Section 3: The Study of History

Splitting History

Periodization—the process of categorizing the past into discrete, quantified, named blocks of time in order to facilitate the study and analysis of history—is always arbitrary and rooted in particular regional perspectives, but serves to organize and systematize historical knowledge.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Analyze the complications inherent to splitting history for the purpose of academic study

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- The question of what kind of inquiries historians pose, what knowledge they seek, and how they interpret the evidence that they find remains controversial. Historians draw conclusions from the past approaches to history but in the end, they always write in the context of their own time, current dominant ideas of how to interpret the past, and even subjective viewpoints.

- All events that are remembered and preserved in some original form constitute the historical record. The task of historians is to identify the sources that can most usefully contribute to the production of accurate accounts of the past. These sources, known as primary sources or evidence, were produced at the time under study and constitute the foundation of historical inquiry.

- Periodization is the process of categorizing the past into discrete, quantified named blocks of time in order to facilitate the study and analysis of history. This results in descriptive abstractions that provide convenient terms for periods of time with relatively stable characteristics. All systems of periodization are arbitrary.
The common general split between prehistory, ancient history, Middle Ages, modern history, and contemporary history is a Western division of the largest blocks of time agreed upon by Western historians. However, even within this largely accepted division the perspective of specific national developments and experiences often divides Western historians, as some periodizing labels will be applicable only to particular regions.

The study of world history emerged as a distinct academic field in order to examine history from a global perspective rather than a solely national perspective of investigation. However, the field still struggles with an inherently Western periodization.

World historians use a thematic approach to look for common patterns that emerge across all cultures. World history’s periodization, as imperfect and biased as it is, serves as a way to organize and systematize knowledge.

Key Terms

- **periodization**: The process or study of categorizing the past into discrete, quantified named blocks of time in order to facilitate the study and analysis of history. This results in descriptive abstractions that provide convenient terms for periods of time with relatively stable characteristics. However, determining the precise beginning and ending to any period is usually arbitrary.

- **world history**: (Also global history or transnational history): emerged as a distinct academic field in the 1980s. It examines history from a global perspective. World history should not be confused with comparative history, which, like world history, deals with the history of multiple cultures and nations, but does not do so on a global scale. World history identifies common patterns that emerge across all cultures.

- **primary sources**: Original sources of information about a topic. In the study of history as an academic discipline, primary sources include artifact, document, diary, manuscript, autobiography, recording, or other source of information that was created at the time under study.

How Do We Write History?

The word history comes ultimately from Ancient Greek *historia*, meaning “inquiry,” “knowledge from inquiry,” or “judge.” However, the question of what kind of inquiries historians pose, what knowledge they seek, and how they interpret the evidence that they find remains controversial.

Historians draw conclusions from past approaches to history, but in the end, they always write in the context of their own time, current dominant ideas of how to interpret the past, and even subjective viewpoints. Furthermore, current events and developments often trigger which past events, historical periods, or geographical regions are seen as critical and thus should be investigated. Finally, historical studies are designed to provide specific lessons for societies today. In the words of Benedetto Croce, Italian philosopher and historian, “All history is contemporary history.”

All events that are remembered and preserved in some original form constitute the historical record. The task of historians is to identify the sources that can most usefully contribute to the production of accurate accounts of the past. These sources, known are primary sources or evidence, were produced at the time under study and constitute the foundation of historical inquiry. Ideally, a historian will use as many available primary sources as can be accessed, but in practice, sources may have been destroyed or may not be available for research. In some cases, the only eyewitness reports of an event may be memoirs, autobiographies, or oral interviews taken years later. Sometimes, the only evidence relating to an event or person in the distant past was written or copied decades or centuries later. Historians remain cautious when working with evidence recorded years, or even decades or centuries, after an event; this kind of evidence poses the question of to what extent witnesses remember events accurately. However, historians also point out that hardly any historical evidence can be seen as objective, as it is always a product of particular individuals, times, and dominant ideas. This is also why researchers try to find as many records of an event under investigation as
possible, and it is not unusual that they find evidence that may present contradictory accounts of the same events. In
general, the sources of historical knowledge can be separated into three categories: what is written, what is said, and
what is physically preserved. Historians often consult all three.

### Periodization

Periodization is the process of categorizing the past into discrete, quantified, named blocks of time in order to facilitate
the study and analysis of history. This results in descriptive abstractions that provide convenient terms for periods of
time with relatively stable characteristics.

To the extent that history is continuous and cannot be generalized, all systems of periodization are arbitrary. Moreover,
determining the precise beginning and ending to any period is also a matter of arbitrary decisions. Eventually,
periodizing labels are a reflection of very particular cultural and geographical perspectives, as well as specific subfields
or themes of history (e.g., military history, social history, political history, intellectual history, cultural history, etc.).
Consequently, not only do periodizing blocks inevitably overlap, but they also often seemingly conflict with or contradict
one another. Some have a cultural usage (the Gilded Age), others refer to prominent historical events (the inter-war
years: 1918–1939), yet others are defined by decimal numbering systems (the 1960s, the 17th century). Other periods
are named after influential individuals whose impact may or may not have reached beyond certain geographic regions
(the Victorian Era, the Edwardian Era, the Napoleonic Era).

### Western Historical Periods

The common general split between prehistory (before written history), ancient history, Middle Ages, modern history, and
contemporary history (history within the living memory) is a Western division of the largest blocks of time agreed upon
by Western historians and representing the Western point of view. For example, the history of Asia or Africa cannot be
neatly categorized following these periods.

However, even within this largely accepted division, the perspective of specific national developments and experiences
often divides Western historians, as some periodizing labels will be applicable only to particular regions. This is
especially true of labels derived from individuals or ruling dynasties, such as the Jacksonian Era in the United States, or
the Merovingian Period in France. Cultural terms may also have a limited, even if larger, reach. For example, the
concept of the Romantic period is largely meaningless outside of Europe and European-influenced cultures; even within
those areas, different European regions may mark the beginning and the ending points of Romanticism differently.
Likewise, the 1960s, although technically applicable to anywhere in the world according to Common Era numbering, has
a certain set of specific cultural connotations in certain countries, including sexual revolution, counterculture, or youth
rebellion. However, those never emerged in certain regions (e.g., in Spain under Francisco Franco’s authoritarian
regime). Some historians have also noted that the 1960s, as a descriptive historical period, actually began in the late
1950s and ended in the early 1970s, because the cultural and economic conditions that define the meaning of the period
dominated longer than the actual decade of the 1960s.
Petrarch by Andrea del Castagno.

Petrarch, Italian poet and thinker, conceived of the idea of a European "Dark Age," which later evolved into the tripartite periodization of Western history into Ancient, Middle Ages and Modern.

While world history (also referred to as global history or transnational history) emerged as a distinct academic field of historical study in the 1980s in order to examine history from a global perspective rather than a solely national perspective of investigation, it still struggles with an inherently Western periodization. The common splits used when designing comprehensive college-level world history courses (and thus also used in history textbooks that are usually divided into volumes covering pre-modern and modern eras) are still a result of certain historical developments presented from the perspective of the Western world and particular national experiences. However, even the split between pre-modern and modern eras is problematic because it is complicated by the question of how history educators, textbook authors, and publishers decide to categorize what is known as the early modern era, which is traditionally a period between Renaissance and the end of the Age of Enlightenment. In the end, whether the early modern era is included in the first or the second part of a world history course frequently offered in U.S. colleges is a
subjective decision of history educators. As a result, the same questions and choices apply to history textbooks written and published for the U.S. audience.

World historians use a thematic approach to identify common patterns that emerge across all cultures, with two major focal points: integration (how processes of world history have drawn people of the world together) and difference (how patterns of world history reveal the diversity of the human experiences). The periodization of world history, as imperfect and biased as it is, serves as a way to organize and systematize knowledge. Without it, history would be nothing more than scattered events without a framework designed to help us understand the past.