

Standards of Evidence in Historical Research: How Do We Know When We Know?

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# Methodological Note

## Standards of Evidence in Historical Research: How Do We Know When We Know?

*Carl F. Kaestle*

This article seeks to give a brief response to the question, how do historians know when they know something? The question involves ideas about certitude and truth, and most historians today would make very modest claims about certitude or truth in our statements about the past. Many would echo Charles Beard, who said sixty years ago, “We hold a damn dim candle over a damn dark abyss.”<sup>1</sup> Today the historical profession is fragmented, ideologically diverse, and somewhat relativistic, a situation that is applauded by some and bemoaned by others.

It was not always so. Many of Beard’s contemporaries embarked on a quest for objective knowledge. Peter Novick’s recent book *That Noble Dream* charts the development of a “commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality.” To develop expertise, authority, and professional status, these historians of the early twentieth century ignored James, Dewey, Beard, and other troublesome relativists and established a standard of truth according to the “consensus of the competent.” Objectivity became an ideal; ideology was eschewed.<sup>2</sup>

That commitment has been shaken in the past twenty years by forces within and outside of the discipline. In the wake of Thomas Kuhn’s history, even the truths of the physical and biological sciences are seen as relative and impermanent, and the influential neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty says we must abandon “the neurotic Cartesian quest for certainty,” and develop instead “standards relative to the changing purposes of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Beard, cited in a communication by Robert F. Smith, *American Historical Review* 94 (Oct. 1989): 1247.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 1, 51.

disciplinary communities in changing circumstances.”<sup>3</sup> The development of new subject matter, and with it new perspectives in women’s history, minority history, radical history, and gay history, have further diversified the truths promoted in contemporary history. What’s left? Are we all like Rorty’s “cooperative freshman,” who proclaims that contrary propositions are equally valid?<sup>4</sup> No, there is some sense of better and worse ways of arguing, more-viable and less-viable generalizations about the past. Where do historians turn for standards?

Because history does not have highly developed methodology around which there is consensus, and because historians are continually scavenging other disciplines for methods or theories, we might look to those external sources for guidance on the question, how do we know when we know? For example, some historians discovered computers and statistics twenty years ago, and started talking about R-squares and chi-squares. But do statistical procedures and standards of significance help us know when we know? Well, of course, when arguing about the statistical significance of some numbers, one has to adopt the standards of the discipline from which you have borrowed the method. But these measures of significance have only a peripheral role in answering the question of certitude in historical work, partly because only a small minority of historians use such techniques and partly because such standards of significance tell us little about the importance of the numbers or how to interpret them.

A second potential external source of standards of truth for historians is theories about social structure, social change, and human nature, whether from economics, sociology, political economy, or anthropology. At the crudest level, those few historians who might be doctrinaire disciples of an existing, comprehensive social theory already know the truth, or at least they know the important truths, before they begin. So, their honest answer to the question, how do we know when we know? would be: “We knew as soon as we persuaded ourselves of the truth of the governing body of the theory.” Few historians in the United States use social theory in such a dogmatic way, and even in such ideologically regulated academic settings as the former Soviet Union, no truths were totally secure. A Soviet historians’ joke said, “The future is certain; only the past is unpredictable.”<sup>5</sup> At the other extreme, those who utterly reject social theory and treat history as mere chronicling nonetheless bring to

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, cited in Novick, *Noble Dream*, 540–41.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Lawrence Levine, “The Unpredictable Past: Reflections on Recent American Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 94 (June 1989): 671.

their work implicit assumptions about the way the world works. Using theory more self-consciously and creatively, historians can create a dialog between it and their data, each informing the other. Social theories, then, can help us decide how to seek the truth and can shape our answers. They do not (unless we use them like recipe books) answer the question, how do we know when we know?

A third potential external source for standards of truth in historical writing is the philosophy of history, a branch of philosophy pursued at every major research university and totally ignored by practicing historians. Bernard Bailyn went to a seminar on philosophy and history convened by Sidney Hook in 1962, and he said, "Let me put it bluntly . . . I have never once felt it necessary to work out precise answers to questions of objectivity and subjectivity, the nature of fact, etc.—in order to advance my work in history."<sup>6</sup> Working historians have other problems, said Bailyn, such as anomalies in existing data or discrepancies between data and existing explanations, or how to frame good historical problems, spot false questions, think creatively about what data is relevant, choose the right words for generalizations, and use metaphor appropriately in explanation. These problems are generally not in the province of philosophers of history.

Following Bailyn, I will answer the question, how do we know when we know? by looking internally at some historical work, taking examples from the history of literacy. What are the implicit standards that tell us when to accept a historical generalization?

First, we must define the question a little better. If the issue is certainty, we must ask: certainty about what kinds of issues, and certainty for whom? Regarding what kinds of issues we're talking about, it's not hard to get consensus on many low-level matters we call "factual," such as "Horace Mann was born in 1796 in Franklin, Massachusetts." The more certainty we have (collectively) about something historical, the more trivial it is likely to be. On the other hand, the more significant and interpretive the generalization, the less certain we will be about it. (Of this truth, by the way, I'm absolutely certain.)

Regarding the question, certainty for whom? historical truth is plural, relative, and tentative on issues of importance. If we drop the demand for unanimous assent, there are lots of historical truths around: Franklin Roosevelt was a great president; American civilization is superior; and slavery was the main cause of the Civil War (also, of course, those other truths: Franklin Roosevelt was a terrible president; American civilization

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard Bailyn, "The Problems of the Working Historian: A Comment," in *Philosophy and History: A Symposium*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York, 1963), 94.

is vicious; and slavery was not the main cause of the Civil War). The most popular answers to these kinds of questions may vary depending on the mood of the times, the best recent research, and other factors, but there will always be dissenters, because historical truths are social truths.

Now let me turn to some pragmatic work that illustrates some movement toward certitude in the history of literacy. There are two main approaches to the history of literacy. The first, starting around twenty-five years ago, aimed to determine who was literate, who was illiterate, and to compare their characteristics, with some attention to the ideology of literacy and how it is acquired. This approach had matured by about five years ago. The methodological points had been argued and explored (for example, does signing a document equate with reading ability?); the questions had stabilized (for example, the relevance of religion, industrialization, and gender); and there had been much counterpoint between local and national studies. Thus, big syntheses like those of Harvey Graff and Rab Houston were made possible.<sup>7</sup>

We can use this initial body of work in the history of literacy to see how consensus was worked out on a particular issue, the relationship of literacy rates and industrialization. In a classic article on literacy in England from 1600 to 1900, Lawrence Stone pointed out that the industrial revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries began during a time of stagnant literacy rates. Not only did British industrialization take off during a lull in literacy growth, but the immediate local impact of industrialization upon education and literacy was negative.<sup>8</sup> This view was pressed by Michael Sanderson, who discovered declining school enrollment and literacy rates in industrializing Lancashire. Why? Because early factory work did not require literacy for most workers, and child labor interfered with education.<sup>9</sup> Reanalyzing the same data, Thomas Laqueur suggested that Sanderson's Lancashire decline could be attributed to massive population increases without adequate institutions for education; Laqueur attributed the reversal of the downtrend to schooling efforts arising from industrialization and urbanization.<sup>10</sup> From this debate began to emerge an understanding that although the long-run

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<sup>7</sup> Harvey Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington, 1987); R. A. Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe: Culture and Education, 1500–1800* (New York, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Stone, "Literacy and Education in England, 1640–1900," *Past and Present* 42 (1969): 69–139.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Sanderson, "Literacy and Social Mobility in the Industrial Revolution in England," *Past and Present* 56 (1972): 75–104.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas W. Laqueur, "Literacy and Social Mobility in the Industrial Revolution," *Past and Present* 64 (1974): 96–107.

impact of industrialization on a region was to increase literacy, the short-run effect in factory towns was socially disruptive and inhibited the acquisition of literacy.

Evidence from other settings reinforced this picture. François Furet and Jacques Ozouf explored the relationship between literacy and industrialization in France, where the expansion of literacy ran very much along socially stratified lines and corresponded with the growth of the market economy. In general, towns had higher literacy rates, because they had concentrations of literate occupations and educating agencies. But the nineteenth century brought a decline in urban literacy, for the same reasons as in England. Furet and Ozouf distinguished between the higher-literacy, old, commercial towns and the lower-literacy, new, industrial towns.<sup>11</sup> Maris Vinovskis and I made similar findings for schooling in nineteenth-century Massachusetts.<sup>12</sup> The emerging picture, then, is one in which literacy is correlated with economic growth in a region but is depressed temporarily by industrialization. Rising literacy rates were associated with commerce, the professions, schooling, and gradual population concentration. But literacy rates were inhibited by child labor, rapid population growth, and the stresses of early industrialization. In short, literacy was boosted by the commercial aspects of urbanization, not the industrial aspects.<sup>13</sup>

The work on industrialization and literacy illustrates three ways in which progress toward viable generalizations can be made: first, there was a dialog between local and national studies, a dialog of micro- and macro-analysis; second, generalizations were developed that reconciled previously contradictory generalizations; and third, the results were confirmed by studies from different countries—a form of replication by comparative history.

Thus, the history of rudimentary literacy rates has matured and has produced some generalizations that seem to garner considerable consensus. The other, newer way to look at the history of literacy, is to explore the uses of literacy, to make the actors active, to connect readers and texts in history. This effort is messy, there are very faint borders around the subject, there is little literature on it, and the evidence is murky. But there are many scholars converging on the need for such work and on

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<sup>11</sup> François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et Écrire: L'alphabetisation des francois de Calvin à Jules Ferry* (Paris, 1977), published in English as *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* (Cambridge, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Carl F. Kaestle and Maris A. Vinovskis, *Education and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts* (New York, 1980).

<sup>13</sup> See Carl F. Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880* (New Haven, Conn., 1991), ch. 2.

the basic concept of uniting readers and text in the history of literacy, as there are also in literary criticism, in reading research, and in communication research. In this kind of situation, with a relatively new, problematic line of inquiry, we need many little studies, innovations in methods, and much speculation about the relation of theory and historical research. Frustration can come from a sense of chaos and lack of motion. Bailyn's metaphor for it is a lot of horses pawing at the ground and not going anywhere yet. But it is a necessary stage, in which we set questions, agendas, share tentative hypotheses, and get ready to move.

After we get beyond this stage, we should be able to say, a few years from now, that some historical generalizations about the uses of literacy fit the evidence better than others. How will we know when we know? When things start falling into place according to the kind of internal and implicit standards of historical dialog that I mentioned: consonance of micro- and macro-levels of analysis, synthesis of contradictory claims, and reinforcement across regions or nations. Even then, of course, the answers will be impermanent, but by these standards, some answers are still better than others. Some give us a little better light for looking into the abyss.