

Historiography: How historians DO history

When doing history, it helps to keep in mind that there are many different ways of determining how history happens. One of the key things to remember is that historians disagree very much over why almost any event happened. In the search for how things happen, we get ideas about how to understand our present world's events and what to do about them, if anything.

The following list of selected historians can give you some ideas of how the great historians "did" history. For this class you must keep in mind that we are "doing" history. The idea that history "just happened" is for some other class. Also, keep in mind that this list is in no way complete or exclusive of other historians.

Plutarch-- Great Men and their Character. His thesis is that the very character of men changes history. His study of Mark Antony suggests that his love for Cleopatra blinded him to his duties in Rome and was destroyed by Augustus; who, it turned out, was not a lightweight.

Historical Forces-- This is the assertion that certain ideas, movements, etc., become irresistible forces that will have their way. An example is Christianity being such a force that would eventually not only survive persecution, but emerge victorious over the Roman Empire. Another is the dominance of Science in the West over Theology and Philosophy as the authority for determining Truth.

Toynbee--Challenge and response. Toynbee's theory is that all civilizations are faced with a crisis which is either one of ideas, or one of technology. How they respond determines whether they will survive. An example is the Fall of Rome. Many blame Christianity for sapping the Pagan strength of Rome and causing her downfall. Toynbee points out that the Byzantine Empire (the Eastern Roman Empire) used Christianity to revitalize and reform the Roman Empire for another thousand years.

Hegel--Dialectic. Hegel's Theory of History says that for every old idea, there is a new one which conflicts with it. Out of the struggle a new idea is created (Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis). He felt that this was how God led us to perfection and revealed new truth. History is just the product of conflict

Darwin-- Not a historian, but he took Hegel's idea and applied them to science. His biological application led to the Origin of Species. Herbert Spencer and others then used his biological ideas to support their ideas that a struggle among races of people and differing nations led to the strongest and most able nations ruling the world. Victory in combat meant the superiority of a nation or people.

Marx--Material Dialectic. Marx used Hegel's ideas and applied them to classes of people throughout history. Any ruling class controlled the "means of production" which gave them wealth and power to rule. Whenever a new method of production occurred, there was conflict between the older ruling class and a newer class using the newer and superior means of production. An example is how the Businessman and his money destroyed the power of the old Aristocracy based on land and hereditary ownership

Turner--Geography and the Frontier. Turner's thesis said that geography determines the character of a people and, depending on the situation, gave them certain advantages and disadvantages. An example is that the English and Japanese, being Island Nations, would naturally have an advantage at sea combat. And, in an age of sea-trade they would, tend to be powerful. His thesis explicitly stated how the Frontier shaped the American mind to be open to new things and to strive for what was new. In our modern technological age, Americans are very open to new technologies.

Radicals--History is the story of who won. This thesis says that history is little more than mythmaking. "History is the history of winners." Those who win, write the history books. Those who have lost are excluded or demonized. History is determined by who has the political power to write the books. But, for some, reading a restaurant menu is as important as reading "history."

Boorstin--The unexpected. Daniel J. Boorstin's books suggest a thesis that ideas and practices simply come together in various places and time and can hardly be predicted. What has mattered is that the great Creators and Discoverers have been open to the challenge and took previously unrelated ideas and put them together in a way that was entirely new, they thus change the world. An example is how an anonymous optician in Belgium created the first telescope to be used in combat. It found its way to Italy where Galileo began to look at stars with it. His findings undermined the Ptolemaic system. However, the Church used his information to create the modern Gregorian Calendar we use today. But sixteen years later in the firestorm of the Reformation, Galileo was ordered to remain silent. Boorstin is hostile to the Hegelian-Marxist-Darwinian school as it can only tell what the future is like based on the past. The Hegelians could never have predicted the impact of the telescope. Boorstin makes considerable money showing that no one can predict; you can only remain open to change. Change cannot be managed.

1. Based on the ideas presented above, which do you believe has (have) the most valid argument(s)? Why?