



What Counts as History?

Let's define history as the study of what has happened in the past. Out of everything that happens on a given day, or in a given year or decade or century, what do historians decide to write down? What stories do they tell about what happened? And how do they decide?

When your parents and grandparents were going to school, history was pretty much the study of three things: the government, the military and the economy. A shorthand way to describe it: wars, world leaders and businesses. Some people still think that this is what history is all about.

But many historians see their work differently. For the past 40 years or so, they have redefined what counts as history. These historians focus on the experiences of people who have too often been left out of history: people of color, women, working class people, immigrants, gay men and lesbians. They focus on the experiences of people like you, your family and your friends.

African-American history is a case in point.

To be sure, African Americans have been included in every history of the United States. After all, these histories tell the story of the enslavement of African Americans. But what does that version of events consist of? It includes slavery as an economic system that enabled white plantation owners to get rich and Northern mill-owners (who were white) to get the cotton that they made into fabric. It also includes how the government dealt with slavery: the Three-Fifths Compromise, the Fugitive Slaves Acts, the Dred Scott decision and so on. When some history books address "Northern Views of Slavery," they focus on what white Northerners thought about slavery. And when they address "Southern Views of Slavery," they write about what white Southerners thought about slavery.

Is that the history of African Americans? Not really. What did northern blacks think of slavery? How did the slaves think about their own experiences? African-American writer Ralph Ellison put it this way: "Can a people live and develop for over three hundred years simply by reacting? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them?" Those questions help define what African-American history does.

African-American history puts the black Americans' experiences center stage. On the topic of slavery, for example, it asks questions like these: How did slaves experience their own lives? How did they manage to retain their humanity in a system that so thoroughly oppressed them? To answer these questions, historians look at the religious life, marriage, families and social networks that existed among slaves. Doing so isn't easy because few slaves left written records. Locating sources that shed light on these topics requires historians to be creative. Many have used interviews conducted in the 1930s of former slaves. Others have tried to piece together information from landowners' documents.

In short, the difference between the two approaches to history is this: African-American history says that slaves and their descendents have always been more than just the oppressed victims of white America. They have done more than just react. This approach allows African Americans to define their own lives and experiences.

("Check Your Understanding" questions on next page)

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

To be sure you understand what you've read, answer these questions, either on your own or with a partner.

1. How have the topics that historians study expanded in the past 40 years?
2. How did histories traditionally look at the history of black Americans?
3. What are the key questions that historians studying the African American past ask?
4. How does this reading connect to the activity you did in Part 1 of this lesson?