

Understanding History & Thinking Historically

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I. A Philosophy of History:

History is often understood as “the past.” But can we really “know” the past? Historians think so!

We use primary and secondary sources to re-construct the past. Historians, therefore, are concerned with re-presenting the past. In this course, we have not only asked: What happened? But also, when possible, why it happened when it happened?

Time can often seem constant. But then “out of nowhere” things drastically change. Historians are interested in these shifts in time—sometimes gradual and prolonged while other times seemingly instant. We are particularly consumed with “change over time.” So whilst we are concerned with dates, people, places, and general events, we are primarily interested in *causality*. So, the “Why” question is utmost on our minds. So, we constantly ask: what events or historical forces have brought about significant change? But we also ask: if historical events necessarily bring about change?

As a result, some events are more important than others. While one event can represent monumental change another can help create conditions for change.

Thus some events are more historical than others. Something is *historical* when it either represents a “pattern” or if it represents a *shift in time or condition*. As you see below, violence, for example, is *historically* significant in African American history. There is a noticeable *pattern* of violence—during slavery, during Jim Crow (lynching and police brutality), and in the present (Mass Incarceration & Police Brutality). The Civil War was *historical* because it signals the end of slavery, that is, a shift in time or the period of slavery. Similarly, historians are also consumed with the question of whether this is change conditions. For example, some historians convict labor argue that while formal slavery ended the conditions that ex-slaves experienced were continuous with those of during the legal period of slavery. So historians are not only interested in “change over time” but also “continuity.”

Students are expected to understand and explain:

1. What happened?
2. Why it happened when it happened?
3. Use and interpret primary & secondary sources

Historical actors:

1. Humanize and center historical actors
2. Get a sense of how they understood and viewed their own time period
3. Structural forces, state & civil society

Analysis:

*Ability to think historically, analyze historical phenomena, and define and apply concepts, such as race, black public sphere, etc . . .

II. Some key terms:

1. Historical Context
2. Causality
3. “Change over time” & “Continuity”
4. Watershed, a period or moment representing significant change.
5. Historical actors or agents

6. Structural forces or conditions

7. Presentism

8. Primary Sources: texts, artifacts, interviews that are contemporaneous with, or speak to, a particular period.

9. Secondary Sources: books and articles that are produced through the use of primary sources.

10. Historiography are the historical writings by historians or scholars on specific periods, topics, and themes over the course of time.

III. Major Themes to consider as you read and think about the big picture as it relates to dates, events, personalities, organizations, and periods:

A. The state and civil society

State: government at local, state, and national levels, including all three branches.

Civil society: nongovernmental organizations and associations.

B. Race, Racism, and different forms of Identification

1-Race: the notion that there are inherent, natural, and biological divisions within humankind that make up distinct racial groups.

2-Racism: describes patterns of racial discrimination that are institutionalized, often as “normal,” throughout an entire culture. It’s often based on the notion that groups within humankind are inferior based on racial differences.

3-Racialism: awareness or acknowledgement of racial differences.

4-ethnicity: a group within a nation that may share a common ‘racial’ or national or religious ancestry and/or history.

5-nation: historically, nation represented a group that shared a common history, culture, and language; a ‘modern’ understanding of nation additionally include belonging to a territory or sovereign state.

6-Uplift Ideology/Respectability: An embrace of the values of hard work, thrift, piety, and sexual restraint as a means to attain respectability, social mobility, and especially differentiate yourself from others.

7-Black public sphere: According to political scientist Michael C. Dawson, “A set of institutions, communication networks (media—newspapers, magazines, television, radio, blogs, etc. . . .) and practices that facilitate debate of causes and remedies to the current combination of political setbacks and economic devastation facing major segments of the Black community, and which facilitate the creation of oppositional formations and sites (organizations within civil society & the streets, i.e. boycotts or “occupy Wall Street”).

8-Cultural Hegemony: Dominant groups obtain political, economic, and social control through getting subordinate groups to embrace and adopt the dominant groups values.

C. African Diaspora- dispersion of Africans from the continent of Africa

D. Structural forces such as economic, political, social, and cultural elements

Economic: agricultural/industrial/service/technological; employers/workers; landlords/tenants; banks/loans/mortgages . . .

Political/state: government, elections, politicians, parties, government workers—police officers, teachers, firefighters, postal workers, etc . . .

Social: public and private space, for example streets and transportation, theaters, schools, housing

Culture: music, art, theater, and media—digital, paper, radio, internet, television; including the institutions and/or industries of.

E. Ideologies-Integration and US Nationalist/Patriotism, Black Nationalism, Anti-capitalist (socialist/communist), Pan-Africanist:

1-Integration/Patriotism: adherence to the precepts of and loyalty to country; desire to be part of nation with all privileges and rights.

2-Black Nationalism: the notion that black people constitute a distinct nation within the country of the U.S.

3-Anti-capitalist--belief that the exploitation and economic degradation of the working-class is inherent to capitalism.

4-Pan-Africanist--the notion that people of African descent share a common history, culture, condition, and especially political objectives.

F. Violence

1. Objects of violence

2. Political violence

a. Self-defense

b. Non-violence