

Outline Introduction to the Meaning of 'Historiography'

The phrase *Historiography* may refer to one of the three following concepts:

a) It is the study of the writing of history as an academic discipline especially seen as a process over time;

b) may be applied to the corpus of literature covering a certain culture or epoch.

c) may also mean the study of the historical methods and approaches.

You will encounter all three uses of the word, and you need to be aware that three separate issues are involved without collapsing them into a single semantic patch. This course will mainly use the term in senses *b)* and *c)*.

We have mentioned that the study of history is, today, more subdivided than ever into sub-disciplines, sub-fields, branches and approaches. Here is a list, which I tried to make as exhaustive as possible but I am sure more can be added by resourceful practitioners of particular fields:

- Comparative history
- Cultural history
- Art history
- Deconstructive history
- Diplomatic history
- Economic history
- Marxist history
- Biography
- History from below
- Micro-history
- History of ideas
- Oral history
- Paleography
- Political history
- Classical philology as history
- Gender history
- Revisionism (does history exist?)
- Urban history
- Whig history
- Romantic (usually national) history
- Military history
- History of historiography
- Universal history, etc

We mentioned that Historiography (in a given meaning of the word) most often addresses the following questions and issues:

- The purpose of history;
- The use of history (political, educational, cultural, etc);
- Reliability, credibility of authors, editors;
- Reliability, credibility of primary sources (we have discussed the definition of primary vs. secondary sources);
- Ideological bias (or “tradition”) of the author;
- Ideological bias of the reader;
- Canonical/orthodox vs. revisionist history;
- Moral values, assignment of guilt or praise in history;
- Given the fact that “a history” should be sharply distinguished from “a chronicle”, what qualifies as a historical event? (A treaty, a battle, the birth or death of a “great man”, the emergence of an idea, unification/disintegration of a polity, emergence of new agricultural methods, that someone leaves behind a detailed diary, a large (or small) epidemic, a technical or medical invention, new styles in music or architecture, changes in language use, the emergence of a new approach to history, perhaps any significant (or insignificant) statistical change?);
- The role of the state (free-standing “Black Box”) in historical writing vs. the living and sentient building blocks that make up societies;
- Can an individual or isolated group of individuals or an object (group of objects) be the subject of historical study without reference to socio-economic-political embedding?
- Philosophical interpretation of Objectivity vs. subjectivity;
- Can/should a historian search for the “truth”?
- Historical metanarrative;
- The influence of the medium (textbook, article, film, interview, novel, etc) on the meaning of the message;
- Historical theory vs. historical practice;
- Does history teach us anything?
- Should a historian and his/her history be ethical?
- Whether historiography itself may influence (interact with) historical events and the way they are viewed, interpreted.

In spite of these evidently fraught questions, it is perhaps surprising that Historiography does not look back on a long and distinguished tradition of exponents and practitioners. One outstanding exception to this observation is the life and work of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), (full name: Muḥammad bin Khaldūn Al-Hadrami), astronomer, philosopher, historian, Islamic scholar, who may be considered as the father of historiography. His Muqaddimah “Prolegomena” (introduction to a planned history of the world) is the first recorded piece of scholarship that critiques historical methods, examines the role of the state and bias in the writing of history, addresses the significance of propaganda, communication and the role of language. He also elaborated a systematic method for the study of history.

Only the emergence of modern (European) source-based history in the 18th to 20th centuries opened the way for the methodological and philosophical inquiries that we call Historiography today. In this connection, the names of Theodor Mommsen, Leopold von Ranke as well as the French Annales School need to be mentioned. The first historical journals (such as *Historische Zeitschrift* [1859] and *Századok* [1867]) provided the early forums for historiographical debate .