

How To “Do” History or The Ten “C’s” of Historical Understanding

by Robert Freeman

History is not about facts. It’s not about dates. It’s not about dead white males. In fact, it’s not even about memorization, though all of those things have their place in the study of history. History is about ideas, specifically the conflict of ideas and how those conflicts played out in earlier times and what they can tell us about today.

Why did democracy emerge in the very specific time and locale of ancient Greece? Why did it lapse? How did the feudalism of the middle ages contend with the rise of capitalism? Why did Europe choose science over religion as the system for organizing what man knows about the world? Should people have representation in government? Are people rational and can that be a basis for organizing governments? What does it mean to be a “Great Power?” Why do some powers rise while others fall?

These and a thousand other questions like them are the real interest of history. We study these questions—and the people and societies that fought over them—in order to understand our own times, for the questions and the interests they represent are universal. And we study history so we can (hopefully) make better decisions as citizens in our own country today. The famous historian George Santayana said it best: “Those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them.”

This paper presents a simple but powerful framework we can use to guide our study of history. It starts from the premise that history is not random and so its study should not be random. In fact, we can be quite systematic about how we approach, understand, and learn from history. Specifically, the paper proposes a framework of ten orienting guidelines that, when addressed, can provide a sound and compelling understanding of major historical periods and events. They are:

1. Conflict
2. Context
3. Cause
4. Characters
5. Course
6. Conclusion
7. Consequences
8. Comparison
9. Comprehensiveness
10. Coherence

Every major period of history, every major conflict, every major transformation in human society can be analyzed through the prism of this framework. Doubtless, there are other questions that might be asked as well to further enrich our understanding, but these ten questions provide a powerful, simple, easy to remember, and easy to use starting point for

historical analysis. Below is an explanation of each of these “Ten C’s” together with examples from different periods of history showing how they can be used to deepen our understanding of history, and therefore our effectiveness as citizens of our world.

Conflict

What was the conflict itself? What forces opposed each other that led to the clashes that make any period or event worthy of our study? Note that conflicts may be ideas or originate in ideas but play themselves out with armies.

For example, the rise of democracy in ancient Greece involved the conflict of two big ideas. On the one hand was the idea that men could be trusted to be free, that they could govern themselves without the need for a slave-driver overlord. On the other side was the historical belief (and practice) that men were not ready for freedom, that they could only be slaves. This conflict of ideas played out in the epic Battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis between the Greeks (on the side of freedom) and Persia (on the side of slavery).

Context

What was going on in a setting that colored the way a given conflict emerged? What were the underlying political, economic, military, cultural, social and intellectual forces at work that gave rise to the conflict, that defined the roles contestants played, and that constrained the possibilities of resolution?

For example, the Italian Renaissance occurred in the context of a gradual breakdown of feudal relations and the decline in the authority of the Catholic Church. Italian merchant families were producing fabulous wealth from trade and manufacturing. Political conflicts were occurring between the major Italian city states and between those states and the larger forces from what is today France and Spain. Over prior centuries, tens of thousands of people had traveled to and returned from the middle east in the Crusades. A surge of classical scholars from the recently overthrown city of Constantinople was another contextual factor in the Renaissance as was the recent invention of printing in 1453.

Cause

What was the cause of the conflict? What events triggered it, i.e., were the “proximate” or immediate causes? And what were the deeper causes?

For example, World War I was triggered by the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914. But this is only a “proximate” cause, the match that lit a keg of gunpowder that was ready to go off. Deeper causes would involve explanations of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. Still deeper causes would point to the rise of Germany as a leading European power and the threat this posed to England. Still deeper yet, we might look at the way industrialization and German unification undermined the “balance of power” system that had been put in place at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

Characters

Who were the main characters in the conflict? What interests did they represent and what roles did they play? What was it about their specific characters and backgrounds that affected how they acted? Note that not all “characters” are necessarily people. They may be organizations or institutions, for example the Union Army in the American Civil War or the Catholic Church and the Franciscan order in the settlement of the “New World.”

For example, an understanding of the English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution must describe the actions of Charles I, Oliver Cromwell, James II, and William of Orange. Obviously, it might well include many other people. It would need to account as well for other “characters” such as the English gentry and nobility, the Anglican church, Parliament, and the Puritans. Importantly, these are not individual human characters but they represent institutions whose interests and actions affected the outcomes of the Wars.

Course

What was the sequence of events that a conflict followed and that led to its final resolution—assuming there was one? What evidence do we have of this sequence? Is there a “logic” to the unfolding of events that can help us understand how and why the conflict proceeded and ultimately got resolved?

For example, the Cold War might actually have roots in Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812 and in the White Counter-Revolution where the West invaded Russia again in 1921. It surely began in earnest in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Some of its major events included, in order, the Berlin Blockade, the Korean War, Sputnik, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. There is an inescapable logic to the sequence of these events and how they affected each other. This sequence or Course, is central to a proper understanding of the War and its significance to the twentieth century.

Conclusion

What conclusion was ultimately reached that settled (at least for the time being) the conflict at hand? And what special features of the conclusion are important in helping us understand subsequent events and periods?

For example, World War II was concluded when the Allied powers defeated Germany in Europe and Japan in Asia. Both defeated countries signed statements of unconditional surrender. Both agreed to indefinite periods of occupation by the victors. The terms of the occupation of Germany are of particular interest because they were a factor in the subsequent “Cold War” between the U.S. and the Soviet Union that dominated global affairs for most of the rest of the 20th century. Also of interest in the settlement of the War are the institutions put in place for managing future global interactions: the United Nations; the International Monetary Fund; the World Bank; etc.

Consequences

So what? So what happened as a result of the way the event was settled? Most major conflicts are resolved in ways that affect societies for years, sometimes decades or even centuries to come. What were the major consequences of a given conflict that have had broad, deep, or enduring effects?

For example, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Period are frequently cited by historians as the beginning of the modern western world. The reason is the way they gave substance to nationalism, the modern administrative state, how secularism eclipsed clericalism, and the official end to feudalism, etc. Other immediate consequences would include the imposition of a reactionary dynastic authoritarianism as a European system of governance and the rise of Romanticism as an intellectual force to counter the perceived failures of Enlightenment rationalism.

Comparison

How does one major historical event compare with other major historical events with similar but different contexts, courses, characters, etc. What patterns can we find in different events that can inform our understanding of our world today?

For example, what features, actions, events, and outcomes can we find in common between the fall of the Spanish Empire in the 1600s and the fall of France as the leading European power in the 1700s? England replaced France as the leading European power but was itself eclipsed by the United States in the 1900s. What are the similarities and differences in each of these cases? What might England's demise—or France's, or Spain's—tell us about the conflict between the United States, the current leading world power, and China, its upstart competitor?

Comprehensiveness

Any competent treatment of any major historical event should cover those factors that had a major bearing on the event's unfolding or outcome. Otherwise, the scholar's understanding of the event will be only partial and, therefore, flawed. Of course, comprehensiveness must be balanced with the space available for the analysis.

For example, any competent treatment of the Scientific Revolution would have to include mention of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton as its primary Characters. It may not have space to mention Torricelli, Mersenne, Napier, or other lesser lights. Similarly, in discussing the Conflicts involved, it would almost certainly have to discuss the way in which the scientific method Conflicted with the approach of Aristotle, which it replaced. It would almost surely want to highlight the inherent Conflict between the approach to knowledge of science and that of the Catholic Church. Space limitations may not, however, allow the student to discuss Conflicts between different approaches to science, for example, between Theory,

Experimentation, and Measurement, or between different practitioners of these approaches, for example, Descartes, Bacon, and Newton.

Coherence

Does the analysis hold together as a comprehensible whole? Are there explanations in one area that contradict explanations from other areas? If so, then the treatment is flawed and unfinished. This does not mean that there cannot be alternative theories presented about a particular event, but an explanation must be given as to why they exist and how the historical discipline has attempted to reconcile them.

For example, explanations of the founding of America might include economic, religious, and political motives. These might be entirely complementary to each other or they might actually conflict. But they should not be presented in a way that states that more than one of them was the primary motive. Similarly, economic motives might include desire for land, desire for vocational mobility, and desire for free commerce. These are different motives which co-existed among different classes of people and so should not be presented as alternatives but rather, as complements.

A Single Example Incorporating All Ten “C’s”

Here, we treat the Protestant Reformation in its entirety, utilizing the Ten “C’s” framework. Of course, in the space available, we can only offer the sketchiest of outlines but hopefully the student can see how all of the elements can be integrated to produce a fully-rounded, compelling understanding of the event.

At its most immediate level, the Conflict involved different understandings of God and the role of a church in helping man to salvation. It also involved political Conflicts between German princes and the Holy Roman Empire, and economic Conflicts between the same princes and the Pope in Rome.

The Context of the Reformation included the decline in the prestige of the Catholic Church and the recent growth of Humanism associated with Renaissance scholarship and artistry.

There are both proximate and deeper Causes of the Reformation. The proximate Cause was the sale of Indulgences by the Catholic Church. A deeper Cause would be the corruption of the Church itself and its unwillingness to reform its practices.

The leading Characters must undoubtedly include Martin Luther, Pope Leo X, and the German princes. At a deeper level, they might include Johann Tetzel, Erasmus, John Calvin, and the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Still deeper, we might discuss French kings, Dutch oligarchs, English Puritans, and others.

The Reformation took a fairly visible and well-documented Course. It began with an academic dispute about Indulgences. From there, it escalated into a challenge

to Church authority and, then, a challenge to Church legitimacy. Finally, it involved the creation of a new church and a new form of Christianity.

In some sense, the Reformation might still be playing out today, so it's an editorial decision about where and how to define a Conclusion. Perhaps it ends with Luther's death in 1546, or the end of the Council of Trent in 1565. It may include the founding of America as a haven against religious persecution.

Consequences are inextricably tied up with the Conclusion. But they undoubtedly include the fracturing of German and European political unity, an impetus to the expansion of capitalism through the Protestant Work Ethic, 150 years of religious wars, and other such consequential aftermaths.

The Reformation could easily bear Comparison with any number of other intellectual revolutions, or Luther with other intellectual revolutionaries. The European Enlightenment would offer excellent grounds for the first comparison. Karl Marx could serve as an excellent comparative revolutionary.

At the level of depth the student has available, all of these elements could be combined so as to give a Comprehensive treatment of the Reformation. A five-page rendering would offer much less space than would a 20- or a 200-page treatment. However, each could contain some level of discussion of all 10 elements. More narrow treatments might focus on only one element, for example, Causes or Consequences, but would still deal with all of the important matters related to that concern.

Finally, our treatment of the Reformation becomes Coherent when all of the above elements coalesce to create a unified, integrated picture of the event. The Reformation radically changed the course of European—and world—history. Its impact on politics, culture, economics and science are still being felt today.

Final Word

These “Ten C’s” cannot—and, in fact, are not intended to—answer all questions we might have of history. They cannot, for example, tell us whether war is inevitable, whether democracy is the most effective form of governance, how long empires last, or other such open-ended questions. But they can give us very good understandings of the historical circumstances where such questions have been at issue in the past and how they were answered then. In that way, they build a foundation of understanding in historical facts that can support more speculative analyses today. Without such foundation we have no basis for knowing how and why our world came to be the way it is, nor how we might navigate the uncertainties of a complex and dynamic future. In a very real sense, a well-grounded understanding of history is the only way to make sense of our world today. This model will help you build that grounding.