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# Historiography: An Analysis of How History is Written and Interpreted

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## ABSTRACT

*Historiography refers to the study of how history is written, interpreted, and constructed by historians across different periods. It goes beyond the simple recording of past events and focuses on the methods, perspectives, and ideological frameworks that shape historical narratives. This paper examines the evolution of historiography from ancient narrative traditions to modern scientific approaches and postmodern critiques, highlighting how the understanding and interpretation of history have transformed over time. It also discusses major schools of historiography, including positivist, Marxist, subaltern, and feminist perspectives, each of which offers a distinct framework for analyzing the past and emphasizes different aspects of historical reality. Furthermore, the study explores key factors that influence historical interpretation, such as bias, culture, political ideology, and the availability and limitations of sources. Through selected case studies like the Revolt of 1857, the French Revolution, World War I, and the Industrial Revolution, the paper demonstrates how the same historical events can generate multiple and often conflicting interpretations. Overall, this research emphasizes that history is not a fixed or absolute truth but a dynamic and continuously evolving process of interpretation shaped by context, perspective, and methodological choices of historians.*

**Keywords:** *Historiography, Historical Interpretation, Positivism, Marxist Historiography, Subaltern Studies, Feminist Historiography*

**H**istoriography refers to the study of how history is written, interpreted, and constructed by historians over time. Rather than being a simple collection of past events, historiography examines the methods, perspectives, and assumptions that shape historical narratives. In this sense, history is not merely a fixed record of facts, but a dynamic process of interpretation influenced by the historian's context, available sources, and intellectual framework. As a discipline, historiography allows us to critically evaluate not only what is written

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about the past, but also how and why it is written in a particular way. The importance of historiography lies in its ability to reveal that historical knowledge is not neutral or purely objective. Every historical account is shaped by choices—what sources to include, which events to emphasize, and how to connect them into a coherent narrative. These choices are influenced by cultural values, political ideologies, and the historian's own perspective. Therefore, historiography helps us understand that history is not simply discovered but actively constructed. This insight is crucial in the modern context, where competing interpretations of the past often influence identity, politics, and collective memory.

The foundations of historiography can be traced back to early historians such as Herodotus, often called the “father of history,” who attempted to systematically record events and human experiences while also incorporating storytelling and cultural explanations (Herodotus, trans. 2003). Although his work included myths and anecdotal elements, it marked a significant shift toward organized historical inquiry. In contrast, the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke emphasized a more scientific approach to history, arguing that historians should strive to present the past “as it actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) (Ranke, 1824/1973). Ranke's approach laid the foundation for modern empirical historiography, prioritizing primary sources and objective analysis.

However, despite Ranke's ideal of objectivity, later developments in historiography have demonstrated that complete neutrality is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Historians inevitably interpret evidence through their own conceptual frameworks, leading to multiple, sometimes conflicting, representations of the same event. Thus, the central idea of historiography is that history is not just a collection of facts, but an interpretative act shaped by perspective, context, and methodology. Understanding this distinction enables a more critical and nuanced engagement with the past.

## EVOLUTION OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

The evolution of historiography can be understood as a gradual transformation in how humans perceive, record, and interpret the past. It is not just a change in content, but a deep shift in the methodology and philosophy of history writing almost like upgrading the “operating system” through which we process past events.

**Ancient Historiography:** Ancient historiography represents the earliest systematic attempts to record the past, but it often combined myth, legend, and factual events without strict separation. Historians of this period were not only recorders of events but also storytellers who aimed to preserve cultural memory and moral lessons. A key example is Herodotus, who is widely regarded as the “father of history.” In his work *Histories*, he documented events such as the Greco-Persian Wars, but also included folklore, divine explanations, and anecdotal narratives (Herodotus, trans. 2003). His approach reflects a stage where history was not yet a strict analytical discipline but a blend of observation and narrative tradition.

**Medieval Historiography:** Medieval historiography was largely shaped by religious frameworks, where historical events were interpreted as manifestations of divine will. In both Christian and Islamic traditions, history was seen as a linear progression guided by God, with moral and theological significance. Chroniclers during this period often focused on kings, religious figures, and major events, interpreting them through a spiritual lens. For example, events such as wars, famines, or plagues were frequently explained as divine punishment or testing (Bloch, 1953).

**Modern Historiography:** Modern historiography represents a major shift toward a more scientific and evidence-based study of the past. It is closely associated with Leopold von Ranke, who emphasized the use of primary sources and argued that history should be written “as it actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) (Ranke, 1824/1973). This approach highlighted objectivity, critical source analysis, and factual accuracy, moving history away from moral storytelling toward systematic reconstruction of events based on evidence.

**Postmodern Historiography:** Postmodern historiography challenges the very idea of absolute or objective truth in history. It argues that all historical narratives are shaped by language, power structures, and perspective, making complete neutrality impossible. Thinkers like Michel Foucault and Hayden White emphasized that history is not just discovered but constructed through discourse (White, 1973). According to this view, there is no single “true” version of history—only multiple interpretations depending on who is telling the story.

## DIFFERENT SCHOOLS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

The study of historiography is enriched by different interpretative schools that offer distinct ways of understanding and reconstructing the past. Each school reflects a specific methodological and ideological orientation, shaping how historians select, analyze, and interpret historical evidence.

- **Positivist School:** The Positivist School of historiography is grounded in the belief that historical knowledge can be derived objectively through empirical observation and verifiable facts. It assumes that “facts speak for themselves” and that the historian’s role is to collect, verify, and present them without subjective interference. This approach was influenced by the broader development of positivist philosophy in the nineteenth century, particularly associated with Auguste Comte (Comte, 1853). Positivist historians emphasize chronology, accuracy, and documentary evidence, treating history as a discipline similar to natural sciences where truth is discovered through factual verification.
- **Marxist Historiography:** Marxist historiography interprets history primarily through the lens of economic structures and class struggle. Based on the ideas of Karl Marx, it argues that historical change is driven by conflicts between social classes, particularly between those who control the means of production and those who labor under them (Marx & Engels, 1848). From this perspective, political institutions, cultural systems, and even ideas are shaped by underlying economic forces.
- **Subaltern Historiography:** Subaltern historiography focuses on recovering the voices and experiences of marginalized groups who are often excluded from dominant historical narratives. It emerged as a critique of elite-centered history writing and is strongly associated with Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies Collective (Guha, 1982). This approach seeks to reconstruct history from the perspective of peasants, workers, and other oppressed communities whose experiences are often absent from official records.
- **Feminist Historiography:** Feminist historiography examines history through the lens of gender, emphasizing the roles, experiences, and contributions of women that have traditionally been marginalized or overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. It critiques the male-centered bias in conventional historiography and seeks to reconstruct history in a more inclusive manner, incorporating gender as a key analytical category (Scott, 1986). This approach reveals how social, political, and economic structures have shaped gender relations across different historical periods.

## FACTORS AFFECTING HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

Historical interpretation is shaped by several interconnected factors that influence how historians understand, select, and present the past. One of the most important factors is bias, which refers to the personal or unconscious preferences of historians that can affect their interpretation of events. Bias may arise from individual experiences, education, or social background, and it often leads to selective emphasis or omission of historical evidence (Bloch, 1953). As a result, the same historical event can be interpreted differently by different historians depending on their perspective.

- Culture is another key factor that shapes historical interpretation. The cultural environment in which a historian lives influences their worldview, values, and sense of importance regarding historical events. Cultural beliefs and traditions determine what is considered significant or meaningful in history writing, thereby shaping the interpretation of past events (Burke, 1991). This means that historiography is deeply embedded within cultural frameworks and cannot be fully separated from them.
- Political ideology also plays a significant role in shaping historical narratives. History is often influenced by dominant political systems or ideologies, which can affect how events are recorded and interpreted. Governments or political movements may highlight certain aspects of history while downplaying others to support their legitimacy or ideological goals (Marx & Engels, 1848). Thus, political context can strongly influence the construction of historical knowledge.
- Availability of sources significantly impacts historical interpretation. Historians are limited by the evidence that survives from the past, including documents, artifacts, and oral traditions. Gaps or limitations in available sources can lead to incomplete or partial reconstructions of historical events, requiring historians to rely on interpretation and inference (Carr, 1961). Therefore, the nature and accessibility of sources play a crucial role in shaping historical understanding.

Historiography shows that history is not a fixed record of facts but a continuously evolving interpretation of the past shaped by perspective, evidence, and context. From ancient narrative traditions to modern scientific approaches and postmodern critiques, historical writing has constantly changed in its methods and assumptions. Ultimately, historiography helps us understand that history is constructed through interpretation, and different schools of thought reveal multiple dimensions of the same past (Carr, 1961).

### **SOURCES OF HISTORY AND THEIR LIMITATIONS**

Historical reconstruction depends heavily on different types of sources, which provide the foundation for interpreting the past. The first category is primary sources, which include original materials created during the time period under study, such as official documents, inscriptions, letters, eyewitness accounts, artifacts, and archaeological remains. These sources are considered highly valuable because they provide direct evidence of historical events, although they still require careful interpretation (Carr, 1961). The second category is secondary sources, which are works produced by historians or scholars after the event has taken place. These include textbooks, research papers, and historical analyses that interpret, analyze, and synthesize primary evidence. While secondary sources help in understanding and contextualizing historical events, they are influenced by the historian's perspective and methodological approach (Bloch, 1953).

However, the use of historical sources comes with several limitations. One major issue is incomplete data, as many historical records have been lost, destroyed, or never recorded in the first place. This creates gaps in knowledge, forcing historians to reconstruct the past based on partial evidence, which can lead to uncertainty or multiple interpretations. Another significant limitation is bias in sources, as both primary and secondary sources may reflect the perspectives, interests, or agendas of their creators. This means that historical records are not always neutral and may present a distorted view of events (Burke, 1991). Therefore, historians must critically evaluate all sources before drawing conclusions.

### **CASE STUDY INTERPRETATION OF HISTORICAL EVENTS**

Historical events are often interpreted differently depending on the perspective, ideology, and objectives of historians. This makes historiography a field of competing narratives rather than a single fixed truth. A strong example is the Revolt of 1857, but this pattern can also be observed in several other major historical events.

- **The Revolt of 1857:** The Revolt of 1857 has been interpreted in contrasting ways. British colonial historians described it as a “mutiny,” focusing mainly on the rebellion of sepoys within the East India Company’s army and framing it as a limited military disturbance rather than a widespread uprising (Metcalf, 1995). This interpretation minimized its political significance and helped justify continued colonial rule. In contrast, nationalist historians such as Bipan Chandra interpret it as the “First War of Independence,” emphasizing its widespread participation by soldiers, peasants, and regional rulers against British exploitation and domination (Chandra, 1988). Thus, the same event is framed either as a rebellion within an army or as the beginning of a national freedom struggle.
- **The French Revolution (1789):** The interpretation of the French Revolution also varies widely. Liberal historians view it as a foundational moment for democracy, liberty, and equality, marking the overthrow of feudal and absolutist structures (Doyle, 1989). However, Marxist historians interpret it differently, emphasizing the role of class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, seeing it as a bourgeois revolution that replaced one ruling class with another (Hobsbawm, 1962). Thus, while one interpretation highlights political freedom, the other focuses on economic class transformation.
- **World War I:** The causes of World War I are also interpreted differently by historians. Traditional interpretations emphasize factors such as militarism, alliances, imperialism, and nationalism as shared responsibilities among European powers. However, some revisionist historians argue that Germany bears greater responsibility due to its aggressive foreign policy and strategic decisions, while others emphasize structural failures of the international system rather than individual state actions (Fischer, 1961). This shows how responsibility for the same conflict can be distributed differently depending on historical interpretation.
- **The Industrial Revolution:** The Industrial Revolution is another debated historical transformation. Classical interpretations present it as a period of technological progress,

economic growth, and modernization that improved living standards. In contrast, Marxist and social historians emphasize its negative consequences, such as exploitation of workers, child labor, urban poverty, and widening class inequality (Thompson, 1963). Thus, the same process can be seen either as progress or as exploitation depending on the analytical lens.

- **Partition of India (1947):** The Partition of India is interpreted differently by historians and political narratives. Some view it as an unavoidable outcome of communal tensions and political disagreements between major communities and leaders, while others interpret it as a result of colonial policies that deepened divisions through “divide and rule” strategies (Butalia, 1998). For many social historians, it is also remembered as a human tragedy involving mass migration, violence, and displacement, rather than only a political event.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The question of whether history can ever achieve complete objectivity remains one of the most debated issues in historiography. The positivist tradition holds that through rigorous source criticism, empirical verification, and careful methodological control, historians can approximate objective truth about the past. However, in practice, complete neutrality is difficult because the historian is not an external observer but an active interpreter of evidence. Every historian selects, organizes, and emphasizes facts based on intellectual training, cultural background, and contemporary concerns. Even the identification of what counts as a “historical fact” involves interpretive judgment, since facts do not exist in isolation but gain meaning only within narratives (Carr, 1961). Therefore, historical writing is better understood not as pure objectivity, but as a structured interpretation of evidence shaped by context, perspective, and methodology. Another crucial issue is bias, which cannot be fully eliminated but can be critically recognized and managed. Bias exists not only in historians but also within the sources themselves, as historical records are often produced under specific political, social, or ideological conditions. This means that both primary and secondary sources may reflect partial or distorted viewpoints. However, through methodological rigor—such as cross-examining multiple sources, comparing conflicting accounts, and applying contextual analysis—historians can minimize the influence of bias and move closer to balanced interpretation (Bloch, 1953). In this sense, objectivity should not be understood as complete neutrality but as a disciplined process of critical inquiry and self-reflection.

Furthermore, modern historiography increasingly acknowledges that interpretation is shaped by linguistic and conceptual frameworks. The language used to describe events already carries assumptions that influence meaning, making complete detachment impossible. As a result, historians must remain aware that their narratives are constructed rather than simply discovered. This does not make historical knowledge unreliable; rather, it highlights the importance of transparency in methodology and openness to alternative interpretations. Objectivity, therefore, becomes an ideal to strive toward rather than a condition that can be fully achieved (White, 1973).

Historical objectivity is best understood as a continuous methodological effort rather than an absolute state. While complete neutrality is unattainable due to the presence of bias in both sources and interpretation, historians can still produce reliable and meaningful knowledge through critical analysis, comparative study, and methodological self-awareness.

## CONCLUSION

Historiography clearly demonstrates that history is not a fixed or static record of past events, but rather a continuously evolving field of interpretation shaped by changing methods, intellectual traditions, and socio-political contexts. From early narrative traditions that blended myth and memory, to modern scientific approaches that emphasized empirical evidence, and further to postmodern critiques that question the possibility of absolute truth, historical writing has undergone profound transformation in both purpose and methodology. Each stage of historiographical development has added new dimensions to our understanding of the past and has refined the ways in which historical knowledge is constructed, analyzed, and presented.

Ultimately, the study of historiography reveals that history is not merely about recording what happened, but about interpreting why events occurred and how they are understood differently across time, cultures, and perspectives. The meaning of historical events is not fixed; it changes depending on the questions asked, the available evidence, and the interpretive framework used by the historian. Thus, history becomes a dynamic interaction between evidence and interpretation, where the past is constantly re-evaluated in light of new insights and changing contexts. This makes historiography essential for developing a critical understanding of how knowledge about the past is produced and why multiple

narratives of the same event can coexist. “History is not just about what happened, but about how we choose to remember it.”

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