

Demystifying Historical Authority: Critical Textual Analysis in the Classroom

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Although historians urge the close, critical reading of documents in their own work and in the classroom, they rarely treat the textbooks, paperbacks, and articles they assign and review in the classroom to the same rigorous and detailed analysis. Even less do they show the impact of modern literary theory upon the very representation of the past as a form of text or narrative. Failure to show students the constructed side of history through a critical analysis of the assigned readings as textual wholes promotes two false impressions of how historians convert the past into history and how contemporary theorists in the social sciences, philosophy, and literature view the nature of historical understanding.

One false impression may be labeled historical fundamentalism in analogy to religious faith. Students seem to treat their assigned readings and textbooks, if not their teachers, as divinely inspired. All history is basically a matter of facts in this view; all students need do is memorize enough data by reading the assignments in the course. These students do not tolerate ambiguous interpretations of data, let alone multiple perspectives upon the past. Such an approach to representing the past as formal history presumes at base only one great story told from a single omniscient viewpoint. These students need to learn, in my opinion, how to treat textbooks and assigned readings as textual constructions subject to the same kinds of analysis as any other piece of argument or literature and, therefore, that the construction of history as an overall narrative is subject to the same biases and problems as any other intellectual production.

On the other side are the students who learn all too well the many interpretations given any major event or period of history by professional historians. To them such conflicting interpretations too often seem the picayune squabbles internecine to a profession in need of mental leaf-raking to keep its members in business. These students do not see the larger issues about human behavior and understanding at the core of the divergent interpretations historians give events and periods.

These students also need to learn that history textbooks and other assigned readings can be treated as textual constructions but, in this case, in terms of how they embody major controversies about the nature and causes of human behavior, the moral and political purposes of learning, and the role of narrative and rhetoric in the expositions humans give their understandings of themselves. Just as other persons cannot stand outside some universe of discourse, so these students must learn that they too make certain claims by their intellectual stance.

Both types of students should learn that historians construct history as if it were really an omniscient narrative that can be read as a single, great story of the past. In actual practice that great story is constituted by historians' books and articles through their representation of the past as formal history. Students learn this lesson best through becoming critical and close readers of their various assigned readings and textbooks as part of this discourse. Students should learn to move from reading assignments as textual constructions to reading all of history as a text. To modern literary theorists the word text designates not only the written work itself but also the framework of presuppositions that produce its form as well as content. In this sense of the word, a textbook, like a famous document or great book, invites interpretation as well as embodies

interpretation, hence calls for a more active reader.

In my own classrooms, whether for first-year, upper-division, or graduate students, I try to achieve such an approach through a lengthy handout that offers guidelines to what I see as a more active approach to reading secondary sources than the usual suggestions for reading (and reviewing) a history book or article. Advanced Placement (AP) students will learn, like their college peers in history courses, that the discipline is a thinking person's field. In fact, they might study the whole AP examination as a textual production itself, using the guidelines to discover definite sets of presuppositions about the nature of history and whether the exam embraces but one version of the great story.

In the following version of my handout, I offer some additional commentary in brackets after each section of the original.

The purpose of analytical or deep reading (and reviewing) is to see through the surface text of a book or article to its inner workings. A simple recapitulation or summary of the work's contents as the author organizes it does not usually provide you as a reader or anyone with whom you discuss the piece an adequate understanding of the contents as a set of arguments or a narrative embodying a cluster of presuppositions. You should examine authors' main points, how they went about explicating them, and the sets of assumptions that made for their works being exactly the way they are. In books, for example, authors have several hundred pages to make their points, but in preparing a review you have only a few double-spaced pages to make your points. Thus you must reorganize the author's scheme of exposition and framework of argument and assumptions for your own purposes according to your own needs for understanding and/or presentation. The following topics and questions aim to help you do this, to examine the book or article as a whole according to the larger framework of assumptions that generates its contents.

Comparing the author's goals and achievements. What are the chief goals of the work as announced by the author in the preface or introduction to the book or the first few paragraphs of the article? What are the actual major themes or ideas of the work in your own opinion? Does your analysis of the goals and themes agree with the aims as expressed by the author? Do the author's explicit goals (if any) and his/her major themes or arguments match both in their logic and in their exposition as represented in the book's or article's organization? Are the goals, themes, and arguments shown clearly in the organization of the book or article?

Does, for example, the structure of the book-- its parts, chapters, or other subsections-- follow closely or loosely from the author's stated goals, or does the structure derive more from implicit judgments about morality, politics, or other concerns? Does the author, in short, prove her/his argument(s) and how well and by what means? Does the author's style enhance or detract from the main arguments or the overall contents of the work? What rhetorical ploys does the author use to further the argument or story? From whose viewpoint and with what literary devices does the author present the story or frame the argument? Why do you think the author chose that particular viewpoint or voice? Do conspicuous silences occur in the work about topics you think should have been covered? Why do you think the author omitted what you think so important to the work's argument or narrative?

[This section calls the students' attention to the overall message(s) of the book or article as stated by the author and whether they see the total text in the same manner. By focusing upon the comparison they examine the work as a whole in terms of its implicit as well as explicit messages and how the many layers of text embody and thus (re)present those messages.]

Morals, uses, politics. What are the author's moral and political judgments and how do they influence the

text? For what political, moral, intellectual, or other purpose does the author argue and shape the material? (Philosophical, religious, and professional concerns can shape material as much as economic, political, or other interests.) Are the author's uses made explicit or are they implicit in how he/she told the story or made the argument(s)? Even an explicit denial of political or moral ends may have moral and political consequences.

[These questions direct the students' attention to their and the author's largest concerns in the political and moral realms. Such questions connect the work's contents to the world of ethics and politics, whether through philosophy, political theory, economic self-interest, partisan argument, or otherwise. Not only can the students use knowledge gained in other subjects, at home, or in still other ways to explore the presuppositions of an author, but, in the process, they connect a history text to their own larger perspectives as well. They also learn that all secondary sources have present-day political and moral implications even if the author argues for the appreciation of the past for its own sake.]

Models of society, economy, polity. What does the author presume about the nature of social, economic, or political arrangements in the society being examined? How are social groupings and their relationships determined? Does the society have classes as well as groups? What does the author argue explicitly or implicitly about the structures of power and the means of social control or domination? Does the author presume consensual agreement or conflict is natural among social groups and the overall workings of a society? Is the author a pluralist who believes in the wide distribution of power throughout the society or a power elitist who sees a small integrated group dominating the society? Does the author present supporting evidence or only theory in her/ his exposition of social arrangements?

[To ask what is presumed about the state, the economy, or the social organization in a text or interpretation exposes certain basic presuppositions that may or may not be uncovered in the preceding set of questions about uses, but the morals of the preceding part and the models of this part are often inextricably connected in an argument. These questions once again give students a chance to apply knowledge from other subjects and disciplines and to compare their versions of their own or another society with those presented by the authors they study.]

Plots, stories, metastories. From whose viewpoint does the author tell the story or make the argument? How does the author employ (or organize) the underlying narrative (conceived broadly)? To what extent does the author presume progress, decline, cyclic, or other basic modes of comprehending time through history? What story or logic does the author employ to move his/her argument or narrative forward? Of what larger story or history does the text or interpretation presume its story to be a part? Why does the author begin and end the history when she/he does? Do the beginning and end points build in certain biases in the making of the argument? At bottom, how does the author view the nature of history as a way of comprehending the past? To what extent do the author's arguments and story depend upon her/his evidence and what upon larger assumptions about human nature and society, ethics, and political uses? How does the author divide time in her/his story? What periodization does the author presume or explicate and how does the author know it or prove it?

[This section attempts to have students apply some of the current interest in literary theory and philosophy to the nature of historical narrative and the structure of the story. They should explore the author's viewpoint and voice as well as the literary motifs or rhetorical devices employed in the text. Even social science texts use plotting and rhetoric to make their arguments. How metaphors and narrative structures shape present-day social understanding as well as the history of ethnicity is argued delightfully in Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press 1986).]

Model(s) of human nature and causation. Does the author presume that human beings change their ways and outlooks easily or are they fundamentally hostile to change? To what extent do changes stem from willed human agency, that is, from goal-oriented human action individually or collectively? Or does change come from unanticipated consequences of aimed-for actions or from larger forces and/or structures working upon human beings? Can humans change their circumstances easily or only with difficulty? Does society in a sense create human beings and their actions or vice versa in the author's opinion? How does the author see the particular society, culture, or time as coming into being, and how does that society, culture, or time reproduce itself according to the author's arguments? To what extent are humans constrained by their culture or society or times and to what extent are they free to create what they will? Are all human beings alike over time in their interests, outlooks, and capacities, or do they vary by time and culture? Does the author, in other words, presume human nature is universal or a cultural and temporal creation? Are certain drives and interests considered common to all human beings, or do these vary by individual human beings, by cultures, by times?

[If students' attention was called to political and literary theory earlier, these questions focus on social theory and the "psychology" of human behavior in the explanation or interpretation of human activities and thoughts. Many of the questions revolve about the relationship-- even the conflict--between voluntary human agency and social structure or impersonal factors like demography or physical environment in the explanation of past and present human behavior.]

Uses of evidence and proof. Does the author have all the kinds of evidence needed for all parts of her/his case as explored in the preceding topics? Are the basic facts presented by the author determined more by the evidence used or by the author's premises and presuppositions about human nature, models of society, or political and moral uses? Does the author, in other words, employ the types of evidence she/he needs to prove her/his case in the larger sense of the argument? Or is much of the evidence presented in the book or article beside the point(s) actually argued or implied? Does the author employ sophisticated methods of analysis in the manipulation of data? If the methods are quantitative, are they the proper or best methods? Does the author assert and then prove a strongly framed version of her/his case or argument but assert the stronger one is proven?

[Historians regard evidence as crucial in their own work, so too with the reading of secondary works as narratives and sets of arguments. How does the author use evidence, and is the right kind of evidence employed to prove the argument? For example, evidence of behavior may not prove the thoughts, let alone motives, of a person, just as statements of intention do not prove that such an activity occurred or was done for that reason. The conflict between human agency and structural explanation only complicates this matter. In the end, matters of evidence are matters of logic, and frequently the lack of the right kinds of evidence for the arguments or stories offered undermines the validity of the whole book. Similarly with methods of analysis these days, improper statistical manipulation of variables may nullify the most voluminous accumulation of data.]

This guide to reading and reviewing, in my experience, improves students' critical reading abilities at the same time that they learn to think about the construction of history as ways of thinking. Most students react with happy approval when they realize that this approach to thinking about history works also for understanding human affairs in the present. Likewise they come to appreciate the present-day significance of the many arguments about the past. Students also find they read with more interest as they become more active in questioning authors. They also discover, they have far more than they previously thought possible to discuss or write about an article's or book's organization and its author's presuppositional framework when they follow the guidelines. Even more importantly, they experience profound satisfaction in realizing how all the sets of questions fit together as a totality in the pages of an author's work and, as the semester progresses,

in their own and other students' thinking.

I have used this handout with equal success for students ranging from first semester freshmen in the survey course to graduate students in a readings seminar. In discussions of required reading, the guidelines broadly orient the students to the assignments. As a result, they frequently can carry the class discussions by themselves because they have thought through the reading. They also seem to retain the so-called factual material better than if they tried to learn the facts apart from the larger intellectual frameworks that give them meaning. If I give undergraduates a quiz on the reading, I ask a question that brings out major themes of the reading according to the guidelines. Students find such an intellectual exercise more satisfying than the typical quiz because it shows how deeply they understand the assignment and its relationship to the total course.

If I require analytical book reviews as part of a course, the guidelines form the basis of the students' reviews. But, as I warn them, the questions cannot be applied mechanically. The guidelines offer students suggestions for thinking about a book and framing their essays in their own manner, not a step-by-step manual for easy application. Students soon learn their own book reviews are constructed according to the same presuppositional frameworks they find in the authors they study. They too must make decisions about how to construct their arguments, choose the moral or political uses of their reviews, and rally evidence for their own cases. As I tell students, neither they nor I can stand outside the universes of discourse we say others use. That the guidelines apply as much to themselves (and me) and to their (and my) ways of framing things comes as an important self-discovery to students. (In fact, I urge students to watch the logic and presuppositions of their professors' arguments and lectures as much as the authors they read.)

I have even organized an entire semester course around the guidelines. In "Myths and Models In (And Of) American History," I arrange a sequence of paperbacks covering the span of American history. By reading short monographs that have strong models and morals shaping their messages and organization, the students soon gain an awareness of the constructedness of history as an intellectual activity. Not only do the students therefore get a chance to understand each text for itself, but they also begin to see over the semester that the larger story of history presumed by the different authors (and the historical profession) embodies similar or conflicting presuppositional choices. Since this class was a required writing course at the University of Michigan, I assigned a short paper every other week. The students were asked to write five to ten typed pages on questions that probed the core of the author's presuppositional frameworks in terms of one or two sections of the guidelines. The discussions were always energetic and frequently intense. Most of the twenty students said it was the most exciting class they had taken in their college career. The best student was only a sophomore, but he and half of the other students produced reviews of the assigned books better than most of the reviews that appear in professional journals.

NOTES

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