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The Historian's Encyclopedia

This document is a non-exhaustive list of key terms that you may encounter in your adventures in history at WestConn. These are terms to which you will be exposed in your classes early in your academic career, and while they may appear in lectures or your reading, they may not always be easily pre-defined for you. The following are a description of these terms and their meanings. Some etymological information was gleaned from the Oxford English Dictionary.¹

Archive: An archive refers to a collection of documents, usually unpublished, where some sort of special permission is required to access and use documents. Some archives are public institutions run by national or state governments or can be found within municipal or university libraries; others can be found in private institutions such as ecclesiastical orders or private families. From the latin *arcuim*, meaning a public office; first recorded English use is in the seventeenth century.

Allegory: A literary trope by which an author constructs an argument that appears to be about one group of characters in a single period of time in history but may also be interpreted to be about another group of people from a different time. For example, L. Frank Baum's

¹ Oxford English Dictionary. <http://dictionary.oed.com/> Accessed July 20, 2009.

The Wizard of Oz tells the story of Dorothy and her dog Toto meeting the Tin Man, the Lion, and the Scarecrow. But the story could also be interpreted as telling the story of the rise of populist politics in the 1890s and 1900s, with the Tin Man being a representation of Henry Ford and the Lion without courage an example of the populist politician William Jennings Bryan. From the Latin *allegoria*, meaning “speaking otherwise than someone seems to speak,” the first known reference to this term in the English language occurs in the writings of the English theologian John Wycliffe in 1382. Historians often encounter allegory as a way of using historical arguments to comment on the present.

Anachronism:

An anachronism involves the use of a word or object outside of the temporal context appropriate for that word or object. A classic example (though some claim it to be apocryphal) can be found in the film *Ben-Hur* (1959). A careful glance at the charioteers in the film is said to reveal Charlton Heston driving a chariot while wearing a wristwatch. (Wristwatches were invented in the seventeenth century). Many historians see anachronism as an obstruction in their path toward discovering genuine or authentic motives of historical characters “as they really were” in their own time and place.²

Annales School:

Refers to a style of history writing associated with the scholarly journal *Annales d'histoire economique et sociale* and founded in the 1930s. This school of history writing emphasizes long-term social trends rather than considering more narrow political themes. Rather than studying the political history of France between the two world wars, for example, an annales historian might consider the role of bread in French history over the course of a millennia, or how ice flows have changed the course of global history. Key figures include Marc Bloch (1886-1944), Lucien Febvre (1878-1956), Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) and Roger Chartier.

Antithesis:

The use, in writing or rhetoric, of a style of opposite or contrasting arguments in order to frame a claim.

² David R. Ringrose, *Spain, Europe, and the “Spanish Miracle,” 1700-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26.

- Book Review:** A book review is a usually brief evaluation of a published book. The review typically summarizes the main points of a book, describes the book's main argument, and offers a critique of the argument, evidence, and conclusions of the book.
- Capitalism:** An ideology or economic system in which the accumulation wealth or goods in the hands of private individuals is seen as intrinsically worthwhile. Capitalists argue that the accumulation of capital by individuals or corporations leads to more competition, which leads in turn to greater efficiency and lower costs for all consumers.
- Chronicle:** A document arranging brief entries about events in a chronological order with a minimum of commentary. Chronicles were common in medieval Europe. From the old French *chronique*, meaning "related to time." Historians often distinguish between a chronicle which simply lists events from a narrative that would tie events together and interpret them as part of a greater story. Used in English as early as the thirteenth century.
- Claim:** A claim is an assertion, a statement. Claims require warrants (reasoning) or evidence to be made valid.
- Colligation:** This term refers to a binding together of disparate elements. Students of historiography apply the term colligation to theorize the process by which historians pick seemingly disparate events and relate them together in order to produce a coherent historical narrative. From the French *colligation* (to bind together), first used in English in 1502.
- Communism:** Communism is an economic theory that advocates the abolition of private ownership and the redistribution of goods for the common benefit of all members of society. In Marxist theory, communism is achieved after goods are redistributed cooperatively. In Marxist terms, communism is characterized by the absence of all government; without the conflict caused by economic inequality, the state becomes unnecessary and eventually "withers away." Thus, the absence or decline of government in communism is a major distinction

between communism and socialism. (Thus, a communist state sees communism as an ideal to be achieved, not the state of things at the present, just as “capitalism” or “democracy” are goals not fully realized). Not all advocates of communism are Marxist. The term first comes into popular usage to describe the Paris commune in the 1790s.

Cultural Historian:

A historian whose work primarily concerns changes or continuities in knowledge and customs, such as music, dance, dress, or food, to name a few, is considered a cultural historian. Cultural historians borrow heavily from anthropological methods to analyze public rituals such as carnivals or festivals or other public performances over time.

Dialectic:

The dialectic is a method of examining historical changes. It presumes that history develops and changes in grand epochs in which a grand synthesis develops. Eventually, tensions within these grand syntheses arise, as they are all embedded with contradictions. A new epoch arises with revolution, which brings a new synthesis. Whereas Immanuel Kant and GWF Hegel saw the dialectic as a method for describing how ideas change, Karl Marx used the dialectic to describe changes in who owns the means of production.

Discourse:

Discourse can refer simply to “talking” or “discussion.” However, it can also have more specialized meanings in historiography. Following the French theorist and historian Michel Foucault (1925-1984), discourse can refer to unstated ways in which social customs regulate what can or cannot be talked about and therefore regulates what questions can be formulated and framed.

Economic Historian:

An economic historian is concerned primarily with how economic phenomena such as the trading of commodities and the development of business effect historical processes. Economic historians borrow from techniques in social history and overlap with labor historians.

Empiricism:

A method which regards experience and observation and the only valid forms of knowledge. As an historical method, empiricists view the role of the historian to be as a compiler of observable factual information from the

past, whereas those opposed to an empirical method might think that interpretation and analysis of those observations is paramount. From the latin *empiricus*, meaning experiment. First used in English in the sixteenth century works of Francis Bacon.

Epistemology: An epistemology is a general theory of knowledge or a general methodological principle; it refers to the fundamental theoretical assumptions. Epistemologists ask questions such as “What is fundamental?” or “What is knowledge?” From the Greek meaning “study of knowledge.” First used in English and recognized as a subfield in the 1850s.

Eschatology: This term refers chiefly to a division of religion or theology concerning itself with the big questions of death, judgement, heaven, and hell. The term has evolved a more specialized meaning in the twentieth century; currently, it refers to the ultimate religious meaning of life. From the French *eschatology*, with the same meaning; first used in 19th century.

Ethnicity: The original term “ethnicity” in English, as used in the eighteenth century, referred to barbarianism or heathendom. Today, it refers to the designation of groups who identify themselves as having a real or imagined common cultural heritage. The term also sometimes refers to claims that groups make of a common ancestry.³ For the purposes of historical analysis, it is important to distinguish ethnicity from race, which is a category of identity based on skin color or physical characteristics, whereas ethnicity refers not to racial but to cultural characteristics.

Functionalism: A method of analysis that presumes that objects or concepts can be described by their function—that something is what it does. A chair is a chair because its function, in other words, is to be sat on. Critics of functionalism argue that this approach leads to an overly mechanical view of the world, in which we are reduced to being identified by our work, like machines. The term first finds its way to the English language in method textbooks in the 1910s.

³ Marcus Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions*. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 151.

Gender: Gender refers to the social identification of people with characteristics of males and females. In early twenty-first century American culture, for example, someone who wears a skirt, a bra, and lipstick would usually identify with the female gender. For analytical purposes in history, gender can be distinguished from sex. While someone of the female sex is defined by an XX chromosome and the male by an XY chromosome, and usually by female genitalia as opposed to male genitalia, gender is a chosen identity. Thus, someone who possesses a y chromosome and male genitalia who wished to be called Norma in everyday life and wears skirts may be said to be of the male sex and the female gender. Gender is derived from the latin term *genus*, meaning category; in English usage up until the nineteenth century, it referred to any general type or sort of person; someone could “have a patriotic gender”. First English usage was in the fourteenth century; its current usage dates only to 1963.

Hegemony: In general, hegemony refers to the predominance or authority of one group or nation over another; thus, in this pedestrian sense, the United States Federal Government can claim hegemony over state law. In historiography, however, hegemony has a more specific meaning derived from the writings of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) describes hegemony as the work that dominant classes and/or dominant political and social groups do to maintain their status. Gramsci theorized that dominant groups devise or create laws and cultural norms through their control of social institutions such as schools or the press in order to perpetuate their status and prevent ultimate change. From the Greek *hegemon*, meaning “leader,” the first recorded uses of the term in its general meaning occurs in the sixteenth century.

Historicism:

Historiography: Historiography is the study of how and why history is written and how the writing of history changes with the variations of time and place. For historians, historiography can also refer to historical method and to that subfield of history which is sometimes also called the “philosophy of history.” Historiography can

also refer to the processes by which knowledge of the past is disseminated, maintained, restricted, or rendered into narrative. From the Greek “history writing,” the term is first used as history becomes recognized as a discipline in the 1860s.

Ideology:

An overall, systematic schema of ideas or a (usually secular) belief system that may provide a justification for everyday actions; it is, in other words, a comprehensive vision of how to think and act in the world based on a fidelity to certain ideas. Thus, capitalism can be described as the ideology which justifies many different means of accumulating wealth on the grounds that the end of capital accumulation will be beneficial for society as a whole. In many cases, ideology can have a negative connotation, as was the case in Napoleon Bonaparte’s dismissal of his opponents as “ideologues.”⁴ For Marxist historians, ideology may have a more particular, specific meaning. To Marx, ideology was what was produced by the ruling classes to make the working class believe that what was in the interest of the wealthy was in the interest of everyone. In this negative Marxist sense, nationalism would be an example of an ideology imposed by the bourgeoisie to give low-wage workers the sense that “we’re all in this together.”⁵ The term ideology was originally coined in the late 1780s to describe factions fighting in the French revolution; it is derived from two Greek roots meaning “the study of ideas.”

Imperialism:

In one sense, imperialism simply refers to a state ruled by an Emperor; however, what distinguishes emperors from kings is that an emperor rules over distant dependencies, whereas a king only rules over his own realm. In the last two hundred years, however, imperialism has come to refer to an ideology that justifies the annexation of large swaths of foreign land for the purposes

Intellectual Historian:

An intellectual historian studies the how ideas develop and change over time. Most intellectual historians start from the premise that ideas cannot be examined in isolation from the conditions in which they were

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*. (London: Verso, 1994), 67.

⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. (New York; Wiley, 2006), 118.

produced or they changed. They closely analyze key intellectual texts such as novels, memoirs, philosophical tracts, or poetry, with an eye to the context in which ideas emerge.

Literature Review:

A literature review is a document produced by researchers in the initial stage of researching a topic. Researchers usually compile a literature review after choosing a topic and writing a prospectus but before engaging deeply in substantive research. A literature review is typically a document of around ten pages that describes the state of existing secondary research on a topic that the author is interested in researching.

Materialism:

Historical materialism is the idea that commodities and tangible materials drive historical change. Materialists thus typically oppose the idea that historical changes are brought about by divine intervention, the force of personality of particularly significant people, or the advent of particularly significant ideas. “Orthodox” Marxists are typically historical materialists in that they follow Karl Marx’s idea that history progresses through certain discrete stages that can be defined by who owns the means to produce material (the “means of production.”)

Marxist History:

Marxist history is a school of historiography that relies upon the insights of Karl Marx in developing historical narratives. Marxist historians typically place a premium on the centrality of social class and of economic exploitation in producing historical outcomes. Many Marxist historians may also use historiographical methods derived from Marx’s thought, such as dialectical materialism, though not all do.

Methodology:

A methodology is a practice or series of practices employed to make sense of data. In this sense, Marxism can be seen as a historical methodology—as a means of weighing and sifting through raw historical data in order to shape it into something coherent. The term is derived from the Latin *methodologia*, or study of methods and came into English usage early in the nineteenth century.

Modernism:

For historical purposes, modernism can be conceived of as a group of ideologies or cultural movements which

reached their peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in literature, art, architecture, and music and were characterized by the rejection of prior “traditional” rules, for example, for the production of art of for building structures.

Modernization:

Modernity:

Modernity is distinct from modernism. It is conceived of as a period of time, usually perceived of as starting (with the early modern period) around 1500, in which medieval conceptions of knowledge were rejected in favor of a return to ancient Greek and Roman antecedents and secular forms of association and government came to be favored over ones in which religious identity was integrated. The term was originally used to refer to European history, though its use is now more widespread. Some historians, however, hold that modernity begins with European industrialization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Narrative:

A narrative is a coherent story. In historiography, an historical narrative is distinguished from a chronicle in the sense that historical narratives must have all of the elements of fictional narratives (characters, plot, introduction, conclusion), and that producing these narratives through the interpretation of historical material is a key aspect of historical study.

Patriarchy:

A system of explicit or implicit practices that have the effect of maintaining male social dominance. In traditional or formal anthropological terms, patriarchal societies are those in which males

Periodization:

Periodization is the division of the past into recognizable chronological chunks.

Plot:

The main events of a work of literature or history; historians use plot (or more specifically emplotment) to describe the process of sorting through significant events and arranging them in a meaningful order.

Postmodernism:

Postmodernism refers to movements in literature, art, architecture, and other fields to reject and move beyond concrete and totalizing ideological and theoretical

schemas in favor of approaches that thwart the overall thematic descriptions that postmodernists believe will lead to totalizing ideology. Postmodernists often use stylistic techniques of bricolage or pastiche to break apart constructions of reality. Characteristic of the late twentieth century. The term was first found in English in the 1920s.

- Popular Culture:** Aspects of a culture that are informal, mainstream, and accessible to a middle-class audience. Popular culture is typically distinguished from high culture, which may not be easily accessible to a mass audience. Historians of popular culture study those aspects of culture available through mass media sources, such as sporting events, music, or popular film.
- Post-structuralism:** A literary and ideological movement comprised of scholars who reject the central tenets of structuralism. Poststructuralists reject most firmly the structuralist idea that there are universal structures in human nature, human language and human behavior that can be applied across the board as explanatory tools. Post-structuralists reject this tendency to generalize and focus instead on specific cases and contingent and changeable identities. Though many people considered to be affiliated with post-structuralism reject the label, influential people who have been label post-structuralists include Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Jean Boudrillard. The term was first coined in English in the journal *Yale French Studies* in 1975.
- Presentism:** An ideology that argues that history should be studied for the purpose of understanding the circumstances of the present day. Critics of this approach argue that presentists will fail to view the past “in itself,” and that the search for present-day solutions will mask the questions asked by people in the past. Proponents argue that presentism is inevitable anyway and that abandoning a presentist approach renders history irrelevant.
- Primary Source:** A primary source is one that is considered close to the event, a source that was produced at a time close to the event being studied. In contrast, secondary sources are those sources compiled, often on the basis of primary

sources, considerably after the event considered. There is no rule or bright line to delineate at what point of distance a primary source becomes a secondary source. Primary sources also can be defined by how they are being used by the historian. For example, Frederick Jackson Turner's *Significance of the Frontier in American History* would be a primary source for an historian studying ideologies of ethnic division in the 1890s, but a secondary source for historians researching the Lewis and Clark expedition. Proponents of the primacy of the primary source/secondary source distinction in historical research argue that primary sources are more reliable than secondary sources because of their temporal closeness to events. Critics argue that the primary/secondary source distinction is arbitrary and that the primary/secondary source distinction originated in a misleading effort in the 1890s to portray historical method as scientific.

Public History:

Public history is a subfield of historical work that emphasizes producing history for a wider audience. Practitioners of public history take history out of the classroom. In addition to university professors, public historians may be museum staff, librarians, archivists, or may work for private companies.⁶

Race:

A race is a group that asserts common biological ancestry, often imputed from the color of one's skin or other inheritable trait. Race differs from ethnicity because common ethnic heritage involves cultural, linguistic, or religious traits that are not biologically inherited. From the French *rasse*, or offspring; first used in 1480.

Reproduction:

The process of bringing something forth again in similar form; copying, multiplying. In Marxist theory, *simple reproduction* of capital is an exchange in which the amount of capital remains constant, whereas expanded production occurs when profit is expanded through surplus value.

⁶ National Council on Public History, "What is Public History?" <http://www.ncph.org/WhatisPublicHistory/tabid/282/Default.aspx> (Retrieved July 22, 2009).

- Review Essay:** A review essay is a longer work than a book review in which either one book is reviewed at great length, or, more typically, that reviews several books that have similar themes. Review essays are distinct from scholarly articles in that they are simply evaluations of existing books, and will not have independent arguments or evidence outside of the evaluation of these books.
- Secondary Source:** A secondary source is a source that analyzes an event or an idea from a position far removed in time from that event or idea. Secondary sources rely on information presented elsewhere, usually in primary sources. Usually, a secondary source would be written by a non-participant in the events that the secondary source analyzes. See primary source for more information.
- Social Historian:** A social historian is chiefly concerned with how social groups change over time. In the 1950s and 1960s, when social history was relatively new, this meant primarily that social historians were interested in the effect of class differences upon history, and many social historians were also either Marxist or annales historians as well.⁷ In recent years, social history has shifted its emphasis from the working class to other ways in which social change affects our views of the past, including new emphases on microhistory and urban history.
- Socialism:** Socialism is an economic system in which major industries are owned by the government. It is distinct from communism in the sense that government ownership of the means of production and distribution of goods and services is seen as a worthwhile system in itself, not as a means to an end in which the state is eventually unnecessary. Thus some socialists are sympathetic to Marxism while others are not. Some socialists see government ownership and redistribution as a means to the end of the pure equality of all social groups; some only advocate socialism as a means of economic inequality. First appears in English in the early 1830s.

⁷ Steven C. Hause, "The Evolution of Social History," *French Historical Studies* 19:4 (August 1996): 1192-1195.

- Structuralism:** A method of analysis in the social sciences and humanities, including history, in which common elements such as conventions of language and symbolism are conceived of as providing universal and systematic tools for explicating particular circumstances. The term is first used in 1951 in English.
- Topic Sentence:** The topic sentence is a statement in a paragraph that makes a claim related to the overall thesis or argument of an essay. Except in rare occasions, the topic sentence should be the first sentence in the paragraph.
- Thesis:** A thesis or thesis statement is a sentence or group of sentences identifying the main argument in an essay or book. A thesis provides a theme to be discussed or proved. Enters the English in the sixteenth century.
- Warrant:** Conclusive proof, either by empirical evidence or logical reasoning. All claims require warrants to become persuasive. Enters the English language in the 14th century.