

Historiography of American History

“Historiography reminds us that history is not a closed book, not a collection of inarguable facts or a seamless story. Historiography is a reminder that there is something to argue about in history, something that makes us think about the conduct of our contemporary lives.”¹

I. Providential History: 1600’s and Puritan writers

- A. Writings:
 1. William Bradford: *Of Plymouth Plantation*
 2. John Winthrop: *The Journal of John Winthrop*
 3. Cotton Mather: “Limitation of Government”
 4. Mercy Otis Warren: *History of the American Revolution*²
- B. Beliefs:
 1. Justify the ways of God to man, and vice-versa.
 2. Their history is a holy chronicle, revealing God’s Providence toward His Chosen People and their efforts to build a New Canaan in the wilderness.
 3. God’s hand leads mankind forward, their disasters are His rebukes, their successes His merciful rewards.
 4. The American Revolution is a triumph of reformed Christianity over paganism and Catholicism.
 5. The U.S. as a whole took the place of New England as the model of Christian virtue for the corrupt Old World to emulate.

II. Rationalist History: 1700’s

- A. Writings:
 1. Thomas Jefferson: *Notes on the State of Virginia*
 2. David Ramsay: *The History of the American Revolution*³
- B. Beliefs:
 1. History takes on a secular and naturalistic interpretation.
 2. Historians were influenced by Newton, Locke, and the French philosophes.
 3. History, like the physical universe, is subject to natural law. Natural law takes the place of divine providence in directing the world’s affairs.
 4. History unfolds through progress and reason.
 5. These men possessed classical educations, fine private libraries, and the leisure time to use both. Their writing was more refined and allusive than the studiously plain prose of their Puritan predecessors.
 6. They wrote history for their own satisfaction, but also to explain to the enlightened world the success of men like themselves: free, bold, intelligent, and ambitious – men who built fortunes and governed provinces that embodied a perfect balance between liberty and order.
 7. Self interest, not piety, motivates men; reason, not faith, allows them to discover and pursue their destiny. The fruits of liberty include not only astonishing material prosperity and advances in knowledge but moral progress as well.
 8. History was a story about how wealth, power, rights, and wrongs came to be in this world.

III. Nationalist History: mid to late 1800’s

- A. Writings:
 1. George Bancroft: *History of the United States*
 2. Elizabeth Ellet: *Pioneer Women of the West*
 3. Helen Hunt Jackson: *Century of Dishonor*
 4. Josiah Strong: *Our Country: Its Possible Future and its Present Crisis*
- B. Beliefs:
 1. Historians began to temper their Enlightenment assurance about human beings’ capacity for rational improvement.

¹ Couvares, Francis G. et al (Editors). *Interpretations of American History: Patterns and Perspectives*. (7th Ed.) New York: The Free Press, 2000.

² Warren is neither a Puritan nor was her book written in the 1600’s, but it is reflective of this ideology.

³ Ramsay is a bridge between the Rationalist and Nationalist History.

2. America is the triumph of Anglo-Saxon people over inferior races.
3. History focuses around three themes: progress, liberty, and Anglo-Saxon destiny.
4. German influence of romantic emphasis on the inborn virtues of the “folk.”
5. The Anglo-Saxons were racially destined to spread freedom across the globe was central to this romantic nationalism.
6. The march of history, which corresponded to the spread of American democratic institutions throughout the world and culminated at home in Jacksonian democracy.
7. History focuses on the conflict between white settlers and indigenous people.

IV. Progressive History: early 1900’s through the mid 1940’s

- A. Writings:
 1. Charles Beard: *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*
 2. Charles and Mary Beard: *The Rise of American Civilization*
 3. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.: *The Age of Jackson*
 4. Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”
 5. Vernon L. Parrington: *Main Currents in American Thought*
- B. Beliefs:
 1. American history is characterized by a struggle between the “power elite” and “the people.”
 2. Liberals and progressives are the “good guys” in American history because they move the nation closer to a liberal democratic state.
 3. The development of a liberal democratic state is inevitable.
 4. Private property and the free enterprise system are the best way to provide opportunities for common Americans. Private property should not be destroyed.
 5. The solution to almost every problem in America is more democracy and an extension of rights.
 6. Conflict has shaped American history. All of the following divisions represent America’s polarized history; rich v. poor, haves v. have not’s, privileged v. less privileged, aristocracy v. democracy, debtors v. creditors, North v. South, East v. West, labor v. big business, liberalism v. conservatism, agrarianism v. capitalism.
 7. Progressive historians generally ignored the issues of race, gender, and ethnicity.

V. Consent and Consensus History: late 1940’s through the 1980’s

- A. Writings:
 1. Richard Hofstadter: *The Age of Reform*
 2. Louis Hartz: *The Liberal Tradition in America*
 3. Daniel J. Boorstin: *The Americans*
- B. Beliefs:
 1. The shared ideas of Americans are more important in history than the conflicts.
 2. There is a general absence of conflict in American history, particularly the absence of class conflict.
 3. American history is characterized by a general continuity and ideological narrowness. Americans have always found general agreement on fundamental principles – freedom of speech, religion, etc.
 4. Historians should study ideas that cross over time periods.
 5. American’s political struggles have always been within the center rather than between extremes of left and right.
 6. American’s have always been held together by general prosperity and a universal acceptance of the ideas in the Declaration of Independence.
 7. The accomplishments and achievements of American democratic capitalism should be celebrated. The industrialists of the late 1800’s gave us a more efficient economy.

VI. Conservative History: 1950’s through the present

- A. Writings:
 1. Russell Kirk: *The Conservative Mind*
 2. Russell Kirk: *Reflections on Our Conservative Constitution*
 3. George H. Nash: *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*
 4. Larry Schweikart and Michael Patrick Allen: *A Patriots History of the United States*

- B. Beliefs:
1. History should be seen as a moral guide and promote the more traditional characteristics of society.
 2. History is moral interpretation.
 3. Historians should focus on individuals and institutions of power and influence.
 4. History is seen as a source of promoting patriotism within America.
 5. Conservatives believe in a transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems.
 6. Belief that civilized society requires orders and classes, as against the notion of a “classless society.”
 7. Persuasion that freedom and property are closely linked – separate property from private possession and Leviathan becomes master of all. Economic leveling, they maintain, is not economic progress.

VII. New Left History: 1960’s through the 1970’s

- A. Writings:
1. Michael Harrington: *The Other America*
 2. Howard Zinn: *A People’s History of the United States: 1492 – Present*
- B. Beliefs:
1. Historians should not leave out the parts of American history that explain the violence, racism, and oppression in American society.
 2. Americans need a “usable past” that realistically includes all of the nation’s negative features.
 3. America is not a melting pot – it is a stew of races, class, gender, and ethnicity.
 4. Individualists, radicals, and anarchists such as Garrison, Thoreau, and Goldman should be celebrated. Their ideas were ahead of their times and they described America accurately.

VIII. People’s History: 1980’s through the present

- A. Writings:
1. Eric Foner: “The South’s Inner Civil War.”
 2. Patricia Limerick: *Legacy of Conquest*
- B. Beliefs:
1. History should focus on common people rather than individuals in a position of perceived power and influence.
 2. Historians should study diaries, letters, and other documents from common people.
 3. American history is characterized by a general conflict that is neither political nor economic. The conflict shaping American history is cultural.
 4. Americans struggle against each other with opposing views of how to live.
 5. Americans struggle against each other with opposing views of modernism and traditionalism or change and continuity.
 6. Historians should use comparative history to understand America better. Historians should compare American society to societies in other nations and put American history in global perspective.