

How to Think (and Talk and Write) Like a Historian

History 208 Europe in Era of Total War – October 2020 – gks

History. The study of the past. Not “the past.” From the Greek, “*historia*,” meaning “inquiry.” History is an investigation into the past.

The Five C's of History. Historians like to talk about the “five C's,” important concepts of historical thinking: Change & Continuity, Context, Causality, Contingency, Complexity. We can explain these and go beyond them.

Change & continuity. This is the historian's bread and butter. What changes? What remains the same? We can point to continuities across very different periods. Or to decisive changes. International relations (the power balance in Europe), for example. Or to the emotional values surrounding death and grief, for example. Beware of the expression: “throughout history”; historians hate it. Remember these words of wisdom: history changes slowly, except when it doesn't.

Turning points. Moments in time – or particular events – at which history turns. We look frequently to dates of major conflicts and think of how the world looked before and after. 1914. 1945. But we can also look to moments in time that represent new ways of understanding the world. 1919 and the Paris Peace Conference, for example. Or the 1930s and the Depression.

Chronology and periodization. What is your chronology? What is your periodization? And what defines each period? Such questions invite us to line up events in time and understand their relationship.

Context. A classic historian's tool. We can ask of anything: what is its context? A memoir from 1937 (such as Orwell's). An artistic manifesto from 1909 (such as Marinetti's futurist manifesto). A political movement (such as the popular front in 1930s France). Looking to context – political, social, cultural, etc. – can help us to understand events.

Causality. Or forces of change. The causes of change are rarely singular. We can often point to several forces of change that produce events. What produced the First World War? No single answer will do.

Contingency. An advanced term, but an important one. The contingency of history reminds us that “every historical outcome depends upon a complicated web of prior conditions.... Change a single prior condition, and any historical outcome could have turned out differently.”

Complexity. In understanding historical change and continuity, historians often insist upon complexity. History is not an experiment with a dependent and independent variable. There are usually more variables than can be easily accounted for. Thus, historians prefer to analyze the many factors behind historical change.

The Historian's Approach. A frame of mind. Don't rush to judgements – consider evidence. See multiple perspectives. Make distinctions. Understand complexity!

The “burden of the past.” Remember these words of Karl Marx: People “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.” The past provides the circumstances that shape the present. (Note: you don't need to follow the thinking of Marx the revolutionary to learn from Marx the historian!)

Historical legacies. Another way of talking about the “burden of the past,” though historical legacies are not necessarily burdens. The term points us to the lasting influence of the past upon the present. This influence may have to do with a wide variety of things: demographic patterns, culture, institutions, economic development, etc.

Primary sources. Texts, images, documents, artifacts, anything, really, that provides an entryway to another time or place. These are not a direct transmission from the past, but documents that require contextualization and interpretation. We should understand primary sources as the product of a particular moment in time and a particular culture.

Secondary sources. The work of historians, arguments about the past based on evidence and analysis.

Historiography. The study of historical writing, in general; or more specifically, the body of historical work on a particular subject. So, we might refer to the historiography of homicide, or the historiography of British colonialism, or the historiography of the prison.

What is history good for? Not predicting the future, not preventing the mistakes of the past (as Michael Herr memorably wrote, “those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it as well”). History helps us understand the world, helps us understand others (the cultivation of empathy), helps us understand the constraints on societies and individuals, helps us fathom other ways of doing things, helps us sharpen our own values. More than this, it helps us cultivate a healthy skepticism. And it can help us understand how change can play out (Michael Hunt: “the highly contingent nature of our world”).