History and Historiography
Historiography

1) a : the writing of history; especially : the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods; b : the principles, theory, and history of historical writing <a course in historiography

2) the product of historical writing : a body of historical literature
The goal of this lecture is to explain approaches to historiography and historical knowledge. We will seek to understand how different approaches ‘represent’ and discuss the past.
The past vs. history

Though not all historians would agree with this distinction, it is useful for our sake to acknowledge the difference between the past and history.
Everything that happened in the past -- the events, the people who lived, the thoughts they had

Geoffrey Elton: the past’s “objective reality is guaranteed; it is beyond being altered for any purpose whatsoever.”
What is “left” of the past and its interpretations

It exists in:
- Artifacts
- Written accounts (history books/articles)
- Memory
- The ‘left-overs’ of the past
Why is this difference significant?

- This difference is central to much debate about history and what comprises historical knowledge.
- There is a past, but how do we know about it? How accurate can our interpretations of it be? Do our interpretations change the past?
Three epistemological perspectives

What follows is the “nuts and bolts” of three different perspectives of history and historiography.

This description will hide much of the nuance of the three approaches, but will hopefully still offer some insight into how historians think about writing history.
Empiricism

- History as an area of knowledge is as an endeavor to know the objective past
- The past is knowable and it is unalterable
- There are remnants of the past left over (primary sources) and the careful historian can fully understand *what actually happened*
Again, Elton:

- Because the past’s “objective reality is guaranteed; it is beyond being altered for any purpose whatsoever,” all we must do is find evidence left over and synthesize it into historical truth.
- With enough time and patience, we can know what happened in the past.
“wie es eigentlich gewesen”: we should write history as it actually was

Historians should refrain from interpretation and just write down how things happened

For example, Leopold Van Ranke wrote long histories of many, many volumes

One history was 17 volumes: this is what it takes to write history wie es eigentlich gewesen
Empiricists on bias and perception

Doesn’t the historian’s own experience shape his interpretation of primary historical sources?
Of course histories have bias, but the empiricist would argue that with keen insight and self-criticism, the historian can overcome bias.

The empiricist acknowledges the limits of historical knowledge and the problems of bias, but ultimately believes that the past can be objectively known.
Skeptical approaches

- Furthest from the empiricist approach is the ‘skeptical’ approach
The gist of the skeptics

- The past does not exist *now*, there are only leftovers, and they can only be interpreted.
- We cannot access the past.
What is historiography then?

- Whatever we write down about the past
- Ultimately, a language game

“Look” says the poet Khlebnikov in his *Decrees To The Planets*, “the sun obeys my syntax”. “Look”, says the historian, “the past obeys my interpretation”. (Jenkins, *Re-thinking history*)
Knowing the past

- Skeptics argue that we cannot know all the past. We in our being are removed; we are ontologically cut off from the past.
- If we could be there, the past is too vast, too large, for us to know.
Knowledge and Power

- That which gets written down and remembered is usually the stories of the elite, the rich, the powerful
- Knowing that, the historian can try to write oppressed groups back into history
Because historians have culture, they are going to be biased no matter what.

The times we live in “write” history: our experiences, media, values, norms, all shape and, to some extent, determine our interpretations.
The ‘pragmatic’ approach

Most historians fall in between the conservative, empiricist approach of Elton and away from the subjectivist, ‘there-is-no-such-thing-as-objective-truth’ view of the skeptics.
On truth

- Truth can be known, the past is real
- Though we cannot access the past, we can know real things about it
- Of course these things we know are limited by bias, language, culture, our past
- But these obstacles can be in large part overcome
On subjectivity

- Our interpretations are subjective because they come from subjects (people).
- But that subjectivity is not wholly limiting: we can be aware of it and compensate for it by being critical, aware, and thorough.
On bias

- It exists, and the competent historian engages it, and tries to neutralize it.
- It is not a wholly limiting factor to accurately describing the past, but an obstacle.
Does all this matter?

- Most historians spend very little time agonizing over ‘what kind of historian’ they are
- Instead, they just do history, using all of the sources they can and their best historical judgment
We should know that historians disagree over the nature of historical knowledge and that these debates do have a real effect on the historical knowledge we have.
Other kinds of history

- Historians write history through different lenses. Examples:
  - *Annales*:
    - History relying on insights from all areas of knowledge
    - Popular in France in the mid twentieth century
The 'fragmentation' of history

- Feminist - Writing women back into history after centuries of their absences
- Intellectual - The history of ideas
- Social - The history of society
- Military - History of wars, more or less
- Legal - History of the law
And so forth...

- Racial
- Political
- Quantitative
- And the list goes on...
Schools of American Historiography

Puritan (1600s)
Patrician (1700-1850)
Professional (Mid 1800s-)
Progressive Historiography (1900-1940’s)
Consensus (Traditional) Historiography (1940’s-1960’s)
New Left Historiography (1960’s-1980’s)
Neo-Conservative Historiography (1980’s-Present)
# Schools of American Historiography

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<th>Period</th>
<th>Major Themes</th>
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<td>Characterization of early America</td>
<td>William Bradford, Thomas Jefferson, George Bancroft, Francis Parkman</td>
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<td>Patrician (1700-1850)</td>
<td>History as a guide to the future</td>
<td>Henry Adams, Frederick Jackson Turner, Alfred Thayer Mahaffy, Frederick Jackson Turner, Francis Parkman</td>
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<td>Professional (Mid 1800s-&gt;)</td>
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**What are the major differences in perspective?**
Three Schools of Historical Thought- Foreign Affairs

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What are the major differences in perspective?
Application

Where Historians Disagree: “The American Revolution”


1) How do these individuals line up with the school they are associated with?
2) What could factors could have influenced shifting scholarship associated with the revolution / the interests of these historians?