"History does not repeat itself. The historians repeat one another."

*Max Beerbohm*

"History has to be rewritten because history is the selection of those threads of causes or antecedents that we are interested in."

*Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*

A university professor once berated a young graduate student for what he termed "stale historiography." A fellow student later said this sounded something akin to bad breath. What the professor meant, of course, was that the student was not familiar with the most recent scholarly interpretations in a particular subfield of history.

"Historiography" is not a word normally found in everyday reading, but you probably already know the concept even if the word itself is unfamiliar. Literally the word means "the writing of history." In modern usage, however, the word refers to the study of the way history has been and is written—the history of historical writing, if you will. When you study "historiography" you are studying how individual historians have interpreted and presented specific subjects, such as the collapse of the Roman Empire, the causes of the industrial revolution, or the end of the Cold War. For example, to learn about the variety of ways historians have tried to explain the coming of the American Civil War is to become familiar with the "historiography" of that subject.

It is our purpose in this chapter to provide a thumbnail sketch of the history of historical writing in the West in order to acquaint you with some of the defining moments in the evolution of the discipline. Keep in mind, however, that such a brief survey can only trace the faint outlines of a subject that is rich in both variety and complexity. In addition, be warned that you should view with suspicion any secondhand summary—including ours—of another historian's work. If you want to know what a historian says about a subject, you should read that historian's work yourself. As a final caution, remember that we discuss historiography in terms of exceedingly broad trends and patterns, but few individual works will ever fit the pattern exactly.

**History: The Beginnings**

The Western tradition of historical writing began with the ancient Hebrews (Jews) and Greeks. The Jews, in their long struggle for freedom and autonomy, developed the belief that they were special in the eyes of God and that their historical expe-

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1 Some historians see that war as a conflict between an agrarian economy (the South) and an industrializing economy (the North), others emphasize slavery as the primary cause, still others see states' rights versus federal sovereignty as the issue at stake.
riences reflected God’s will. Conscious of their role as God’s “chosen people,” the Jews wrote history as a chronicle of their continuing and evolving relationship with the Creator. Essentially the books of the Old Testament of the Bible (some elements of which may date as far back as 1000 B.C.) constitute a written history of the Jewish people and Hebrew nation. This God-centered historical perspective of the Old Testament was destined to have a long and influential run in Western intellectual history, as we shall see.

If Jewish historical writing was “God-centered,” it was the ancient Greeks who first wrote history in self-consciously human terms. At first the Greeks saw both their own past and the workings of the physical universe as the products of supernatural forces and the intervention of the gods. Later, in the sixth century B.C., a number of Greek philosophers began to reject supernatural explanations in favor of natural ones. They saw nature as functioning according to concrete “natural” laws that could be comprehended through human reason. Likewise, in the realm of human affairs, the Greeks increasingly saw history as the product of human actions and decisions, and believed that accounts of the past should be based on solid evidence, not legend or myth.

Herodotus (ca. 484-ca. 425 B.C.), often called the “Father of History,” wrote the first systematic historical work based on personal observations and the examination of witnesses and surviving records. In his account of the Greek wars against the Persians he admittedly included many fanciful myths and unsubstantiated legends, but essentially his was a history of human actions told in human terms. Thucydides (ca. 460-400 B.C.), who, a generation later, wrote a justly famous history of the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 B.C.), was even more careful in his use and analysis of evidence. He insisted that his history include only relevant, verifiable facts, and that it explain events only in ways that could be substantiated by the evidence (The English word “history” comes from the Greek word for “research.”) In Thucydides’ work we first see what moderns would call a true historical spirit.

There was little change in the nature of written history after Greece succumbed to the power of Rome in the second century B.C. However, during the European Middle Ages (ca. A.D. 500-1400) a change of some magnitude took place. With the triumph of Christianity, history writing again became more concerned with the relationship between the human experience and Christian perceptions of God’s eternal plan. Christian historiography mirrored that of the Jews, not that of the Greeks and Romans, although Greek and Roman influences were still evident. To Christian writers in the Medieval period, human experiences on earth were but a minor part of a larger drama—the unfolding of God’s divine plan for humanity. It was the job of written history, therefore, to find and reveal the transcendent design of God hidden in the chaos of day-to-day events. That is why many histories written in the Middle Ages began with the biblical story of creation and incorporated that part of the Jewish Old Testament tradition that fit the redemptive message of Christianity. The proper subject of written history, in the eyes of the Christian monks who wrote it, was not the earthly fate of a particular state or people, but the universal drama of humanity’s quest for salvation. We might note in passing that those very monks were also the inventors of the conventional western calendar that distinguishes between the events that occurred before the birth of Christ (B.C.) and those that came after (A.D., Anno Domini, “in the year of the lord”).

Only in the Renaissance (the 1400s and 1500s) did historians return to the more secular, humanistic style of the Greeks. Especially important were a number
of Italian historians, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1540) and Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1527) being the best known. Although the Renaissance historians were Christians, they believed that the function of history was to narrate the experiences of particular states and individuals, not to reveal God’s designs in the earthly affairs of humanity. The Renaissance also saw the gradual emergence of new critical standards for collecting, reading, and interpreting evidence. History was not yet recognized as an independent field of study (like theology or law), but the path was now clearly marked.

In spite of the long tradition of history writing in the West, history emerged as a formal academic study only in the early nineteenth century. Of course, there were many pre-nineteenth-century historians who produced works of great power and sophistication, as any reader of Gibbon (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) or Thucydides can attest. On the whole, though, such works were few and far between, for history still lacked a coherent and workable critical methodology. Much history was written, but seldom did the historians actively consider the criteria for writing good history. Many pre-nineteenth-century historians handled evidence with a cavalier disregard for critical standards. Often they cited no sources whatever; on other occasions they accepted myth, legend, and gossip as established fact; on yet others, they read or interpreted records with too much credulity and too little skepticism.

In another way, the pre-nineteenth-century historians had a blind spot. They did not fully understand that in some respects past ages differed from their own; they had difficulty realizing that styles, habits, and values changed over time. For instance, even though a number of Renaissance scholars became increasingly conscious that the classical past that they studied was radically different from their own time, this insight was never fully internalized. There are many Renaissance paintings, for example, that portray biblical scenes in which individuals from the time of Christ are dressed as fifteenth-century Florentines and surrounded by buildings constructed in the architectural styles of the Italian Renaissance. The equivalent today would be a painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware River in a car ferry while dressed in a double-breasted pin-striped suit.

Conversely, when many of the early historians did perceive differences between their age and another, their response was not to try to understand that which was different, but to denounce it. Thus did Voltaire, in the eighteenth century, dismiss the Middle Ages as unworthy of study because medieval men and women were not “enlightened,” as he felt himself to be. Such an attitude, as we have seen is ahistorical (See Chapter 5, “Context.”)

**Leopold Von Ranke and the Rise of Modern History**

Historical studies came into their own following the immense political and social upheavals associated with the French Revolution (1789–1815). The French Revolution represented a massive break with the past and, paradoxically, made people much more “history-conscious” than ever before. Thus, it was in the nineteenth century that history became the “Queen of the Sciences” and earned a permanent place in the academy.

The man most responsible for elevating the study of history to a new plateau was the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). Ranke’s contributions were threefold: (1) he played a leading role in establishing history as a respected discipline in the universities, (2) he firmly established the notion that all sound history must be based on primary sources and a rigorous methodology, and (3)
he reflected the broader nineteenth-century attempt to define the concept of "historical-mindedness." Of these, the latter two points require further elaboration.

**Ranke and Historical Method**

Previously, as we mentioned above, much history was written, but "there was no systematic use of sources and no accepted methodological principles." Many pre-Rankean historians relied heavily on the work of other authors (secondary sources) rather than going to the original documents, or primary sources. Ranke (pronounced "Ronkuh"), on the other hand, stressed the importance of basing any historical narrative firmly on the reading of primary sources. Furthermore, he insisted that the historian constantly inform the reader of the specific sources upon which a given point was based. Hence the central importance, after Ranke, of thorough footnotes (or endnotes) and bibliographies. (Now you know whom to blame.) In a word, Ranke popularized the idea that history could be "scientific"—not in the sense that history could discover general laws of behavior, but in that historical writing should be based on rigorous critical standards.

**Ranke and Historical Mindedness**

Ranke also contributed to the rise of the conviction that one should not study a past age in terms of one's own values and culture but in terms of the values and realities of the age itself. According to Ranke, one should not make moral judgments on past individuals and past cultures but try to understand them on their own terms. To Ranke, every age and individual was "immediate to God" (did not need to be justified) and worthy of our sympathy and understanding. Ranke appreciated the fact that things do change over time, and this basic insight is central to the whole process of thinking historically.

Ranke, then, and many other eminent scholars, established the study of history on a firm methodological foundation. But what sorts of things did these pioneers write about? Space forbids a detailed treatment of history and historians in the nineteenth century, but two general points can be made:

1. Most nineteenth-century history was political, legal, or diplomatic in emphasis, as historians began to get access to government archives that had hitherto been closed to researchers. Their work, which reflected the character of the documents, naturally focused on the actions of kings, parliaments, law courts, armies, navies, and diplomats—"drum and trumpet" history as it came to be called. The nineteenth-century historians also studied and wrote about the history of ideas—especially the political and legal ideas that had played a role in the evolution of nations and legal systems.

2. Nineteenth-century history, especially in Europe, tended to have a national focus—more in the sense of "nationality" than "nation-state." During that era a number of "new" nations, or ethnic groups, perceiving their cultural and historical uniqueness, began to explore their own historical roots with great vigor. Even history coming out of the more established nations, such as England and France, reflected this compulsion to probe the depths of their national experience. Much the same could be said of the histories produced in nineteenth-century America.

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Across the board, historiography during this period tended to be ethnocentric and nationalistic.

**Karl Marx and History**

If Ranke and his contemporaries saw only politics and diplomacy as worthy of the historian's attention, it was the German economist and revolutionary philosopher Karl Marx who opened historians' eyes to the importance of social and economic forces in human affairs. Marx (1818–1883) is widely recognized as one of the most influential thinkers of the last one hundred and fifty years. Much modern scholarship in history, economics, political theory, sociology, and philosophy cannot be fully appreciated without some understanding of Karl Marx's ideas. This is not the place to discuss Marx's system in detail, but a few words concerning his impact on the discipline of history are in order. It should be noted from the start, however, that a consideration of Marx the historian can be effectively divorced from consideration of Marx the prophet of socialism. In the latter guise Marx, and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels, postulated a broadly "progressive" theory of history, which held that human societies would evolve through a number of stages culminating in the establishment (through revolution) of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" and, eventually, a classless society. This was a secular version of the medieval Christian conviction that the human race was moving toward a "preordained goal."

More important for our purposes is the fact that Marx opened new intellectual vistas by breaking out of the political-diplomatic straitjacket that had bound most historical investigations before his time. Marx, says one American historian, "became the first to formulate, in explicit fashion, the economic interpretation of history." Marx (and Engels) argued that, at any given point in time, the mode of economic production determined, to a great extent, the character of the entire society—its ideas, values, political structure, and social relations. To some of Marx's more dogmatic followers, this insight was converted into a thoroughgoing economic determinism. That is, economic forces were seen to determine totally the nature of society, and changes in the economic structure were considered the sole engine of historical change. Marx himself never went so far; late in life he even commented: "I am not a Marxist." Marx and Engels did not deny that noneconomic factors could be contributing causes of events. They simply asserted that economic factors were of primary importance.

Within this general framework, the history of economic and social classes was more relevant than the history of great men or ruling elites. "The history of all hitherto existing society," wrote Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, "is the history of class struggle." This, of course, is a debatable conclusion. Of significance though is the fact that Marx and Engels saw class interests as a vital element in any historical equation.

Marx's impact on politics and political thought has been immense and requires no further comment. But what of Marx's impact on the writing of history?

In communist countries, of course, where Marxism in some form or another was (and, in a few cases, still is) an official ideology, historical writing has been "Marxist" in the extreme. And, quite frankly, much of it is not very good history. Evidence was chosen, organized, analyzed, and interpreted more with an eye to

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1Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History* (Chicago Quadrangle Books, 1963), 268
validating the ideology than establishing the best true account of the past. Much official communist history written before 1989 in Russia and eastern Europe, and elsewhere even today, suffers from this defect. In fairness, we should also note that noncommunist history is not immune from this failing, and any time scholarship is subordinated to the dictates of an ideology—Marxism or any other—it is truth that suffers.

In the noncommunist West the influence of Marx, while great, has been less direct. In the broadest sense Marx is significant because, by emphasizing the importance of economic factors in history, he opened the door to a new approach to the past. Few historians today, whatever their political orientation, would deny the validity of exploring the role of social classes, economic interests, and modes of production in the historical process. Economic interpretations have, in fact, become a staple of American historiography. A famous (and controversial) example is Charles A. Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* published in 1913. In that work Beard examined the economic interests of the framers of the Constitution and concluded that the Constitution was designed more to protect property rights than political rights. Whatever the accuracy of this interpretation (and it has been vigorously challenged), the important thing to note is the explicitly economic focus of the work. Beard was no Marxist, but he acknowledged a debt to Marx just the same. Few historians have gone as far as Beard in emphasizing economic factors so single-mindedly, but even fewer would deny that the economic “question” is one that must be asked in order to understand any given segment of the past.  

The Twentieth Century

The twentieth century, especially since 1945, has witnessed a “knowledge explosion” of sorts. Books, articles, reviews, and reports have been pouring off the presses in ever-increasing numbers. This “explosion” has been most dramatic in the sciences, but the generalization is applicable to history as well. Moreover, recent historical writing has displayed such kaleidoscopic diversity that history is a more exciting field than ever before. Unfortunately, the mass and diversity of recent historical scholarship also makes it impossible to summarize neatly even the most prominent trends in twentieth-century historiography. What follows, therefore, is a very selective sampling of what we see to be some of the defining characteristics of recent historiography—especially American historiography.

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1David Remnick says of the Soviet Union and its distaste for open inquiry “The regime created an empire that was a vast room, its doors locked, its windows shuttered. All books and newspapers allowed in the room carried the official version of events, and the radio and television blared the general line day and night.” It was Mikhail Gorbachev who finally decreed that the time had come to fill in the “blank spots” of history and, in so doing, precipitated the collapse of the USSR (see Chapter 1) *Lenin’s Tomb The Last Days of the Soviet Empire*.  

2For some Western scholars the Marxist impact has been more direct. There are many scholars, historians among them, who consciously call themselves “Marxists,” and they have adopted an explicitly Marxist approach to the study of history and society. Such scholars are a distinct minority within the profession, yet many of them have published solid scholarly works that have greatly enriched our understanding of the past. Remember, the test of good history is not the author’s ideology or bias, but the thoroughness, accuracy, and soundness of the research and the argument.
The New Social History

There is nothing especially "new" about social history. Social history, simply put, is the history of life in the broadest sense, the history of the everyday experiences of "average" men and women. It is the history of social and economic classes, occupations, life-styles, leisure activities, family structures, eating habits, sexual practices, reading preferences, beliefs, and values; it is "grass roots" history; it is, in the memorable words of G. M. Trevelyan, history "with the politics left out"—or, to the irreverent, "rum and strumpet history." Historians have been writing social history for some time. Even today, a frequently cited example of brilliant social history is the famous third chapter of Thomas Babington Macaulay's *History of England* (5 vols., 1849-61), in which he draws a fascinating portrait of English society during the 1680s.

Although social history has long been with us, it was only in the 1960s and 1970s that it became a thriving cottage industry in the historical profession. In Macaulay's day social history was strictly subordinated to what historians considered the more important priority of writing about political, constitutional, and military affairs. Social history was used to "set the scene" or provide a pleasant interlude in the narrative. Today, however, social history is taught and studied as a field of inherent interest and importance. Only to this extent is social history "new."

Social history is new in another sense—it is much more "scientific" and less anecdotal than had previously been the case. Social history is one area in which the application of statistical methods and computer analysis has been especially productive. Much social history today is, in effect, historical demography (demography is the statistical study of populations), by which historians systematically analyze large-scale population trends and calculate such things as average family sizes, death and birth rates, marriage ages, and average incomes. The more literary tradition of social history has by no means been abandoned, but statistical methods have given the social historian a potent analytical weapon.

The most fruitful contribution of the social historians has been to focus the spotlight on groups that have typically been ignored in traditional history—women, African Americans and other ethnic minorities, blue-collar and migrant workers, farmers, peasants, children, the aged, criminals, outcasts, and groups otherwise marginalized by society. The popularity and vitality of social history is in part a reflection of the increasing sense of identity among various ethnic subcultures. It is also a product of the democratization of the history profession as women, members of minority groups, and the sons and daughters of recent immigrants increasingly have entered the field. Witness the proliferation of books on women's history, African-American history, Chicano history, American-Indian history, and the history of various immigrant groups. In sum, the "new" social history has brought to life the experiences of countless groups previously bypassed in the historical studies that had traditionally focused on the experiences of political and economic elites.

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Women's History

One category of social history, women's history, deserves special comment. In light of the fact that women constitute more than half of the human race it is sobering to discover that only after World War II did historians begin to pay systematic attention to the role of women in history. Of course, larger-than-life figures such as Queen Elizabeth I of England or Catherine the Great of Russia always had their fair share of attention from historians. But women as a group? For decades the male-dominated history profession systematically ignored them.

Today the situation has changed dramatically. Modern feminists and a growing number of historians have generated interest in both women's history and, more broadly, gender studies (the study of the roles played in society by gender relations and concepts of gender). The result has been an avalanche of new scholarship not only on the history of women, but also on the history of gender relationships, histories of children and families, and gay and lesbian history.

In writing the history of women, many practitioners not only have wanted to recover an overlooked past, but to use their scholarship to advance the cause of women's equality. An underlying assumption was that women everywhere, past and present, were more alike than different, and that writing the history of women would advance their quest for equal political and economic equality. But what women's historians discovered was that there might be no such thing as a singular "women's history" relevant to all women everywhere. Research revealed that there was often a great gulf separating the experiences of middle-class women and working-class women, black women and white women, Western women and non-Western women, sixteenth-century women and twentieth-century women, etc. And, to make matters even more complex, there were many differences within each category. "[N]ot all black women or Islamic women or Jewish women share the same conceptions of femininity, or social role or politics." 8

In sum, the same fragmentation and diversity that characterize history writing in general at the turn of the century characterizes women's history as well as many of the other subdisciplines we have mentioned. The result has been both the immense enrichment of the discipline and the frustration inherent in knowing that a single individual will never become familiar with even a small portion of the fascinating histories being written about the myriad aspects of the past. 9

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9Scott, Feminism, 7

A sampling of titles on only the American experience dramatizes the point. On the subject of women in America we find such works as Susan K. Cahn, Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport (1994), Angela Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (1998), Susan J. Douglas, Where the Girls Are Growing Up Female with the Mass Media (1994), Susan Faludi, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (1991), Sharon Thompson, Going All the Way: Teenage Girls' Tales of Sex, Romance, and Pregnancy (1995), and Susan Ware, Still Missing Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism (1993)

Chapter 13 • The History of History

Computers and Quantification

Another distinctly twentieth-century phenomenon is the growing use of computers and statistical methods in history. Quantitative techniques have been especially productive (as we saw in Chapter 10) in the realms of economic and social history. Historical studies of voting behavior have also benefited from the application of well-thought-out computer programs to historical evidence. There are, of course, problems with this type of history. The most obvious is that most historical questions cannot be answered with computers, however sophisticated the machines or their programs. Quantification, therefore, has an important place in historical studies, but the limitations of “mere numeration” must be kept firmly in mind. For a fuller discussion of this topic see Chapter 10.

Psychobiography

Psychobiography is another twentieth-century innovation in historical scholarship. Although psychobiography has never been fully accepted or widely practiced by most historians, you should be aware of some of its central characteristics and claims. Psychobiography is essentially an outgrowth of the work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who drew attention to the importance of the unconscious mind and irrational impulses in human behavior. Just as Marx had emphasized the importance of economics in human affairs, Freud underscored the role played by hidden psychological drives that originated in the traumas and experiences of infancy and early childhood. It was Freud and his followers who pioneered the practice of psychoanalysis as a method for discovering the “unconscious” roots of human behavior by probing for the suppressed and repressed experiences of childhood. Psychoanalysis, Freud argued, could help those whose early, and unremembered, childhood traumas had made them dysfunctional as adults. Freud also claimed—and here we get to the crux of psychobiography—that psychoanalysis could also be applied to historical figures long dead.

Freud’s message was reinforced in his lifetime by the senseless slaughter of World War I (1914–18), which dramatized for a complacent Europe how easily irrationality and animal brutality could triumph over intellect and reason. In the years after that war psychiatry and psychoanalysis came into their own; in the years after World War II (1939–45), psychobiography itself made its debut. One of the pioneers in the field was Erik Erikson, whose masterful study Young Man Luther (1958) seemed to put psychobiography on a firm intellectual footing.

Though many psychobiographical studies have been written, in recent years the enthusiasm over the approach has dimmed. Since the publication of Erikson’s book, many historians have challenged the legitimacy of psychobiography on methodological grounds. Psychoanalysis involves the recovery of repressed childhood memories, but direct evidence for the early experiences of most historical figures is sketchy or non-existent. More significant, even if we can find out something about the earliest experiences of an individual, the explanatory value of that information is questionable. Martin Luther, for example, had some rough experiences when he was growing up, but those experiences were not atypical of his time and place. Yet it was only Luther who ended up as the standard-bearer of the Reformation. Factors other than Luther’s childhood development must have been more important.

Even though psychobiography is not in history’s mainstream, it has made its mark. Whatever the merits or defects of Freud’s theory of personality, his work opened
historians' eyes to the importance of psychological dimensions of the individuals they study. Today the writing of historical biography is still a thriving enterprise, and it is the rare biographer who would totally ignore questions of psychological motivation and the psychological roots of character. To that extent psychohistory has permanently changed the way historians do business.  

**History in the Information Age**

A glaring modern paradox is that even as many critics vocally lament America's increasing historical illiteracy, history has never clamored so insistently for our attention—perhaps a sign that these pundits are not altogether correct in this matter. In the last fifty years there has been tremendous growth in the amount of history targeted for mass audiences. Originally cheap paperback books and then television and film (see chapter 8) brought popularized history into the marketplace. And more recently cable and satellite television networks (e.g. the History Channel, the Learning Channel) and the Internet have greatly increased the options for those interested in some aspect of the past.

Ultimately this is a good thing, for unless historians communicate their findings to a larger audience, they are serving no useful function in a society. On the other hand, popular history (whether presented in books, on television, in movie theaters, or on the Internet) can also be a dangerous thing. All too frequently good entertainment is bad history, for to emphasize the dramatic and sensational is often to distort the truth. Moreover, whatever the advantages of historical essays and sources on the Internet (and there are many advantages—see Chapter 6), literally anyone with an ax to grind or an overactive fantasy life can create a web page accessible by computers around the world. As a result, there is a staggering amount of nonsense and misinformation on the Internet, making it increasingly difficult for the average citizen to discriminate between accurate and inaccurate information, between good and bad history.

 Moreover, so insatiable is the public appetite for the inside story of recent dramatic events that “instant” histories have become commonplace. Whether the subject is world conflict (the Gulf War, the crisis in the Balkans), a sensational murder case (O. J. Simpson), the death of a rock star or popular idol (Princess Diana), or the latest terrorist outrage, hastily written paperback “histories” and TV documentaries and mini-series are sometimes published and aired only days, or weeks, after the event. The limitations of such productions should be apparent. They are put together in haste, their evidence is even more incomplete than normally would be the case, and public passions may still be fully aroused. The authors, in many cases, are not trained historians or even trained journalists. Obviously, such instant histories should be read and viewed with a very critical eye.

**Conclusion**

If one can perceive a trend over time, it is this: historical writing in the West has become broader in geographic scope, casting its attention on civilizations and cultures hitherto ignored; it has become more eclectic and diverse, with few as-

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pects of life escaping critical attention; it has discovered (at last) the histories of groups hitherto ignored in traditional narratives; and it has become ever more rigorous and imaginative in its use of evidence, our comments on “instant history” notwithstanding. History as a discipline is alive and growing, telling its story of change, but telling also of how tenaciously the past survives in the present. Yet, we cannot end without a note of caution.

As positive as all these trends are, the writing of history from many and diverse perspectives is not without its costs. As one historian noted recently, “History no longer sets forth common stories that presumably speak for the identity and experience of all readers. . . . We no longer possess a past commonly agreed upon.”

To the extent that shining history’s lamp on all peoples, and not just on male elites, has helped Americans find a history that is personally relevant and meaningful, we say bravo! To the extent that groups of Americans no longer think they share either a common past or a common destiny, this trend is unhealthy.

Another indirect consequence of the recent proliferation of historical subcategories and subdisciplines has been an unsettling relativism. It is a small step from saying that it is important to study the history of African Americans, or women, or American Indians to saying that history is simply what each of the myriad groups says it is from their own perspective. And, from there, it is but a short step to argue that there is no objective truth at all, only what different groups perceive it to be. This sort of relativism has been reinforced by an array of trendy theories coming out of literary criticism and the social sciences, including postmodernism, deconstruction, semiotics, and structuralism and poststructuralism. The complexity of these various “isms” precludes a detailed discussion here, but one historian who laments their impact summarizes the situation:

In the 1990s, the newly dominant theorists within the humanities and social sciences assert that it is impossible to tell the truth about the past or to use history to produce knowledge in any objective sense at all. They claim we can only see the past through the perspective of our own culture and, hence, what we see in history are our own interests and concerns reflected back at us. The central point upon which history was founded no longer holds; there is no fundamental distinction any more between history and myth.

Personally, we would argue against the most extreme forms of relativism implicit in many of the fashionable “isms” mentioned above. But we would also acknowledge, as much of this book has argued, that history of necessity reflects the values and interests of the historians and societies that produce it. And the multiplication of perspectives that has characterized our century is much more a cause for celebration than a sign of despair. As three representatives of the “new” history have so pointedly argued, “truths about the past are possible, even if they are not absolute.” What the future will bring no one can say, but if the last century is any guide, the intellectual journey should be an exciting one.

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12 Keith Windschuttle, The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 2. This book provides an excellent, understandable overview of the various theories mentioned in this paragraph, as well as a detailed critique of those theories.
13 Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, Telling the Truth About History (New York: WW Norton & Co, 1994), 7