

Historiography from below:

how undergraduates remember learning history at school

What do our students make of the history that we teach them? As part of an introductory module on historiography, Marcus Collins asked his undergraduate students to analyse the history that they had been taught at school and college using historiographic concepts. The results make for interesting reading. What do students make of national political history? Are there advantages in studying the same topics at GCSE and AS/A2? Collins' analysis provides fresh insight into many topics that are currently debated. We have a lot to learn from our students and ex-students.

Introduction

Last year, all 62 first-year undergraduate students studying history at Loughborough University were asked to write 'a historiographical analysis of the history you studied at school'. The essay was to encompass both 'what historical topics you were taught' and 'how you were taught them'.¹ The students were born in 1990 or 1991, grew up under the National Curriculum and typically arrived at Loughborough with a B grade in A-Level History. Their first six months at university included a module of modern European history, a skills mini-module, half a semester of historiography and world history and an equivalent amount of politics, international relations, English or geography, depending on their choice of joint-honours degree.

This was an exercise in historiography for beginners. The essay was written for an introductory module entitled *What Is History?*, which provided most students with their first direct exposure to epistemological issues.² Preparation for the assignment consisted of six classes on the politicisation of the discipline and the tension between 'artistic' and 'scientific' and 'new' and 'traditional' approaches. This equipped students with a series of binary categories to apply to their historical training: Rankean/Annales, positivism/idealism, political/social, 'history from above'/'people's history', inductive/deductive, historicist/presentist (see Figure 1). For many, it was their first opportunity to reflect on the content and methods of history teaching. 'I have never really given it much thought as to exactly what type of history I actually studied,' commented Dominic, who was not alone in having been incurious about – though not uncritical of – his prior historical training. For all the promotion of critical analysis skills when studying primary sources, students were hardly expected to critique the secondary sources otherwise known as history lessons.

I hoped that this assignment would reveal to students why historiography matters by relating its often abstruse concepts to their own experiences. I also hoped to learn something from the activity. It was as valuable for me to discover what students have learnt at school as it was for them to ponder their own origins as historians. Teachers of history at schools and universities communicate too little with one another, so what was commonplace in school classrooms was news to me.³ My other ambition was to produce a sort of 'historiography from below': a student's-eye view of the content and delivery of history courses to complement that of teachers, policy-makers and academics.⁴ For these purposes, students' historiographical analysis was as valuable for its subjectivity as much as for its accuracy.

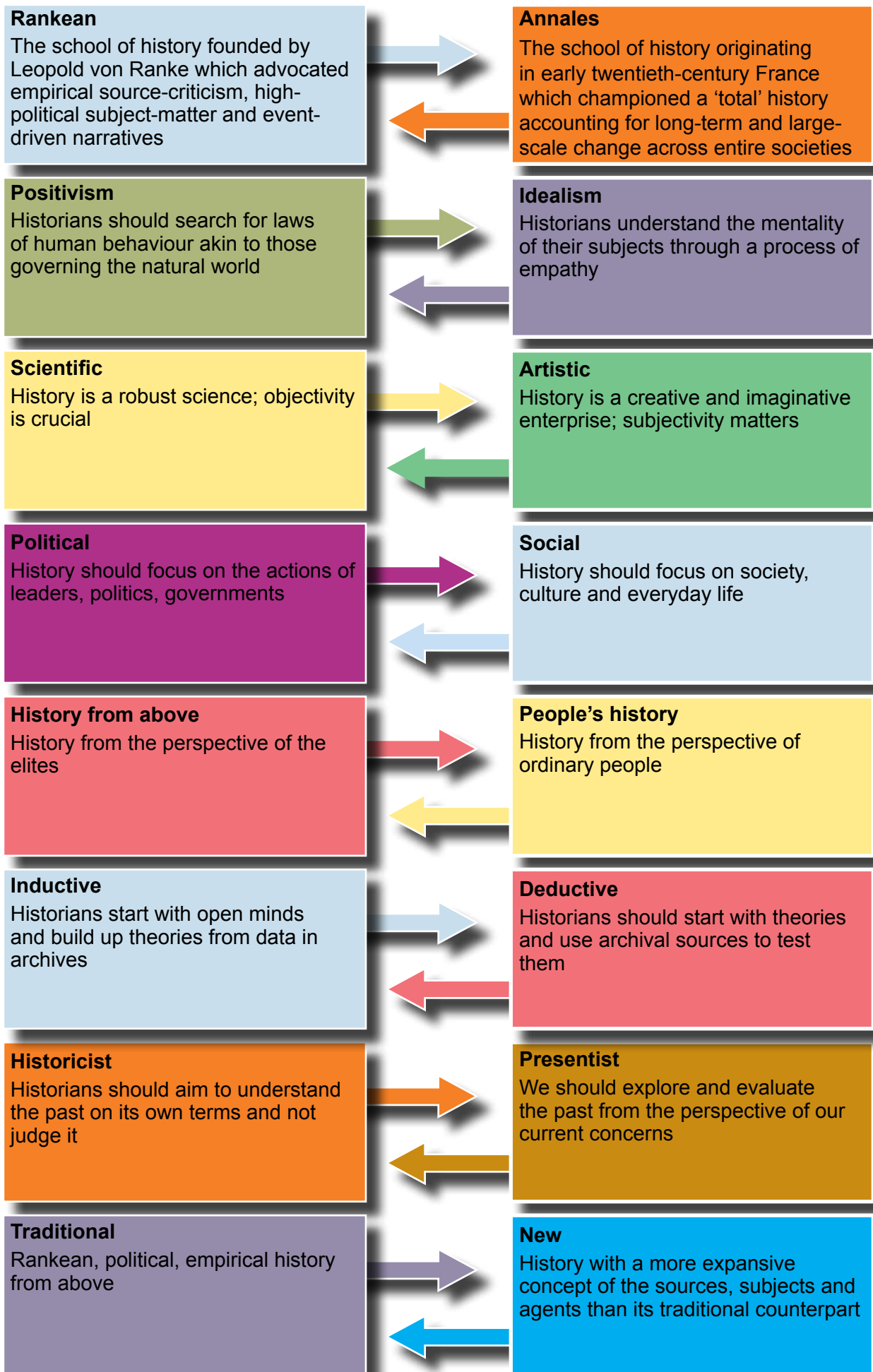
Marcus Collins

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Breaking with tradition

Guidance for the assignment invited students to consider if they had 'learn[t] more "traditional" history than "new" history?' and whether 'the study of history [was] presented to you as being more of a "science" than an "art"'. These questions tended to be taken together, with Rankean history seen as both traditional and 'scientific',

Figure 1: Some conceptual oppositions to use when comparing different historical methods



in opposition to the New History and its 'cultural turn'.⁵ Furthermore, students often displayed an evolutionary understanding of their own maturation as historians which seemed to recapitulate the development of the historical discipline itself.⁶ The 'listing and reciting' undertaken by Lucy at primary school sounded oddly reminiscent of the obsession with lineage in oral cultures and the earliest written chronicles, while several others began learning history as a Thucydidean-type narrative of statesmen and wars. A certain recapitulation also manifested itself in the periods under study. Ancient and early medieval history were essentially left to primary schools, allowing secondary schools to concentrate on modern history leavened by the odd Tudor.

Students generally saw 'traditional' history to be unchallenging and as such most appropriate for younger children. 'Certainly it is much simpler to teach traditional history rather than new history and I believe this is the reason that at a lower age, traditional history is the fundamental way of teaching,' stated Chris C. Dan C. likewise contended that 'a more "traditional" form of history was taught [at primary school] because it is simpler to teach the basics in order to understand more broad history later on.'

Some students also associated the quest for objectivity in 'traditional' history with the rote learning tested by examinations. Gen recalled that:

Although the way in which we were encouraged to think about or learn 'history' at AS-Level was not prescriptive or 'scientific', the way[s] my teachers encouraged us to answer exam questions or analyse sources were extremely scientific. My teachers were 'training' my class to get good exam results, and this meant following the AO's [Assessment Objectives] set by the exam board, but also to a degree following a prescriptive approach to essay writing, that of: point, evidence, comment.

Matt likewise found that the 'very "traditional" ... Empiricism' taught to him prior to sixth form allowed 'no space for any different style of interpretation'. Declan Timmins' A-Level history course was more regimented still. His school year was divided into two, with the first half being devoted to 'gathering and learning the required information' and the second half to 'practising exam technique by going through past papers'. The way he learnt to produce a 'good answer' militated against him 'challenging historical opinion[s] of authors and ... building up [his] own personal understanding'. The rigorous testing of arguments with evidence championed by Ranke was reduced to a formula for passing exams.

Many pinpointed a shift from 'traditional' to 'new' approaches in their later years at school. The turning-point for Lucy came when she entered secondary school and was exposed to "'new" history in action', represented by 'more complex topics, such as social standings and ... economic influences'. In Nana's case, 'the history I knew began to change' at GCSE level when encountering 'the study of society and the study of groups of people'. But the most common contrast drawn by students was between the history they learnt at GCSE and A-Level. 'GCSE was focused

primarily around learning dates, facts and figures on events in order to be able to regurgitate them for the exam in the summer,' recalled Alex: 'The emphasis on elites was clear.' At sixth-form, however, 'Instead of focusing of the role of the individual upon history, we focused on the way history impacted the individual.'

The scope for interpretation struck other A-Level students as a major departure from their previous schooling. Dom's teachers had 'banged' into him the correct way to write an essay and to identify 'the one answer' to any given question in earlier years. Yet in sixth-form they taught him that 'there was a number of different ways you could answer the question' and expected him to 'use evidence to come to [his] own response'. Nathan H. also came to appreciate that 'different historians will obtain varying conclusions' as an A-Level student, which led him to reclassify history as more art than science. So did Dom.

Students who revisited familiar historical topics at A-Level sometimes experienced epiphanies. Alice had hitherto been taught about Nazism in a 'very traditional' manner which emphasised 'specific events and dates' and Hitler's role as 'the sole driving force of the Nazi regime and Holocaust'. It was only when reading numerous 'sources, accounts, statistics and books on the Nazi regime' for her A2 coursework that she 'developed the "New" History approach'. A changing understanding of Lenin's April Theses signalled Fiona's graduation from 'traditional' to 'new' history:

When I came to study A level I was told to almost ignore what I was told at GCSE ... At GCSE level I was told Lenin came back to Russia to a big crowd of support and his April Theses were widely accepted and approved of. In contrast, after doing reading for A-level, [I] found the situation to be quite different, with Lenin coming back into Russia to a minimal reception and his April theses having to be adjusted in many respects to be accepted.

But reconceptualisation of this sort escaped those whose entire schooling was traditional in its methodology and subject-matter. 'Throughout my time at school I have only been taught traditional history, under the impression that this is the only way to study history,' wrote Chris C. 'Throughout my school life, history was taught in its traditional sense as designed by Ranke,' echoed Tom. Even those who had been exposed to 'new' history at school often considered such training to have been too little, too late. The reason for their dismay was that they perceived 'new' history to be more sophisticated and comprehensive due to its multiplication of themes, sources and interpretations. 'Traditional' history's focus on politicking by an elite seem narrow by comparison. '[T]here is more to life than that, and there is more to history than that,' concluded Dan Sharp.

The teaching of British history was singled out for its traditionalism, with Luke receiving only 'a small pinch of economics and general public opinion' to enliven his standard high-political diet. 'Kings and Battles' particularly dominated lessons on the Tudors according to Steven, David and Aimee. Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia were conversely identified as subjects taught in a 'total' history manner which integrated the social and the political. Katie

discerned 'more of a "New" history approach' in a module on totalitarianism:

Although we looked at models of the state, we looked at regimes in a broad sense rather than focusing heavily on individual political figures, instead they were only used as supporting evidence to back up our arguments. This enabled us to consider life under these totalitarian regimes and the affect [sic] they had on society as a whole.

Joe similarly studied German history at an 'individual everyday person level', Dominic explored 'social effects and changes' only in reference to Nazism, and Amanda appreciated the different subject-matter ('the lives of the peasants and the economical base') and sources ('pictorial and oral rather than just being purely textual') in her module on Russia: From Tsars to Commissars. A welcome by-product of the over-teaching of Hitler and Stalin is that students study a single subject in sufficient depth for them to become exposed to its historiographical debates. Alice accordingly became acquainted with the functionalist and intentionalist approaches and the Browning-Goldhagen controversy during the last of the 'three or four times' she studied Nazism at school.

Worldviews

The two other issues raised in the guidance for the assignment – how history teaching was shaped by politics and the National Curriculum's avowed goal of 'promoting citizenship' – prompted students to take issue with the geographical focus of their studies. Notwithstanding their grisly fascination with Continental dictators, many students shared Simon's dissatisfaction that he 'did not study any country outside of Europe and America', thereby contradicting the National Curriculum's additional aim of promoting 'cultural development'. The neglect of non-Western history was likewise identified by Meri as a 'major flaw', by Emma as 'continuing a hierarchy' that elevated the West over the rest and by Alice as 'very bias[ed]'. 'Looking back now I am disillusioned by what a small part of history I studied for such a long time, in the context of world history,' she wrote, while Steven worried that schoolchildren lacking a grounding in world history would be 'terribly unaware of the complexities and wonders that other nations have to offer.' One reason for their dismay about having studied (as Alice put it) 'a snippet of knowledge in such a wide historical spectrum' was that they were writing this assignment while taking a module on world history. But this module affected them so profoundly because they had been hitherto been taught a curriculum which, when not Eurocentric, was Americentric in its focus on the US civil rights movement, Native Americans and the Vietnam War.⁷

Nation-state history dominated the learning of the half-dozen or so students who had been schooled abroad, especially those from newly formed or reformed states. Nathan C.'s historical training in South Africa 'promoted national pride and a support for the new government' and Julius found that history lessons in Lithuania were used 'not only to teach about the past but also to evoke nationality,

political, social and cultural activity'. But such agendas also shaped the curricula in nations which had long ago gained independence or experienced revolutions. '[T]o build greater nationalism' was the goal of the French history curriculum according to Laura Pellerin, which explained why her compatriot Lisa was taught to value 'the rights and duties a citizen is entrusted with in a republican and democratic state like France' and not to dwell on unsavoury topics such as the Algerian War of Independence. And whereas Marie characterised her instruction in Norwegian history to be 'very reasonable' in its 'sense of national feeling', Edward characterised himself as having been 'blinded by Irish nationalism' at school.

Though those educated in Britain experienced a less overtly national or nationalistic form of schooling, many nonetheless viewed the privileging of British history to be archaic and myopic. Their aversion to Anglocentrism casts doubt on the citizenship agenda which was promoted by the previous government and seems likely to emerge in a more patriotic guise under the present one. Students were not generally opposed to history being taught as civics, the exception being Josh with his dig at teachers who:

...insisted on making us 'learn from the mistakes of the past', seemingly with the intention of making us walk out of the classroom thinking 'I must not appropriate Africans from their homeland and sell them for profit as non-wage labourers to American cotton and tobacco producers'.

Lucy treasured '[t]he moral lessons learnt when studying about topics such as slavery and Apartheid', Cameron viewed the 'liberal approach adopted by the national curriculum' to be 'necessary for multicultural societies to function' and Chris K. thought that lessons could be learnt from the sorry history of militarism and nationalism.

Yet students were deeply suspicious of any attempts to portray British history in Whiggish terms. Britain was 'always presented in a positive, patriotic light' to Fiona, as 'a country that would not stand for inequality' to Gemma and as 'the perfect model for a state' to Steven. They felt misled, much as Dan Sharp found it 'incredible' that younger schoolchildren were taught to 'associate concentration camps with Hitler and the Holocaust, but not Britain and the Boers.' His point was a contentious one, but it indicated how students suspected the National Curriculum to harbour a nationalist bias. Tory proposals to teach 'our island story' might well founder on a combination of scepticism and boredom.⁸

Conclusion

The students who contributed to this study commonly portrayed themselves as having progressed (especially at A-Level) from perceiving history in a 'traditional', 'scientific' and Eurocentric fashion to one which emphasised its 'new', 'artistic' and global aspects. Many criticised the former as being biased in its subject-matter and simple, even simplistic in its methodology when compared to the latter's more holistic and democratic approach. British history received poor notices for its traditionalism and parochialism, while

concerns over the Hitlerisation of the curriculum were somewhat offset by the subject being taught in a multifaceted manner with reference to historiographical debate. Few students objected to the history curriculum including a moral or civic dimension, but they were quick to denounce political bias and occasionally viewed the curriculum as embodying a set of values at odds with their own.

This small study would benefit from being replicated in schools and other universities in order to gauge its representativeness. Running such exercises provides a means for students to reflect on their education and play some part in shaping it. I find it unsettling that even those who proceed to study history at university express such dissatisfaction with their education. The privileging of some historical topics over others left one of them, Dan Sharp, 'feeling cheated'. 'Why do we study what we do?' he asked. Good question.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Big thanks go to my colleagues Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and Emma Vickers, who taught alongside me on this module, and to the students whose insights this article explores.
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- ⁴ See Davies, I. (ed.) (2011) *Debates in History Teaching*, London: Routledge.
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