribed above the office door of Henry Adams at Johns Hopkins University.

<sup>4</sup> Karl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) was a Prussian army officer and military theorist. His classic *On War*, published posthumously from 1832-1834, contains the statement capsulizing his analysis of the relationship between political and military objectives.

J. Harvey Robinson's call for a "new history" early in this century had a salutary effect in causing American historians to begin emphasizing non-traditional themes and exploiting previously unused materials.<sup>5</sup> Scholars in the fields of socio-economic and cultural history have clearly been the most imaginative in exploiting a variety of public and private sources that in previous centuries would have been dismissed as of no historical value, such as census data, parish records, and police records. Some of the most impressive pioneering work with these types of sources was done by French historians associated with the *Annales* school.<sup>6</sup> Not only did these scholars see the potential use of these previously ignored sources, but they devised novel methodologies for mining their wealth. Entire new subfields of history emerged from the expanding conception of "proper history," including such now familiar and well-established disciplines as labor, ethnic, family, women's and psycho-history. The emergence of these disciplines, of course, reflects the focusing of societal concern on issues relating to these groups and themes. Labor's struggle to organize in the 1920s and 1930s, the Afro-Americans' intensified drive for full legal equality in the 1950s and 1960s, and the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s all spawned a thriving cottage industry in historical research that mirrored the emergence of these new issues on the socio-political agenda. Each generation's concerns create a new sense of the relevance of the past that has a bearing on those concerns. This is the "valued past," a past whose contours change as society's interests change, thrusting some concerns to the front and pushing others to the back. Some historians will reflect the tenor of their times by the very subjects they choose to explore and sources they choose to exploit.

As we reach the next level of the model, it is well to note that in one sense historians' interpretations of the past cut across the top three levels of the model. Decisions relating to the themes and topics to be investigated and the types of evidence that will be used are, to some extent, a function of the historian's professional preferences, viewpoints, and value system i.e., biases (in the non-pejorative sense of that term). The decision to use some types of evidence, but not others, at least partially structures the parameters of the content to be covered, and most definitely impacts the analysis of causation and significance of historical events. British historian A.J.P. Taylor unleashed one of the most acrimonious debates in the history of historical writing when he decided not to use the documentary evidence introduced in the Nuremberg trials of surviving top Nazi leaders in his general history of the background of World War II.<sup>7</sup> He did not deny the authenticity of the documents, just their historical utility for explaining the outbreak of the war. Since they had been assembled by the victors for the express purpose of condemning the policies of the vanquished, the collection represented a "stacked deck" whose

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<sup>5</sup> James Harvey Robinson. *The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook* (New York: Macmillan, 1912).

<sup>6</sup> In 1929 Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch founded the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* as a vehicle for challenging conventional historiography. By combining traditional questions and methods with new ones adopted from other disciplines, the *Annales* school promoted what Bloch later referred to as "that broadened and deepened history which some of us . . . have begun to conceive."

<sup>7</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Atheneum, 1961).

purpose was purely political. As a result of that decision, Taylor proceeded to reject the validity of the major conclusions of the War Crimes Tribunal. Hitler, he argued, had no blueprint nor timetable for conquest. He operated well within the parameters of the traditional German statecraft. He was an opportunist, albeit a bold and clever one, who merely took advantage of situations created by his counterparts in other countries. Clearly Taylor's decision to exclude the Nuremberg War Crimes evidence had the same impact on his verdict as a trial judge's decision to exclude a defendant's confession on the 5th Amendment grounds would have if it were the prosecution's primary evidence.

All the major schools of historical interpretation in the "modern" period, from the theological/eschatological to the Marxist, have made some fundamental assumptions about the relative merits of certain types of sources. These assumptions, in turn, have defined the interpretive framework within which the adherents of a given school operate. Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*<sup>8</sup> is as incomprehensible to the "modern" mind for its assumptions about the nature of God and His continuing active role in history as Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*<sup>9</sup> would have been to Mather. Mather could no more have produced his historical account without references to Biblical history and prophecies than Beard could have produced his without reference to "class" and "economic interests." On the other hand, neither found a place in his respective account for references to the role that sunspot activity may play in the great scheme of human affairs. One suspects that even if either had known what sunspots are, he would have considered them irrelevant to the topic under consideration, as virtually all contemporary historians do. However, it is not impossible to imagine that someday no general history of any period will be complete without an analysis of the impact of sunspot activity on climatic trends and how long-term weather patterns, in turn, impact various aspects of human activity, especially agricultural production, demographic patterns, long-term price structures, and even political and social unrest that could be responses to any and all of these factors<sup>10</sup>.

If the most distinctive historiographical patterns result from the use or neglect of certain *types* of sources, the fact is only the beginning of the explanation for the diversity found in historical interpretations. As was illustrated in the discussion of level three above, equally striking differences can result from the use of the same type of source, as when new conclusions or interpretations are forced by the discovery or utilizations of previously unknown or unused data. Differing views relating to the occurrence of events or even the existence of entire civilizations may be explained by this factor. But the most startling, and for the average student most disconcerting, source of *differing* interpretations arises from the diverse conclusions historians seem capable of drawing from essentially the same sources and data. Teachers can help students understand this type of interpretative diversity by

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<sup>8</sup> Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: or The Ecclesiastical History of New England* (London: T. Parkhurst, 1702).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

<sup>10</sup> The seventeenth-century crisis has generated some analyses along these lines, viz, Geoffrey Parker and Lesley W. Smith, eds., *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1978).

emphasizing that it typically relates to questions of historical causation, motivation, and significance of events rather than to the occurrence or non-occurrence of those events. In other words, these are questions relating to the "why" and "so what" rather than to the "who, what, where, and when" concerns of historians. It is simple to illustrate the sort of differences that arise among historians when they tackle such thorny questions as: Who was the best general in the Civil War? Who was most responsible for 'causing' World War I? Would Russia have had a revolution without (a) World War I, (b) Lenin, (c) any number of other factors? Could the Germans have won World War II if Hitler had not made his well-documented blunders in conducting Operation Barbarossa? What role did Stalin's personality play in the development of the Cold War? Was Gorbachev deserving of *Time's* Man of the Decade designation? Every student has had the experience of trying to analyze and explain his/her own decisions and actions to him/herself and others, and each has had the experience of seeing different interpretations placed on those decisions and actions by parents, teachers, and peers. Each has been in the position of interpreting others' actions and being aware of the differences that may arise between their interpretation and that given by the other party. As a result of these everyday life experiences, students can be led in fruitful analyses of the reasons for differing conclusions and interpretations and even of the very real difficulty in achieving genuine (non-rationalizing) self-analysis. Every facet of such a discussion has a corresponding application in understanding the process of historical interpretation.

As we arrive at the last level of the model, the concept contained there will be easily anticipated and appear self-evident to students who have followed what has been covered to this point. Far from the previous tendencies students may have had to regard a text as a definitive account, they will now see that it represents merely the tip of the iceberg of "history" and one of the last steps in the process of reconstructing and transmitting a knowledge of the past.<sup>11</sup> The text may now be seen as a product and as a tool. It is a product of the very process of historical interpretation of which it is itself a part. Textbooks both present interpretations of the past and are distillations of other historians' interpretations. The text can no longer be viewed as "history," but as a peephole through which one might squint for fragments of information and insight into the past.

I believe that a class period or two devoted to the "levels of history" and the nature of the historical process at the beginning of introductory courses can pay considerable dividends in students' understanding and appreciation of some of the most critical concepts involved in our discipline. And at the very least, it may prevent one from someday saying to a historian/colleague, "At least you teach a subject that never changes."

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<sup>11</sup> Arguably, the teacher further distills the text and other materials in written and/or oral form for the final stage in the process of transmitting history to the student.