

GLOSSARY OF HISTORIOGRAPHIC TERMS

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The entries in this glossary fall into two categories. The first half describes “traits” and “approaches,” or terms that you can use to describe a historian’s scholarship, method, politics, or overall worldview. The second half contains more general terms that historians often use in conversation with each other. Try them out with other history professors and with classmates, but be careful if using them amidst the general public; these terms have the power to either attract or repel non-historians.

PART ONE: TRAITS OR APPROACHES

Bottom-Up Approach: Scholarship that attempts to explain the experiences or perspectives of ordinary people, as opposed to elites or leaders. See also top-down approach. Sample usages: “Many labor historians use a bottom-up approach.” or “This book on Chinese peasant life examines history from the bottom-up.”

Consensus History: Most popular in the 1950s, this school of U.S. history challenged Progressive and Marxist beliefs and instead emphasized that the United States has had in its history very little class tensions, or any other kind of profound division. Although some consensus historians lamented this lack of internal conflict in the U.S. society, most celebrated this trait as a sign of American greatness. On foreign relations, consensus historians stressed that Americans have been united in policies that have promoted freedom and opposed tyranny.

Cultural Approach: The cultural approach or “cultural history approach” refers to any scholarship that analyzes the emotions, images, and sense of identity held by people in the past. While traditional social history is mainly concerned with people’s

experiences, the cultural approach emphasizes that humans experience life subjectively. Thus cultural historians focus on the meanings that people in the past assigned to those experiences. Sometimes scholars will refer to the cultural approach as “the New Cultural History.” See also thick description. **Warning:** Just because a historian focuses on a particular ethnic or “cultural” group such as Mexican Americans or Italian Americans does not mean that this historian is using a cultural approach. Scholars often use traditional social or political history to tell the history of these groups.

Cultural History, or Traditional Cultural History: As a topic, cultural history refers to studies of cultural practices such as music, theater, or film. Traditional cultural history has some roots in the older notion of culture as “the best that has been said and thought.” This quotation comes from 19th-century English cultural critic, Matthew Arnold. This narrow and potentially elitist definition of culture contrasts with the cultural approach’s definition. Historians using the cultural approach typically draw on cultural anthropologists’ sense that everything humans do and think, from opera to middle-school dances to income-tax forms, can be seen as cultural.

Economic Determinist: A historian who believes that economics is the main or sole driving force in human history. See also Marxist.

Environmental History: An approach that examines how nature (i.e. animals, plants, microbes, ecosystems, and geology) has shaped human agency and structures, and how humans have shaped nature. Some historians using an environmental approach even blur the binary distinction between “human” and “nature.”

Ethnohistory: This approach most often addresses the history of native peoples, especially indigenous peoples of the Americas. To understand indigenous people’s agency, ethnohistorians supplement written historical documents with methods from anthropology, folklore, oral history, and archeology.

Feminist: A set of values held by historians (typically on the left) who see history as a way to combat or at least better understand patriarchy (i.e. the political, social, economic, and/or cultural forces that have granted power to men and limited women’s equality).

Leftist: In the United States, leftist historians have enjoyed particularly notable influence in academic life in a few different chronological periods. See each entry for more details: Progressive (1910s or 1920s), Old Left (1930s), and New Left (1960s-present). Each school showed varying degrees of engagement with Marx.

Marxian: A watered-down variation of Marxist, sometimes used to refer to a historian or theorist with some Marxist intellectual traits, but without the political ideology of a full-fledged Marxist.

Marxist: Someone who believes that human history is dominated by different forms of class struggle and that the best way to understand historical change is to start by studying who controls the economy and how the economy operates. Marxism can be an impartial intellectual philosophy, although it can also refer to a political ideology that hopes to see the process of class struggle lead eventually to a communist revolution. See also Economic Determinist, Marxian, structuralism, and teleology.

New Left: A set of values held by U.S. historians on the left who criticize the consensus school. Where consensus historians emphasized American unity, New Left scholars generally call attention to how America has been divided by race, class, and gender. The New Left also criticized the Old Left for focusing too much on class inequality (and not on race and gender). This school emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

Old Left: A set of values held by U.S. historians on the left during the 1930s who emphasized social class issues. Unlike New Left historians, the Old Left was less concerned issues of race and gender. Very similar to Progressive History. Some leftist historians since the 1960s still ignore race and class issues, so in a sense, the Old Left has never disappeared.

Political History: Political history refers to studies of government policy, political parties, elections, and other aspects of government activity. Some historians might use a cultural approach or a social approach to study political history. Other historians just describe and analyze the political process without using any special method. This last type can be called “traditional political history.” Note: Sometimes scholars study the political process of non-governmental groups. Think for instance of a historian who studies the internal politics

within a labor union. This historian would be using a “political approach” to study labor history.

Postmodernism, or poststructuralism: Postmodernism rose in prominence in the 1970s and 1980s and is still controversial. Sometimes scholars use “poststructuralism” as a rough synonym for postmodernism. It is difficult to define either term, but here are some suggestions:

You might be a postmodernist or a poststructuralist if you use the cultural approach AND if one or more of the following apply to you:

- You are intellectually or politically attracted to big structures like capitalism or patriarchy, but you also believe that big sweeping models like Marxism are too simple. You believe that structures are full of exceptions and ironies and therefore are not as powerful or predictable as structuralists would think.
- You enjoy pointing out that seemingly straightforward concepts of identity (such as “I am an American” or “I am a man”) are full of complications and contradictions. You believe that words like “man” or “American” have no fixed or inherent meaning.
- You emphasize the limits to binary distinctions such as “gay-vs.-straight” or “high culture-vs.-popular culture” or “reality vs. representation.” You believe that tidy binaries obscure more complex gray areas.
- You question the ability of words and language to convey reality.
- You question the ability of scholars to prove any “cause and effect” relationship. You think, “Nobody can ever tell why the French Revolution broke out.”
- You question the concept of reality itself.

Progressive School: A type of scholarship prominent in the 1910s and 1920s that often emphasized class tensions and material interests as key forces shaping U.S. history. More Marxian than Marxist, the Progressives hoped to promote reform in pre-World War II America. After the war, however, consensus history became the new norm in historiography. However, the New Left carries on many of the Progressive themes.

Quantitative History: Scholarship that relies extensively or even exclusively on statistics to draw its conclusions. Most often used as part of a social history approach.

Social History: History that attempts to describe the experiences of ordinary people, or that attempts to describe relatively objective patterns in social groups. Social history is often (but not always) history from the bottom-up. Social history is sometimes difficult to distinguish from cultural history, especially because many cultural historians use elements of social history to set up their cultural arguments. One helpful rule of thumb is that social history is primarily concerned with the reality of what life was like for ordinary people. The cultural approach, in contrast, is generally less interested in material conditions and more interested in how people in the past represented reality or constructed identity and emotions. Warning: There are many definitions of social history. Some scholars use the term to refer to any bottom-up history, including scholarship using the cultural approach. For our purposes, however, we will emphasize the more specific definition provided just above.

Structuralism: Before turning to structuralism, it's helpful first to figure out what historians mean by the term "structure." A structure refers to some impersonal force or context that shapes or constrains human agency. Structures can be very big, wide-reaching, and long-lasting, or they can be relatively small and transient. Examples of big or deep structures include capitalism, patriarchy, and the concept of the autonomous individual. A small structure might be the furniture arrangement in a classroom; the furniture creates a structure because the arrangement of chairs and desks shapes students' behavior (or students' agency). However, classroom chairs are a small, weak structure, because we could rearrange them more easily than we could bigger, deeper structures. An example of a medium-sized structure could be the two-party system that currently structures U.S. politics. The two-party system probably will not last as long as capitalism, but it will likely last longer than the furniture arrangement in a classroom.

Now on to the "-ism" part. Historians usually reserve the term "structuralism" only for those scholars who emphasize the power of broad and deep societal structures. Historians use the term less often in reference to smaller-scale structures like classroom furniture or the two-party political system. Thus, for our purposes, structuralism refers to theoretical frameworks that emphasize one or more broad, intangible structures as a driving force in human history. These historians emphasize that big structures are powerful, wide-reaching, very hard to change, and sometimes hard to even notice.

Structuralists tend to downplay the ability of individuals, ideas, or random events to change the course of history, because it's the structure that determines what happens. According to structuralists, human agency is not as important as the big structure. For an example, see Marxism. **Warning:** Just because a historian mentions capitalism or some other big abstraction does not make that historian a structuralist. To qualify for the label structuralist, the scholar would have to argue that capitalism overwhelms human agency and profoundly shapes society.

Top-Down Approach: Scholarship that emphasizes elites and leaders, as opposed to average people. Think, for instance, of a book of World War II that focused on Franklin Roosevelt rather than on the lives of ordinary Americans. See also bottom-up.

Traditional: Scholarship that does not employ any special approach can be called "traditional ___ history" [fill in the relevant topic]. You can use this to refer to works that do not employ quantitative, cultural, structuralist, and poststructuralist approaches. For instance, a straightforward narrative of a labor union's formation might be called "traditional labor history." A straightforward account of a Congressional election would be "traditional political history."

Transnational: In the 19th and 20th centuries, historians often wrote histories that aimed to build a strong nation-state identity among their readers. Mandatory U.S. history courses in K-12 schools and colleges reflect this nationalist tradition. In the 1990s, however, when "globalization" became a buzzword, increasing numbers of historians embraced "transnational" perspectives. The transnational approach emphasizes that nation-states have never been self-contained communities. Transnational historians frequently examine global or border-crossing trends and movements, such as migration, cross-cultural exchange, economic networks, and environmental flows.

Note: International vs. Transnational? Whereas "international" history assumes that two separate and distinct nation-states could have relations with each other, transnational history assumes that the borders separating nation-states are porous, and that much human activity takes place in contexts that transcend any one nation-state. Historians can blend elements of both too.

PART TWO: OTHER TERMS

Agency: The ability to exert some control over one's own life or surroundings. Some historians use an even broader definition of "agency" that includes attempts (even unsuccessful attempts) to take matters into one's own hands. In most basic terms, "agency" is the opposite of "passivity." Historians using a bottom-up approach frequently search for agency among disadvantaged people (e.g. slaves, factory workers, etc.).

Approach: A way or method of studying a topic. For instance, a scholar who uses pop music to explain the result of a presidential election would be using a cultural approach to study the topic of political history. By contrast, a scholar who studies the influence of Washington on Hollywood movies would be employing a political approach to study a topic in cultural history. Words like "method" and "school" are basically synonyms with the word "approach." Often scholars will use more than one approach in the same book or article.

Discourse: A term sometimes used in the cultural approach to refer to a set of beliefs or images that has crystallized into a fairly coherent set of powerful ideas. This term can be roughly synonymous with the concept of ideology.

Essentialize: To essentialize is to make a specific kind of overgeneralization. It refers to assuming the existence of some kind of inner "essence" shared by a group that is in reality diverse. For instance, "The Estonian national character prevents happiness" is an essentialist statement, because it assumes that a single Estonian character or essence exists and that all people who live in Estonia share it.

Gender: Refers to how various societies define what it means to be a man or a woman. Different from "sex," which refers mainly to biological differences. In other words, gender is inherently cultural.

Presentist History: A term used to describe historians whose present-day concerns influence the way they study and write about the past. Although one can argue that all historians have at least some present-day concerns that influence their scholarship,

historians often use the term as a pejorative to criticize bias in another historian.

Primary Source: A source from the time period under study. Examples of primary sources include diaries, letters, newspaper and magazine articles (if published during the time period under study), interviews and testimonies from participants in events, government reports, and statistical information. See also secondary source.

Revisionist History: A catch-all term without much real analytical value. Still, the term can convey useful ideas in certain specific circumstances. The word today has at least three meanings: 1) a neutral term to refer to a scholar who is revising a previous interpretation (in this general and bland usage, every original historian is a revisionist historian); 2) a term used by conservatives to describe, and usually criticize, scholarship on the Left that casts the United States in a negative light; and 3) a term that has specific and commonly-understood meanings in some historiographic subfields. For instance, in the United States, the history of the Cold War in the 1950s had a strong "orthodox" school of thought that blamed the conflict on Soviet aggression. Some historians began to challenge that interpretation in the 1960s, and these critics of U.S. foreign policy became known as "Cold War revisionists." In contrast, the first wave of scholarship on the U.S. war in Vietnam emphasized how the U.S. war was misguided, tragic, and futile. But some historians since the 1980s have challenged this orthodoxy. Now, historians who emphasize that the United States was right to fight in Vietnam (an argument usually made on the Right) are known as "Vietnam War revisionists." In this third style of usage, the meaning of "revisionism" depends entirely on what seems to be the original "orthodox" view that is being challenged.

Secondary Source: A source created after the time period. Secondary sources are usually articles and books by scholars or other authors written years after the events described. See also primary source.

Teleology: A system of thought that claims to know the grand sweep of history, including how the future will end. A teleology usually posits a big central idea or force that gives a direction or sweeping narrative to the passage of time. In a teleology, that central idea or force will lead inevitably to a specific future outcome in which history

as we know it will come to an end. Marx's notion of an inevitable communist revolution is an example of a teleological belief. Other teleologies include bold beliefs in the inevitable march of progress, such as democratic or technological progress. Teleologies can also be pessimistic, such as a belief in universal damnation or inexorable societal decline.

Thick Description: A concept borrowed from cultural anthropologists, particularly Clifford Geertz, and used in contrast to "thin description." A thin description is a straightforward description of an event or text. A thick description attempts to uncover the ambiguities, coded meanings, or subtle gendered or racialized messages that can lurk behind a word choice, a ritual act, or a material artifact. When you see thick description, you are most likely encountering a cultural approach. **Warning:** "Thick description" is NOT the same as detailed description. Just because a historian goes into extensive detail on an event or text does not mean that this historian is using thick description. Thick description requires that the scholar explicitly analyze the deeper cultural codes and meanings behind an event or text.