

Chapter 7. Historical Interpretations

Introduction

Plural and competing accounts of the past are common in our multi-storied present and the expansion of academic history since the nineteenth century has led to the multiplication, rather than the consolidation, of histories. Learning history and negotiating the present both require the ability to identify, comprehend, explain and evaluate historical interpretations. Understanding history entails understanding how historical interpretations come to be made. This chapter explores some practical, theoretical and logical aspects of historical interpretation and considerations relevant to the task of developing students' abilities to think critically, comparatively and evaluatively about history and historical interpretations.

What are historical interpretations and why should pupils study them?

The nature and importance of historical interpretation

Unlike, say, cows, molluscs or monkeys, human beings are temporal beings (Nietzsche, 2008): to be human is, amongst other things, to be conscious of time and to live by manipulating temporal constructs – identity, origin, destination, memory, trace, story, past/present/future, and so on (Ricoeur, 2004; Rüsen, 2005). Human groups and communities come and continue to exist, at least in part, through the stories that they tell themselves about who they ‘are’, where they ‘began’ and where they ‘are going’ and through memory practices, such as anniversaries, memorials and monuments, that embed these narratives in social life through ritual (Lowenthal, 2015; Samuel, 1994).

These narratives and memory practices aim to manage the passage of time, to construct and stabilize identity through time, and to understand the limits and possibilities that the past creates for the present and future (Rüsen, 2005): they are interventions in the present, since they shape the self-understandings of individuals and communities, and historical interpretations are, therefore, potentially both consequential and controversial.

Understanding historical interpretations involves thinking critically about the diverse ways in which human groups and societies make sense of time and change. Subject disciplines exist to enable us ‘to approach questions of importance in a systematic and reliable way’ (Gardner, 2000, p.144) and the study of historical interpretations should aim to provide pupils with tools that they can use to systematically compare and evaluate claims about the past, if not in order to establish total and definitive ‘truth’ then certainly

to move beyond the view that ‘anything goes’ and towards an understanding of how the validity of claims about the past can be assessed.

Many good arguments have been advanced for the study of historical interpretations and the most compelling are historical: there is no alternative to studying historical interpretation, if we want to help students think reflectively and critically about a key dimension of their humanity and about the ubiquitous and often competing history stories and memory practices that clamour for attention in the present.

Historical interpretation in the history curriculum

Historical interpretations are a key component of the history curriculum in England in all key stages (e.g. DfE, 2013 and 2014a) and, in the words of the DfE’s statement of GCSE subject content, studying interpretations involves developing ‘an awareness of... how and why different interpretations have been constructed’ about ‘people, events and developments’ (DfE, 2014b, p.3). Teasing out the implications of the curriculum documents we can say that we need to help students learn to:

1. *Understand that* the past has been interpreted in different ways;
2. *Understand how* the past has been interpreted in different ways;

3. *Explain why* the past has been interpreted in different ways and;
4. *Evaluate* different interpretations of the past

The remainder of this chapter explores some of the issues raised by these tasks.

Understanding what historical interpretations are

Students' preconceptions about historical interpretation

Research suggests that, prior to asking students to identify, explain and evaluate variant interpretations of the past, we should focus on developing understandings of what interpretations *are*. Students often hold tacit assumptions, based on everyday epistemologies, that are likely to impede the development of their understanding of historical interpretation: a primary and ongoing pedagogic task is to challenge these assumptions and help students develop more powerful ideas (Lee 1998 and 2001; Lee and Shemilt, 2004).

Students often think in naïve realist ways about historical interpretations and assume (a) that the past has a fixed identity and meaning and (b) that interpretations should ideally mirror this fixed past and, therefore, (c) that historical accounts should be singular and that there will, in principle, be one ‘best’ account (Lee and Shemilt, 2004; Shemilt, 2000). Students who think in these ways tend also to view variation in interpretation with suspicion and explain it in terms of subjectivity and ‘bias’. Naïve realist assumptions do not work in history: the meaning, and in many cases the basic identity, of things that ‘have happened’ is not fixed, and is more aptly described as ‘fluid’, and historical interpretations are more like theories proposed in response to particular questions or problems than they are like pictures (Lee and Shemilt, 2004). We need to help students understand why this is and also to help them understand that we can deal rationally with plural accounts of a fluid past.

The fluidity of the past and the plural nature of historical interpretation

In so far as it exists at all, the historical past only exists in the present and in the form of:

- traces of the past (relics and reports) and
- interpretations of the past constructed subsequent to its passing.

What we can say about the past results from an ongoing *dialogue* between traces and present questions and purposes and is shaped by a range of factors including:

- our orientation towards the past and understanding of what history is;
- our purposes in engaging with the past;
- our awareness and identification of traces of the past;
- decisions we make about which traces have relevance to the issues we are interested in;
- the questions that we ask of the traces we select for analysis;
- the assumptions, concepts and methods that we deploy as we interrogate and interpret these traces;
- the forms in which we express the answers to our questions.

These factors shape all attempts to engage with the past, to one degree or another, since even the most straightforward description implies theoretical commitments. Disciplined historical thinking is characterised, however, by an effort to make practices of interpretation explicit and available for scrutiny and an important purpose of history education is to make it clear to pupils that interpretation is open to rational discussion and evaluation. Engagement with the past is also a dynamic process: we are not stuck where we started and interpreting the traces of the past frequently involves the revision of questions and preconceptions (Megill, 2007).

In addition, all histories are in history: the ways in which we become conscious of the past, the ways in which we aim to interpret the past, and the tools available for this task are as much reflections of who we are and of our particular place in time as they are of the traces of the past itself. Engagements with the past are always authored, driven by particular purposes or questions and undertaken by particular people or groups of people with particular beliefs and assumptions and even where 'facts' can be clearly and non-controversially established their meaning is inherently debatable (Koselleck, 2004, p.149; Samuel, 1994).

The past is, therefore, inherently fluid and historical interpretations are inherently plural and variable: they are in history, have historicity and continually change as the present changes.

Why do interpretations differ?

It is one thing to acknowledge that histories inevitably emerge from particular contexts and another to claim that they are arbitrary and subjective: maintaining the former does not entail accepting the latter. As Jörn Rüsen has shown, (Rüsen, 2005, p.132) it is possible to acknowledge and model the ways in which historical practice 'is influenced by and related to practical life' but also to defend disciplined historical practice as a

‘cognitive strategy for getting knowledge about the past’(Rüsen, 2005, p.135).¹ Building on Megill’s reading of Rüsen (Megill, 1994, p.58), we can think of interpretations as structured by:

1. the **practical contexts** that they emerge from;
2. the **conception of history** that they express;
3. the **interpretive frameworks** they deploy; and
4. the **textual forms** in which they are expressed.

Practical contexts of interpretation

Historical interpretation arises from the experience of time, is located in time and can be thought of as addressing the practical needs of groups and communities for temporal orientation (Rüsen, 2005, p.10). Interpretive practice is inherently various and relative to the conceptions of time and questions that interpreters deploy, to the time in which an interpretation occurs and also to the groups and interests that it seeks to orient (Paul, 2015).

All histories are practically located in a number of other senses. Academic history operates within particular disciplinary practices and conventions, developed by scholarly

communities to enable methodological rigour and rationality (Lorenz, 2001), and these practices differ from those found in other contexts. It is not uncommon, for example, for computer games (Fergusson, 2006) or filmic constructions of the past (Harlan, 2007) to be scrupulously researched, however, they are shaped also by a range of practical considerations that typically have priority in these contexts (Fernández-Armesto, 2002, pp.159-160; Rose and Corley, 2003). Interpretation involves the construction of meaning and interpretations are also, therefore, shaped by the conventions and the ethical and normative horizons of their social and cultural contexts of origin (Lorenz, 1998).

Historical interpretations are positioned and self-positioning, therefore, and must be historicized and located in context and in relation to the purposes that they serve.

Conceptions of history

Constructions of the past are shaped by the 'stance' or mode of relationship to the past that they express. Barton and Levstik contrast *identification, analytic* and *moral* stances (Barton and Levstik, 2004, p.7), Seixas and Clark (2004) distinguish *monumental, antiquarian, critical* and *modern* conceptions of history, Rüsen (2005) contrasts *traditional, exemplary, critical* and *genetic* forms of historical consciousness and Paul (2015) identifies *epistemic, moral, political, aesthetic* and *material* relationships to the

past. Typology is secondary to the essential point: we can approach the past in very different ways and the mode of orientation towards the past characteristic of the discipline of history is, in principle, distinct and distinguishable from those associated with, for example, collective memory (Wertsch, 2002).

Thus, for example, we can distinguish between approaches to the past:

- that aim to *identify* the present with the past (or to assert *continuity* between them) or that aim to *differentiate* the present from the past (or to assert *discontinuity*); and
- that aim to *affirm* the value of aspects of the past or that seek to *negate* them.

Typically, *traditional* orientations towards the past assert continuity of identity between the past and the present and aim to ensure that the future is shaped by adherence to past values or practices epitomised in monuments, heroic narratives and so on. By contrast, *critical* orientations towards the past disrupt continuity, effect a breach between the past and the present and model the past as something to be negated and overcome through iconoclasm and critique.

The discipline of history characteristically emphasizes difference, specificity and context and construes the past as strange rather than familiar, ‘another country’ rather than ‘home’ (Lowenthal, 2015; Tosh, 2008) and historians characteristically aim to understand

the past in ‘its own terms’, rather than to judge it in present-minded ways or to abolish the distance through ‘identification’.²

We can distinguish between interpretations, then, in terms of their orientation towards the past. We can also argue about the relative merits of different modes of orientation. Footnotes and the critical assessment of testimony are not usually welcome at family gatherings (Wineburg, 2007, pp.6-7); however, the wisdom of grounding collective identities on wishful thinking, rather than on claims we can sustain, is clearly open to question (Lowenthal, 2015).

Interpretive tools: concepts, questions, theories and methods

All engagement with the past is inherently theoretical: there is no perception without presupposition.

No empirical activity is possible without a theory... All historians have ideas already in their minds when they study primary materials – models of human behaviour, established chronologies, assumptions about responsibility, notions of identity and so on. Of course, some are convinced that they are simply gathering

facts, looking at sources with a totally open mind and only recording what is there, yet they are simply wrong to believe this.

(Jordanova, 2000, p.63)

Historians' interpretive frameworks have been analysed systematically by Fulbrook (2002, pp.31-50). Frameworks shape how meanings are constructed and the questions or problems that interpretations pose. Explanations of past action depend upon assumptions about human motivation and assumptions have consequences for the identification of archives, the choice of research methods and so on. If we think material interests determine human action, for example, we will pursue questions that we might not ask if we assume that culture and belief have priority. Methodological questions, such as the relative merits of 'microhistorical' and 'cliometric' approaches to the study of slavery, can be readily made accessible for students, as Hammond has shown in work with 13-14 year-olds (2007), and a focus on historians' questions and methods can focus students on 'genuine historical controversy' placing 'the process of historical research and evaluation at the heart of... investigation' (Howells, 2005, p.33).

Three points are worth stressing, given the fact that students' often model differences in interpretation in terms of the subjective distortion of a fixed past (Lee and Shemilt, 2004). First, an interpretive framework is not an avoidable 'bias': there can be no interpretations without questions, categories and assumptions. Second, assumptions can be rationally debated, and historical controversies often turn on such issues as much as on substantive matters (Chapman, 2011a & b). Third, different interpretive forms place differing degrees

of importance on methodological debate: the discipline of history is distinguished from other forms of interpretation of the past by the fact that historians are expected to make their assumptions, concepts and methods explicit, so that they can be critically assessed by an academic community of practice, and to present *arguments* for interpretive decisions that they make.

Textual forms

There are impressive examples, in the pedagogic literature, of strategies that seek to engage students in the analysis of historical interpretations as rhetorical constructions designed to achieve particular effects (e.g. Banham and Hall, 2003; Lang, 2003; Ward, 2006).

It is useful to think about interpretations as working to persuade their audiences in a number of ways. Interpretations can be analysed in terms of ‘rhetorics of narration’, from plot structure to surface features of a text, and in terms of ‘a rhetoric of annotation’ that works through ‘citation and quotation’ to support historians’ claims (Grafton, 2003, pp.231-233). We should think of historical texts as logical as well as rhetorical objects, however, and as organizing claims into arguments intended to establish warranted conclusions (Kuukkanen, 2015). Understanding how an interpretation works as a text, therefore, is likely to involve considering some or all of the following:

- *Narrative structure*, or how the text works as story (Lang, 2003; Megill, 2007)
- *Argument structure*, or how an interpretation works to justify its claims
 - through citation and annotation (Grafton, 2003) and
 - through logical argument (Chapman, 2011a; Kuukkanen, 2015).

How do interpretations differ?

We need to distinguish between factors that may shape interpretations and what interpretations claim – it is possible, for example, for texts with radically different forms to advance essentially identical claims, and vice versa.

It is likely to be helpful when comparing interpretations to ask questions about

- what different texts are *doing* and
- what different texts are *saying*.

Table 1 develops an analysis by Alan Megill of the things that historical interpretations can be understood as doing.

Table 1. The Four Tasks of Historical Writing³

(Based on Megill, 2007, pp.96-98 and adapted from Chapman, 2009, p.35)

Task	Explanation
1. Description	Describing an aspect of historical reality – telling what was the case
2. Explanation	Explaining why a past event or phenomenon came to be
3. Evaluation	Attributing meaning, value and / or significance to aspects of the past
4. Justification	Justifying descriptive, explanatory or evaluative claims by supplying arguments to support them

Megill argues that all forms of historical writing engage in these four ‘tasks’ to one degree or another, although it is often difficult to disentangle them in practice.⁴

The distinction between tasks provides a way of thinking about how interpretations differ - whereas one interpretation might be primarily descriptive, for example, another might be primarily explanatory. Analysing interpretations in terms of the tasks they perform is a useful way of modelling the questions that interpretations can be understood as answering – descriptive questions (*Who? What? When? How?*), explanatory questions (*Why?*), evaluative questions (*So what?*), and so on. Focusing on tasks also draws attention to the *types of claim* that different interpretations may be making: explanatory claims, for example, differ from descriptive claims and are validated in different ways. Task analysis can also allow differences in interpretive *logic* to be identified – two interpretations, for

example, may articulate identical descriptive claims about what was the case in the past but derive differing evaluative conclusions from these claims. The analysis is also a way of distinguishing differences in interpretation type: academic history, for example, consists of a *superstructure*, of descriptive, explanatory or evaluative claims about the past, and an *infrastructure* that aims to justify those claims (Goldstein, 1975; Grafton, 2003): monographs typically justify their claims in ways that monuments do not.

Thinking comparatively about what interpretations *say* entails thinking about logical relationships between claims. Claims about the past can be considered as *complementary*, *contrary* or *contradictory* to each other. Two interpretations may advance differing claims about the same aspect of the past without coming into logical conflict with each other, which is to say that we can accept both and describe them as **complementary**. When two sets of claims are *mutually exclusive*, but do not *exhaust* the defensible claims that could be made, we can describe the claims as **contrary**: although only one claim can be true it is possible that both are false. Where two sets of claims are *mutually exclusive* and *exhaustive*: we have **contradictory** interpretations and a problem, as, for example, where one interpretation makes descriptive claims about an event, whose occurrence another interpretation denies - either it occurred or it did not and one account must be true and another must be false on the question of existence / non-existence.

A logical analysis of interpretive differences can be combined with an analysis of interpretive tasks to specify how interpretations differ: it is possible, for example, that two accounts may be complementary in their descriptive claims, contrary in their

explanatory claims, and so on. Engaging students in logical analysis need not be a terminologically complex undertaking and is a matter of asking questions like ‘*Can we accept both of these claims at the same time?*’

Evaluating Historical Interpretations

The fluidity of the past and the plurality of interpretation do not mean that interpretation is an arbitrary or subjective process – the contexts from which interpretations emerge are, after all, contexts of practice and objectivity is a matter of adherence to interpersonal standards (Megill, 2007). It is possible, therefore, to assess the validity of interpretations of the past in terms of their formal properties, using ‘rules of thumb’ or norms of practice (Bevir, 1994; Husbands, 1996).

A number of authors have developed criteria for comparing and evaluating historical interpretations (Bevir, 1994; Megill, 2007; Kuukkanen, 2015). Historians ‘explain the evidence’ of the past that remains in the present (Goldstein, 1975) and we can evaluate competing constructions of the past by asking questions:

- Do the interpretations *accurately* refer to the archival traces to be explained?
- How *comprehensive* are the interpretations in explaining relevant archival traces?

- How *consistent* are the claims they advance
 - in themselves and
 - with other claims that we already have good reason to accept?
- How far does an interpretation open up new possibilities (e.g. raise new questions)?⁵

Other questions can and should be asked, of course: we can, for example, debate the logic of historical arguments or question the conceptual or criterial assumptions that authors make (Chapman, 2011a and 2011b). The key points that we should help students to understand are, first, that histories can be evaluated criterially through debate, without trying to ‘check’ interpretations against a ‘fixed’ past and, second, that we may end up accepting more than one competing account provided that evaluation criteria are met.

Interpretations serve many purposes apart from constructing interpersonally defensible knowledge claims about the past. Just as apples are not spectacles and should not be assessed using optical criteria, so monuments are not monographs and differing modes of constructing the past should be assessed in different ways. Because histories deal with human action they raise ethical questions, for example (Lorenz, 1998), and we can assess evaluative claims about the past in terms of the ethical principles they depend on. It is possible also, of course, to argue that interpretations should be assessed as texts rather than claims and against aesthetic criteria. These arguments are plausible but not entirely persuasive: if a monument (or film, or comic strip and so on) makes or implies claims about what ‘was’ then we should assess these claims using the best available principles

for assessing claims of this type. We can assess the value of a film as a film, of course, but filmic considerations have no implications for the historical validity of the claims that a film advances (Rose and Corley, 2003).

Chapter Summary

Understanding historical interpretation is vital to the study of the discipline of history and crucial to a wider understanding of contemporary historical culture and memory practices. Students need to come to understand the range of purposes and stances that interpretations of the past can express and practical, contextual and methodological reasons for variation in historical interpretation. Developing these understandings is likely to be challenging, since they conflict with everyday ideas about knowledge that tend to regard variation with suspicion or to treat all interpretation as arbitrary and subjective. We need to help students build understandings of interpretation that will enable them to explain variation rationally and appraise variant interpretations critically.

Key Questions

- Why is understanding historical interpretation challenging for pupils?
- How can we help students build their knowledge and understanding of historical interpretation as process and historical interpretations as products?

- What do students need to understand in order to identify, compare, explain and evaluate historical interpretations systematically?
- How can we help students to think rigorously and critically about both academic and popular cultural interpretations of the past without trivialising either?

Further reading

Lee and Shemilt (2004) summarise research on progression in understandings of interpretations and accounts and a fuller exploration of key research on accounts is Lee (2001). Seixas and Clark (2004) is a fascinating discussion of historical consciousness that explores student thinking in depth and Paul (2015) is the best systematic exploration of these issues in English. The Polychronicon feature in *Teaching History* explores interpretation questions and provides useful practical teaching suggestions.

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¹ A number of very useful models of factors to consider when exploring differences in interpretation have been proposed (for example, Haydn, et al., 2008)

² The degree of success with which history can achieve this is, of course, open to debate (Jenkins, 1997).

³ The table is based on Megill's work but adapts it: Megill uses 'interpretation' to refer to what I am calling 'evaluation' here for example.

⁴ Many historical descriptions are also evaluations for example, as phrases like 'The Indian Mutiny' or 'The Great Reform Act' indicate.

⁵ These questions are inspired by Bevir's arguments but (a) do not reproduce them fully and (b) modify and simplify them in a number of ways.