Evidence and Interpretation

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When tutors ask new students what they think is different about studying history at university, they sometimes respond that they are no longer able to rely on teachers and textbooks and that they have to give their own opinions. This expectation might be reinforced by the still common requirement that students should read E.H. Carr's *What is History?* (1961).This classic is best known for its contention that historians cannot simply rely on facts and that bias is unavoidable. Perhaps also a tutor will criticize a student's first essay for relying too much on 'description' or 'narrative', for merely recounting 'facts' rather than developing an 'interpretation' and 'argument'. The tutor might urge the writer to explore the 'debates' or to include 'the historiography' in their essay. Yet the same tutor might also criticize the essay for 'factual mistakes' and failure to back up arguments with 'evidence' and footnotes. It is hardly surprising that students are perplexed. How can facts matter if history is all about opinion? If bias is inevitable, then how can we say that historical interpretation is any better than another?

Much hinges on our understanding of loaded terms as 'objectivity', 'opinion' and 'interpretation'. Students often arrive at university believing that historians should be 'objective' – that is, they should put forward neutral accounts of the past, free from their own perspectives, opinions, or beliefs. Yet for at least half a century, historians have known very well that backgrounds and interests influence historians' writings, and that objectivity, in the sense of a ~~completely~~ disinterested perspective on the past, is impossible. It follows that doing history at university cannot be about becoming *objective*, for nobody can completely set aside their background and personal ideas. Yet neither is history as practiced in a university just about giving an 'opinion'. Indeed, it is better to avoid using the word 'opinion' in historical writing altogether, because in everyday language it denotes speculation in the absence of knowledge, or political or moral judgement of what is good or bad. In both these senses, 'opinion' is incompatible with good historical practice. 'Interpretation' is a

better term for historians to use because it implies two things. First, just as we translate from an unknown foreign language into one we can understand, interpretation means translation of unfamiliar things in the past into terms that we can understand now. Secondly, interpretation, unlike opinion, depends on supporting *evidence*, and on the citation (in footnotes) of relevant facts. Proper use of evidence allows us to distinguish valid from invalid interpretations of the past. Historical interpretation, then, depends on both perspective and facts, and becoming a historian means learning to bring the two together.

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between historical interpretation and evidence. All historians begin with preconceptions, but the key point is whether these ideas can potentially be changed by confrontation with evidence. If our ideas were fixed, there would be no point in doing history, as research into the past could not possibly alter our initial preconceptions. Likewise, it is pointless to say that a source is 'biased', because all sources are biased: *all* sources are produced using preconceived ideas for particular purposes. The historian's task is to work out what these preconceptions and purposes were, and what consequences they had for whom.[1] I shall show that this task raises a whole range of questions about bias, moral judgement, the status of facts and indeed the place of history in society.

Interpretation

Students are not alone in their confusion about the difference between facts and opinion. The following example comes from a university tutor's blog on common mistakes made by students. .

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Here's an example of how *not* to represent a fact, via CNN:

[1] Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2nd edn (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 87–104; Mary Fulbrook , *Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002), 31–49.

> 'Considering that [Hillary] Clinton's departure will leave only 16 women in the Senate out of 100 senators, many feminists believe women are underrepresented on Capitol Hill'.

Wait. Feminists 'believe'? Given that women are 51% of the population, 16 out of 100 means that women are underrepresented on Capitol Hill. This is a social fact, yeah? Now, you can agree or disagree with feminists that this is a problem, but do not suggest, as CNN does, that the fact itself is an opinion. This is a common mistake, and it is frustrating for both instructors and students to get past. Life will be much easier if you know the difference.[2]

Commented [K1]: This is a quote from the website named in the footnote.

Let us say that a fact is a statement that we believe beyond reasonable doubt to be true (as in a court of law). A reasonable person could not deny that women are underrepresented in the Senate relative to their presence in the population as a whole. It is not just an 'opinion', because the statement is backed by evidence.

Opinion enters when we think about moral right and wrong. Anyone who believes in the equal rights of men and women will see underrepresentation of women in the Senate as morally unfair. Any member of society may express their views on such matters, and historians have the same right to do so any anyone else. Yet historians' views on moral issues are no more *valid* than anyone else's, and when historians comment on moral issues, they do so without engaging their special training as historians.

There are some sinister examples of what can happen when historians appoint themselves as judges of right and wrong. In early twentieth-century Germany, professional historians were highly committed to scholarly standards, which they thought guaranteed their ability to know the truth about the past. Yet they also confused what they thought was scientifically right with what they thought was morally right. They believed that history was a story of the struggle of 'advanced' nations to increase their power over backward people, a contention that is in fact

[2] L. Wade, 'Professors' Pet Peeves' (2014): http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2014/08/25/professors-pet-peeves/. Accessed 20 June 2015.

more political (racist, we could say), than historical. When Hitler came to power, these historians carried out research that justified colonization of Eastern Europe on the grounds of the 'mission' of the German people, defined in racial terms.[3] Historians were just one of several professional groups in Hitler's Germany to believe that their scientific training entitled them to adjudicate moral problems and even to decide who had the right to live. Historians in democracies have also made simplistic links between politics and history. Since the nineteenth century, historians and other academics have cited the need to spread democracy as justification for imperial conquest.[4] Interpreting the past in the light of one's own values is also bad history. It leads historians to deliberately select facts and evidence that fit with the development of what they happen to believe in. Of course, historians have the right to express their political views, but when they do so, they do so as private persons, not as historians.

If historians are no more or less qualified than anyone else to judge right and wrong, then what *does* their training qualify them to do that others cannot? To develop our earlier example, they can show the historical position of women in society, for instance their underrepresentation in positions of power, unequal pay and denigration of their intellectual abilities. But no self-evident moral position arises from these facts, and historically they have supported opposed moral positions. Feminists nowadays differ enormously in their political conclusions. In other times and places both antifeminists and feminists have argued that unequal pay was necessary because women's primary duty was care of the home and children. Moral or political judgement is separate from documented historical facts.

However, although historians have no special insight into morality, they can still do more than *only* establish facts. Their training qualifies them to interpret: they can explain *why* women have occupied unequal positions in society, pointing for instance to the prevalence of gender prejudice among religious groups or to the capitalist economy's requirement for cheap labour. Again, these interpretations are not

[3] S. Berger, *The Search for Normality: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany Since 1800* (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1997); M. Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastwards: A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
[4] For an example of a somewhat political approach to empire, see N. Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2004).

‘opinion’, because they are based on evidence. *Historians endeavour to explain and understand.* Their interpretations are based on evidence and facts, which differentiates them from mere opinion. However, historical writing cannot just rely on facts either, as some early practitioners erroneously thought it could. We know that historians disagree about many things, which suggests that history is not just about facts any more than it is about opinion.

Facts and evidence

The historical profession as we know it today is still influenced by the methods of Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886). The iconic Prussian urged historians to show the past ‘as it really was’. They should always *begin with facts*, which meant studying original documents, establishing their origin, authorship and authenticity. Historians would then arrange proven facts in sequence as a historical ‘narrative’. Footnotes – references to the documents – would allow other historians to check the validity of the work. In seminars, historians would pass on their skills to students, who would ultimately produce a piece of research of their own (the ‘doctorate’ or ‘PhD’, or ‘DPhil’). Training produced *professional* historians, who were uniquely qualified to understand sources. Rankeans also established new journals, such as *Historische Zeitschrift* (1859), *Revue historique* (1887), *English Historical Review* (1886) and *American Historical Review* (1895), in which ‘peer review’ (anonymous reading by experts in the field) ensured adherence to the aforementioned scholarly standards. Ranke used as his model the scientific experiment, which assumed that any scientist who repeated it exactly would achieve the same result. Likewise, Ranke assumed that anyone who approached a given source using his methods would interpret it in the same way. The footnote guaranteed the replicability of historical ‘results’. Ranke’s innovations remain essential to the historical profession. However, we shall see that they are used differently now, for Ranke’s conviction that historians can begin with facts - that facts can speak for themselves - is problematic.

One difficulty is that Ranke did not allow for disagreement among historians. Contrary to his expectation, historians did not always reach the same conclusions, even when they used the same sources. In *What is History?* E.H Carr argued that it was actually impossible for historians first to establish the facts and then interpret

them, for in reality *interpretation* w*as present from the beginning*. He gave three reasons.[5] First, the historian cannot simply list everything that happened on a given topic. There are an infinite number of facts about the French Revolution, for instance, and the historian cannot include all of them. The selection of material for inclusion in a history is also an act of interpretation, for the historian must use some method to determine which facts are relevant. Secondly, in deciding what to include and exclude, the historian's background and purpose necessarily matters. Ranke and his followers were unwittingly good examples of that difficulty, for they thought that the development of the state and nation were the most important facts of history, and so they tended to write political and diplomatic history. As shown elsewhere in this volume, since the 1960s historians have challenged these assumptions and instead produced histories exploring many different aspects of the identities of 'ordinary' people. Thirdly, Carr pointed out that 'facts' were not intrinsically trustworthy. The documents that survive were often pre-selected by certain groups in the period in question. For example, monks produced many surviving medieval documents. Even modern historians have more sources produced by the state than, say, factory workers. Furthermore, there is also an element of chance in determining which documents survive the vicissitudes of the ages, and in what form, as Helen Nicholson's chapter in this volume demonstrates. We may add a fourth reason, which is implicit in Carr's discussion: even if historians had just one source, they would still need to decide which questions to ask of it: For instance, court records have traditionally been used to ask questions about crime and the operation of the criminal justice system. Only recently have historians thought of using these sources to understand gender or ecological history. [Refs?] Indeed, we cannot know what new meanings people in the future they will discover in old sources. This point confirms Carr's key point that we cannot first give the facts and then interpret them – interpretation is present from the start.

Nowadays, historians generally agree with Carr that bias (understood as 'point of view') inevitably shapes historical writing, and affects interpretation and the use of sources. Since Carr wrote – indeed partly because of his work – historians have given a new meaning to the old term 'historiography'. It once meant the techniques

[5] E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1962), 1–31.

used to analyse sources, as Ranke understood them. It now means studying the historians rather than the history, uncovering their acknowledged and unacknowledged biases, and analysing the influence of different political, social and cultural circumstances on how they have interpreted the past. Since the 1960s, many history degrees have included courses on 'historiography'. By the time they finish their degrees, students are now usually expected to recognize differences between Rankean, Marxist and postmodern approaches, among others, and to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their own ways of doing history. History graduates know that understanding history involves a point of view.

Choosing a topic: frames and conceptual choices

Interpretation is, then, an inevitable part of historical research and writing. Yet this does not mean that history is just a matter of 'opinion', or that all histories are equally valid (a position known as 'relativism'). No history degree is organized on the principle that historical writing is *only* a story, and students who invent essays rarely flourish. Even those professional historians who are most sceptical of the possibility of 'objectivity' write about the past as if they can say something meaningful; they use sources, original documents and other evidence, and they reference them with footnotes. So how can historians acknowledge the inevitability of perspective and still produce worthwhile interpretations? Although perspective enters historical writing in several ways, it does not follow that we can say whatever we like about the past, or that we cannot adjudicate between competing historical interpretations. Historians begin with particular interests and write from specific perspectives, but they must shape this starting point into a question that they can test against evidence.

Perspective is inevitable because any historian must first *choose* a subject. Understandably, historians opt for the topics in which they are most interested, for example, political, military or religious history. They may also have particular ideas about government, war or the Church that they want to develop. Inevitably, these ideas and preconceptions derive from their background and experience, perhaps in ways of which they are not aware. Interests and perspective enter historical investigation from the beginning. Historians who are interested in the military are no more and no less biased than those who want to know about the roles of women or

different ethnic groups in past societies. Everybody has to choose a starting point. What really matters is *whether the ideas that form this starting point can potentially be changed or modified through research, debate, critique and confrontation with evidence*.[6] That depends on learning how to frame a topic and a question open to such modification.

Framing a topic

Each starting point for research is a choice. As Carr argued, definition of the limits of the topic or object of study is a form of bias intrinsic to historical writing. We must be clear about how our choices affect what we write about the past. Take the question, 'Why did the Second World War break out in 1939?' This apparently uncontroversial question involves a judgement on when the Second World War actually began, with which people living in different countries at the time might have disagreed. Others might argue that the war began with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (1931), the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (1935), the British and French declarations of war on Germany (1939), the German invasion of the Soviet Union (June 1941), or with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour (December 1941).This choice shapes the focus of research, and therefore the answer. If we take 1931 as the starting point, we might emphasize imperial interests; if we begin with 1939, we might be more concerned with the European balance of power.

The question of boundaries is all the more important because some historical debates are not about fact, or perhaps even interpretation, but about where limits should be set and how a topic should be defined. For instance, in an important article published in 1989, Paula Schwartz argued that previous historians had underestimated the role of women in the French Resistance. She showed that a few women *had* been involved in combat, but more importantly, argued that women's activity looked more important if the definition of resistance was extended to include transporting weapons and messages, food riots, and more. Schwartz's argument depended on re-defining resistance to include more activities, rather than

[6] M.H. Beales, 'This Source is Accurate, That Source is Bias(ed): A Re-examination of Historical Pedagogy' (2014): http://mhbeals.com/teachingblog/this-source-is-accurate-that-source-is-biased-a-re-examination-of-historical-pedagogy/. Accessed 20 June 2015.

contradicting existing knowledge, for both new and old interpretations agreed that physical combat had been almost exclusively the province of men. While in principle some historians might have objected that 'real resistance' was military, in practice they largely accepted the new definition and incorporated women into their stories. Consequently, the two views were in practice able to live together. However, Schwartz also presented further arguments that were less widely accepted. She argued that prejudices about gender roles – that men's natures were best suited to combat and women's to support roles – explained different male and female patterns of resistance. She thus challenged the assumption that the Resistance fought for equal human rights for all people against Nazi oppression, for it did not treat men and women equally. While some historians modified their accounts to incorporate this view, others rejected it, and some simply ignored it.[7]

Framing a topic entails other conceptual choices. Answering any historical question involves taking a position in relation to ideas about how society works and humans behave. No historian, even the most opposed to the use of 'theory', can avoid doing this, and historians often use casually terms such as 'unconscious' that originally were highly theoretical, but have now passed into 'common-sense' language. Assumptions of this type can make an enormous difference to specific interpretations. Take for instance the role of propaganda in society. Some social theorists assume that if slogans are constantly repeated, ordinary people will unwittingly absorb them and become vulnerable to manipulation. Others think that whether propaganda influences people depends on circumstances and that people may sometimes misunderstand, criticize or even resist it. It is easy to see that a historian's stance on such a question influences interpretation of topics from the role of the Church in the medieval world through fascist dictatorship to the place of advertising in contemporary society.[8] It is important to stress that these conceptual decisions are not mere opinion or bias. These concepts have themselves been subject to rigorous academic investigation and testing, and the best historians will be aware of where they stand in relation to such theories.

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[7] P. Schwartz, 'Partisanes and Gender Politics in Vichy France', *French Historical Studies,* 16:1 (April 1989), 126–51.

[8] See for instance the approaches of D. Welch*, The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Claudia Koponz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Historians must, then, make clear how they are framing their topic, and perhaps show that they are aware that this framing affects their answer. Choice of framing will always rule out things that others might consider important, and so historians should beware of making exaggerated claims for their contributions. Historians must be as clear as possible ~~on~~ where their arguments contradict and where they complement other interpretations. Indeed, most topics have been explored by previous historians. Consequently, in their introductions, historians should indicate the state of play in the field, so that they can explain how their own research confirms, contradicts or modifies other interpretations (this positioning is sometimes called ‘situating work historiographically’). Footnotes acknowledge that the historian’s own contribution depends on many other contributions.

Provisional hypotheses and evidence

To sum up so far, perspective is intrinsic to historical writing because we must begin with interests, choose from many possible ways of framing a topic and conducting research, and select from a potentially immense body of evidence. Yet if our starting point is a choice, it does not follow that our conclusions are simply biased. Rather, the historical method depends on turning our interests and perhaps hunches into *questions*. The point about questions is that we ask them because we are not sure of the answer, and so whatever ideas we start with could *potentially* be changed through reason, research and confrontation with evidence. What would be the point of researching the past if discovering new knowledge could not possibly modify our existing ideas? Asking a question that can serve as a starting point for research is possible only if it is properly framed. That is why initially students usually have to select essay questions from a list provided by the tutor. Gradually, as they progress though to masters and PhD levels, they acquire greater room to choose their questions. Learning to frame an answerable question is an essential part of training as a historian.

An answerable question is one which contains a *hypothesis* about the reasons for a specific historical event – a provisional explanation that research will reveal to be right, partially right or wrong. It is also a *perspective* in that the historian could choose other angles from which to investigate this event, and so their answer could never be a complete account of the topic. Moreover, people in the future will ask questions about the topic that have not occurred to us, just as Paula Schwartz asked questions about the role of women in the Resistance from a perspective which previous historians had not considered. As this example suggests, all histories are provisional, no matter how thorough the research, as all histories could be modified through asking new questions or consulting new evidence.

Thinking about framing answerable questions helps us to see why history is not just opinion. We begin with questions, or provisional hypotheses, but our answers must be supported by evidence. If they are not, the hypothesis must be discarded. This 'hypothetico-deductive method', is associated with the philosopher of science, Karl Popper (1902-1994). Popper's major contribution was to suggest that as we embark on research we must think of potential ways that evidence and research might *disprove* our hypothesis. This might sound counter-intuitive, but the point is actually quite easy to understand. If we asked a question that could not be in principle disproved, there would be little point in doing research. We would know the answers before we started and history really would be just opinion. It is necessary to frame a hypothesis that might be disproved because *confirmation* of a proposition is deceptively easy. Take the contention that all cats have tails. We would likely see any number of cats with tails as we walked about the city, but ~~in fact~~ the proposition would never be proven. We could never be certain that the statement is true, for it could be falsified by spotting just one tailless cat. Translating that into historical terms, Paul Kennedy, in a book that had great resonance outside the world of professional historians, claimed that since the sixteenth century, the relative political power of nation-states has depended on their economic power. He provided many examples to confirm his hypothesis, but just one example of a politically powerful state with a weak economy would oblige him to abandon or at least modify his

interpretation.[9] This is Popper's principle of *falsification*: historians attempt to disprove interpretations and they retain those that best stand up to this process.

The principle that we must begin with a provisional hypothesis has consequences for how we use evidence. Clearly, we cannot just collect evidence in the hope that it will be relevant. Rather, our question dictates what evidence is relevant and how we should use it. The example of Schwartz' research on resistance is relevant here. Historians who defined resistance in military terms did not look for evidence of women's role in food riots, because it seemed to be outside their realm of enquiry. Historians working with an expanded definition of resistance look for different kinds of evidence because they are asking different questions. Questions shape the research process as well as the final argument. This 'selection' of evidence has nothing to do with 'bias', or with choosing evidence that fits our argument. On the contrary, a properly framed question obliges us to choose evidence that might actually falsify our starting point, and cause us to modify our argument.

Testing hypotheses about the past can be complex. There is always much room for debate, for the use of evidence and ways of dealing with it are never straightforward. There are three potential complications to bear in mind. The first is that historical interpretations rarely consist of single statements that can be tested against a clear set of evidence. For example, the question of economic motivations in the decision to go to war involves complex hypotheses about the links between military and civil power in a democracy, the nature of capitalism and even more general questions such as the relationship between ideas and material interests. Falsifying one contention might not undermine the whole interpretation.

The second problem is that we must treat our evidence with caution. As Carr points out, evidence is not intrinsically reliable. The statistics on which historians rely for British population estimates before the nineteenth century are notoriously untrustworthy, for instance. Sometimes, the evidence, not the hypothesis, might be wrong. Historians can obviate some of the problems around reliability of evidence by

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[9] Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Random House, 1988).

consulting the widest possible number of relevant sources, comparing these sources to determine the probable reliability or individual perspective of each, and acknowledging both the limits and possibilities of these different kinds of sources in their published works. However, because they cannot be certain of their evidence, historians have to work with *probabilities.* That is one of the (many) ways in which Holocaust deniers fail to meet scholarly standards: it is simply not probable that the millions of original documents, physical remains and other evidence of the extermination of the Jews could have been fabricated.[10] A third problem is that historians are never (can never be) wholly aware of their own perspective and biases, and so they are not perfectly placed to test their own ideas. They will have blind spots and inconsistencies in their arguments. That is why mutual criticism is so important in the historical profession, and it is one reason why historians have not abandoned the professional structures that Rankeans invented all those years ago – the critique of sources, footnotes, peer review.

Conspiracy theories, critique, and debate

The importance of falsifiability, probability, and mutual criticism in historical writing emerges from comparison with conspiracy theories, such as the conviction that Lee Harvey Oswald did not kill John F. Kennedy or that the American astronauts did not land on the Moon. Conspiracy theories are not provisional hypotheses that research could modify or contradict. They are unshakable convictions that work along the following lines: the perpetrators, 'they', are powerful, hidden forces that 'obviously' have a motive to carry out the conspiracy in question and therefore must have done it. Conspiracy theorists select evidence that fits the theory and, as we have seen, it is all too easy to find apparent confirmation of a theory. Conspiracy theorists are not open to falsification – in fact, they are sceptical about everything except their own theories. If evidence apparently contradicts their theory, the conspirators must have fabricated it. If evidence is missing, 'they' must have hidden it, for 'they' supposedly have the power to do that. Conspiracy theories are also improbable. While it is

[10] Kevin Passmore, 'Poststructuralism and History', in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner, and Kevin Passmore, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 123–46.

theoretically possible to cover up one of the conspiracies in question, it is improbable, given the number of accomplices required. Is it really likely that none of the huge number of people who would have had to have been involved in fabricating evidence of the moon landings have not come forward with some solid evidence?

In contrast to conspiracy theorists, historians do modify their arguments in the course of debate with other historians and of confrontation with evidence. Historians do not stick blindly to their starting points or indeed their conclusions. To be sure, many debates are not resolved. Some never could be, for they involve moral questions that are not the province of historians. Other controversies simply come to seem irrelevant. For instance, from the 1950s to the 1970s, historians were greatly interested in the origins of the French and Russian Revolutions, and debates were particularly controversial because they were entangled with political divisions between left and right during the Cold War. In the 1990s, the topic fell out of fashion, partly because the political climate changed and partly because of methodological developments including the turn to cultural history.

Other disagreements turn out on close inspection to be false controversies, in which the competing positions are actually different perspectives that are compatible with each other. To illustrate this point, Steve Rigby uses the example of a long-running historical controversy about the origins of capitalism in medieval Europe, known as the Brenner debate. Some historians argued the decline of the population was crucial, while others emphasized struggles between peasants and landlords concerning rent payments. Rigby argues that the two views were actually compatible, and that historians agreed without realising it.[11]

Most often, debate, critique and research modifies views. Schwartz' research on women's role in the French resistance, which caused other historians to adjust their arguments in the light of her new methods and data, is a good example of this process of revision. In some cases, historians might even make so many concessions to each other that in practice they end up as indistinguishable. For example, Steve Rigby argues that between the 1960s and the 1980s,

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[11] S. H. Rigby, 'Historical Causation: Is One Thing More Important than Another?',*History,* 80 (1995), 227–42.

historiographical Marxism 'died the death of a thousand qualifications'.[12] Sometimes opponents may even come to agree – after all, historians write in the hope of persuading others. They also try to anticipate the criticisms from others, and that can open the way to compromise. Indeed, the development of an argument involves negotiation, agreement and disagreement with many other historians. For students, this process takes place through lectures, seminar debates, reading published books and sources, and via feedback from tutors. For professional historians, it also involves peer review. In some cases, historians quite explicitly accept that they were wrong. As it happens, I did so in the second edition of a book that I wrote about fascism, in which I conceded that my conviction that studying fascism depended on producing a correct definition (or model) was erroneous. I did so after direct and indirect debate with critics, through reading, participation in conferences and peer review.[13]

Professionalism and objectivity today

Today, Ranke's conviction that professionalism, facts and footnotes guaranteed the scientific objectivity of historical writing is untenable. The emphasis now is on perspective and provisional knowledge. Yet much of what the Rankeans established remains central to the discipline, even if it contemporary historians use these methods and approaches differently. For instance, we no longer agree with Rankeans that footnotes underpin objectivity, but they remain an essential protection against plagiarism and a safeguard against simply inventing interpretations. Present-day historians also see footnotes as recognition that histories are partial perspectives that rely on a whole web of work by other historians; they show some of the many other interpretations on which a particular historian relies and perhaps indicate some of their conceptual assumptions. Footnotes are part of a continuing dialogue between the author of a work and previous and future historians in a constantly revised history, based on agreement and disagreement.[14] Historians know

[12] S.H. Rigby, 'Marxist Historiography', in M. Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997), 889–928.
[13] Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[14] Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History*, 2nd edn (London: Faber & Faber, 1997).

that others will follow up their footnotes in their own research and use the same sources in different ways.

Seminars have changed too. No longer are they a means for the tutor simply to pass on his or her techniques and conclusions. Students must develop their own ideas, with increasing autonomy. At undergraduate level, the tutor helps students to formulate their own interpretations and skills. At the other end of the professional history structure, established academics present papers to their peers in research seminars and invite criticism (so history is always a collective endeavour). Similar principles apply in students' written work, in that tutors help students to formulate their ideas. Tutors know that there is not a single answer to a question, and do not expect students to rehash their own view. They ask how coherently students have formulated their own ideas, how widely they have engaged with and positioned their essay in relation to other work on the subject and how well they use evidence and referenced it. Likewise, anonymous peer-review to which professional historians are subjected is meant to ensure that publications are coherent, that they have formulated their questions properly and are clear on what they contribute, and have provided evidence to support their arguments.

Conclusion: open interpretations

I began this chapter by discussing the common assumption among undergraduates that history at university is all about giving one's own opinion. Historical writing certainly cannot be objective or give us complete or definitive answers, but the term 'opinion' may not be the most helpful. It has the disadvantage of being used in contexts that do not (rightly) require the sort of rigorous analysis that is incumbent upon historians. Historians are better advised to use terms such as interpretation, explanation and understanding. That means conscious attention to the definition of the subject, to the methods used, and asking questions that can be tested against evidence and potentially modified or falsified. Indeed, one mark of a good interpretation is that it allows for other perspectives, so long as they too depend on a proper historical method, and does not claim to be *the* interpretation. That is the basis on which historians assess both students' and each other's' work, and it is the

basis on which histories are judged to be valid, if not definitive, complete, or incontestable

Study questions

- What is the difference between 'opinion' and 'interpretation'?
- What is the difference between an 'objective' and a 'valid' history?
- What is the relationship between evidence and interpretation in historical research and writing?
- Why do most historians nowadays believe that all histories are provisional?

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