

ASSIGNMENT 3: Historiography & Ideology

Historians have a habit of dividing history up into neat and tidy epochs. For example, current historians divide the world up into three major time periods, e.g. the ancient (or Classical) period, the medieval (or Middle Ages) period, and the modern. Christian historians writing during the early medieval period (10th century CE) broke history up into two major periods, e.g. the period before Christ (an age of darkness) and the period after Christ's birth (a time of light). Interestingly, medieval historians *always* began their history with events described in the *Book of Genesis*.

The type of history ultimately told reflects the **ideology**¹ (worldview) of the individual historian. For this reason two different historians (possessing different worldviews) will ultimately describe the exact same event quite differently. For example, the poet Petrarch described the time immediately following the fall of the Roman Empire as a "dark age". Petrarch's opinion reflected his personal bias (dislike) of literature produced by people living when he did compared to the writers of Classical antiquity like Virgil, Homer and Cicero. However, historians as recently as the 1980s and 1990s have looked at the time following Rome's decline and concluded the time was not so much as "dark" as it was "complicated" (some good things happened and some bad things happened).

Historiography, or the interpretation and creation of history, is not a science; it does make use of methods used by science like creating models, testing assumptions, seeking evidence, and so on. History might not be a science but this does not mean it is not useful. We just need to be aware of the problems associated with the telling of history:

- Each generation writes their own history
- History is always told from a particular vantage (or starting) point
- History is always affected by some form of bias (**ideology**)
- History reflects the values and fundamental assumptions of the individual historian

A). Types of Historiography

Below is a list of a historiographical approaches historians have taken over the years to tell their histories.

The Rational Human View: this view assumes people are rational creatures and seek to achieve goals through the exercise of reason and logic. The shortcoming of this view is it ignores all the evidence suggesting human beings tend to be more motivated out of emotion than anything else.

Historicism: a theory of history where it is believed historical events are not determined by human beings but by inescapable laws. For example, someone like Donald Trump was elected president of the United States not because of anything he did but because of the economic desperation of the Americans who voted for him. In other words economic factors, not human action, made history unfold as it did.

The Evolutionary View: time is moving forward in a straight line and over time things are changing and getting better and better. The assumption here is that *change*, not *continuity*, is the stronger historical force. The evolutionary view is overly simple because it ignores the fact societies do sometimes take steps backward; it is an overly optimistic view.

The Cycles View: history unfolds in neat and tidy identifiable time periods which differ from one another, e.g. the ancient world (people believed heavily in the reality of myth), middle ages (faith and reason enjoyed equal

¹ Ideology is defined as a "system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy."

status), and then the modern period characterized by either the Enlightenment or Renaissance periods (reason enjoyed almost exclusive emphasis).

The Great Man Theory: this historical theory assumes that every so often a “great person” (usually a man) rises and alters the course of history through the sheer force of his personality and will. In this case the word “great” means “influential” (not necessarily “good”). According to this view, historical figures like Adolf Hitler and Napoleon literally *make* history. This view ignores the role of sociological, economic, social, political and cultural factors when it comes to the shaping of history.

The Sociological View: this view emphasizes the importance of the actions and decisions made by everyday people in the shaping of history. In other words this view takes into consideration how the activity of the majority of society’s members leads a country in either this or that direction.

Learning Objective: to gain an appreciation how ideology and historiography shapes the telling of history.

B). Ideologies

There are six main ideologies shaping the telling of history, e.g. **socialism** (power and money should be distributed equally); **liberalism** (individuals should be free from the interference of governments); **conservatism** (society needs strong laws to function in an orderly fashion); **Marxism** (corporations exploit workers); **fascism** (a nation must protect itself from enemies within it); and **nationalism** (my people must have a country of their own).

Procedure

- 1). Get organized into groups of three to four students.
- 2). Below each group will find a series of quotations. For each quote complete the following tasks: firstly, as a group discuss what you believe the quotation is literally saying; secondly, decide which type of historiography the quote belongs to (see A); and lastly, decide what ideology is reflected by the specific quote (see B).

Quotations

1). *The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom. For in all the states of created beings capable of law, where there is no law, there is no freedom.*

What it means?

What type of historiography the quote reflects and why?

What ideology the quote reflects and why?

2). *The obligation of subjects to the sovereign is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth by which he is able to protect them.*

What it means?

What type of historiography the quote reflects and why?

What ideology the quote reflects and why?

3). *The art of leadership consists in consolidating the attention of the people against a single adversary and taking care that nothing will split that attention.*

What it means?

What type of historiography the quote reflects and why?

What ideology the quote reflects and why?

4). *The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.*

What it means?

What type of historiography the quote reflects and why?

What ideology the quote reflects and why?

5). A country is not a mere territory; the particular territory is only its foundation. The country is the idea which rises upon that foundation; it is the sentiment of love, the sense of fellowship which binds together all the sons of that territory.

What it means?

What type of historiography the quote reflects and why?

What ideology the quote reflects and why?