HISTORIOGRAPHY:

The Presentation of History

Historiography, literally the "writing of history," is the study of the way history is presented. As historians gather more and more information about the past, the natural questions became 'What's important?', 'What do I emphasize?' Several different principles developed as historians began the task of evaluating data and selecting the material to be presented. These principles provide an interpretation of history, or a focal theme around which other information begins to form a pattern. Writers of history, and lecturers on history, rely on these principles to determine what to present and the manner in which it is presented.

A basic knowledge of these various interpretations of history will help you succeed in your history classes because it will help you understand both your history text and professor. The study of history at the college level is not a mere rehearsal of simple narratives focusing on persons, places and dates. There is usually a theme, an interpretation, a method in the madness. The resourceful and reflective student will look for that theme. Since that theme guides your instructor in the selection and presentation of material, it should also guide you in your study and test preparation.

I. THE HUMANISTIC INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

The humanistic interpretation of history was derived from the classical historians and was reinvigorated during the Renaissance period. The humanistic perspective is characterized by its emphasis on (a) politics and (b) great personalities combined into (c) a lively historical narrative. This approach to history focuses upon humanity's struggles for power, the conflict between individuals and the state, the relations between nations, and the great personalities as the bearers of historical change. The focus here is to look for universal patterns of conflict among nations or great personalities and the results of those conflicts.

II. THE ROMANTIC INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

The romantic interpretation of history developed during the early part of the nineteenth century. This perspective is characterized by its focus on the nation as a whole. The nation becomes a personality, and its continuity over a long period, the rise and the triumphs as well as the anguish and the failure of the nation, become the focus of the historian's presentation. To portray the nation as a living organism through time, attention to political affairs and great personalities is inadequate. This nation must be revealed through all its manifestations; social and economic life, art, literature, science, and popular culture.

Because of the in-depth study of one nation as a separate and distinctive organism, the romantic interpretation of history often leads to a kind of obliviousness, even blindness, to similar or parallel manifestations of political, social, economic and cultural activity among other nations. It is almost as if each nation is left to solve its struggles alone, without learning from the experience of other nations.

III. COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF HISTORY

Comparative interpretations of history seek to identify common phenomena in various societies and to examine the past for recurring patterns of social and political change. Drawing upon many concepts from the social sciences, this view of history seeks to identify the clarify recurrent patterns (such as industrialization, bureaucracy, revolution, urbanization, etc.) and to ascertain the general modes of social, political and economic behavior in the past.

The Impressionistic View is an explanation of the Romantic view, but with a difference. The historian communicates his impression of certain recurring patterns in history through the comparison of two or more different countries or civilizations. The historian still focuses on the full manifestation of a country or civilization (as in the Romantic view) while searching for certain universal patterns or lessons (as in the humanistic view).

The Economic View, derived largely from Karl Marx's economic theory, focuses on economic factors as the driving force of history. This approach sees history as the struggle between those who do, and those who do not, control the natural resources of a country and the means of production. This approach gathers statistical data on the changes in such factors as economic growth, the distribution of wealth, the demographics of the population, voting patterns, etc.

The Sociological View, drawing on the work of Max Weber and Karl Marx's social theories, attempts to develop a hypothetical model of a type of society, such as an agrarian or industrializing society, and then examines the American, British, Chinese, French, etc., experience to discover where it is currently in light of the abstract model as well as what we might expect to happen in the future.

The Multi-cultural View focuses on the diverse ethnic groups involved in a period of history or composing a particular country, and then attempts to identify the unique characteristics and contributions which each group made, or is making, to the country or period.

IV. AMERICAN APPROACHES TO HISTORIOGRAPHY

We Americans in general take our history and culture seriously. In fact, we take our history and culture less for granted than many other countries. We make our history the subject of probing and discussion. One reason for this is that Americans share no ancient language or common ethnic heritage by which to define the American identity or nationality. Another reason may be the relatively brief length, comparatively speaking, of America's history.

Using the previously mentioned interpretations as their bases, American historians have produced two distinct methods, or schools of thought, for presenting our own history. The first of these schools of presentation is known as **the Optimistic (or Consensus) school**. Advocates of this interpretative school offer "the official" version of American history. This version interprets our history as cheerful and optimistic. The official view is that our history is a series of triumphs, from the coming of the Pilgrims seeking religious freedom, to the industrialization of the eastern states, to the expansion of the railroad system and the development of the natural resources of the western states, to reform and the New Deal. Such historians will talk of the 'triumph' of American democracy of the 'rise' of American civilization.

The second school of presentation is known as **the Self-Critical (or Conflict) school**. Advocates of this interpretative school probe our history on behalf of those who have not shared the triumph. This version interprets our history as paradoxical. Some historians point out the following type of paradoxes in our history:

- 1. The nation that talks most about freedom was the main defender of slavery in the 19th century.
- 2. The great spokesman of liberty and democracy -- Washington, Jefferson, Jackson -- were large slaveholders.
- 3. The triumphs of American history carried out against a backdrop of race war and the extermination of native cultures.
- 4. There is still considerable poverty in America.
- 5. This country has had a habit of violence: on the frontier, in slavery, and even in war.

Advocates of this school do not ignore such paradoxes in our history. Consequently, the result is not an altogether rosy picture; and it can be a bit perplexing. The instructor cannot make the subject easy for students; and he cannot resolve the paradoxes.

Being aware of these different interpretations of history should permit you to understand your text and professor. Such an awareness will make your course more enjoyable as you detect the unfolding of the story (theme) and as you begin to anticipate what is coming next. And such an awareness will enable you to be better prepared for exams or to write better papers.

Which of these methods of presenting history do you think is most often employed in the study of ancient civilizations such as the Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, or Roman empires? Why?

2. Which of these methods of presenting history do you think is most often employed in the study of modern European history? Why?

3. Which of these methods of presenting history do you think is most often employed in the study of American history? Why? Might some other method be more suitable?

4. Which of these methods of presenting history do you think is most often utilized by your history instructor?

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