

SECONDARY SOURCE CRITICISM AND ANALYSIS

A critique of a secondary source usually differs widely from a traditional "book report": a book report generally summarizes the contents of a scholarly work. But this simple recapitulation of a work's contents as the author organizes it does not usually provide the reader an adequate understanding of the contents as a set of arguments or a narrative embodying a cluster of presuppositions and techniques. In a critical review, or analysis, you, the writer, examine the author's presuppositions and techniques, drawing from the contents of the work in question material that you need to illustrate and explain the points in your analysis--you must reorganize the author's scheme of exposition and framework of argument and assumptions according to your own needs and purposes. In the end, your goal is to consider carefully what *YOU* have learned, after reading this scholarly work, about both the author's topic and the writing of history itself. Therefore, in your critical analysis, you should not only identify the author's thesis but also evaluate the author's technique for demonstrating that thesis. Accordingly, you should evaluate the author's main points, sources, methods (or approach), assumptions, language, and organization. We will be using secondary source criticism as a vehicle for exploring both various kinds of historical explanations and the various methods for pursuing those explanations. In the course of your reading, look carefully at the *technique* your author uses in his or her exploration of different historical topics: Examine how they go about their tasks and how successful (or unsuccessful) they are in their technique, methods, and explanations. A critical review should answer these following questions, though not necessarily in this format or order.

1. *Comparing the Author's Goals and Thesis with His/Her Achievements.* What is the author trying to do, and does he/she achieve it? What are the chief goals as announced by the author in the preface or introduction of the book or the first paragraphs of the article? Does your analysis of the goals and themes agree with the aims as expressed by the author? What is the author's thesis? Do the author's goals, aims, and thesis match the major arguments, both in their logic and in their exposition as represented in the work's organization? Do conspicuous silences occur in the work about topics you think should have been covered? In short, does the author prove his or her arguments, and how well, and by what means?

2. *Evidence and Proof.* Does the author have all the kinds of evidence needed for all parts of his/her case as explored in the work? Does the author use sufficient and appropriate sources and data to prove his/her arguments? Are the basic facts presented by the author determined more by the evidence used or by the author's premises and presumptions about human nature, models of society, or political and moral uses? Does the author employ sophisticated methods of analysis in the manipulation of data? Does the author use evidence in a logical and convincing manner? Because evidence is crucial for the work of the historian, you should determine how authors use evidence and whether the right kinds of evidence are employed to prove the argument(s).

3. *Morals, Uses, and Politics.* What are the author's moral and political judgments, and how do they influence the text? For what political, moral, intellectual, or other purpose does the author argue and shape the material? (Philosophical, religious, and professional concerns can shape material as much as economic, political, and other interests.) Are the author's uses made

explicit or are they kept implicit?

4. *Models of Society, Economy, and Polity.* What does the author presume about the nature of social, economic, or political arrangements in the society being examined? How are social groupings and their relationships determined? Does the society have classes as well as groups? What does the author argue explicitly or implicitly about the structures of power and the means of social control or domination? Does the author present supporting evidence or only theory in his/her exposition of social, economic, and political arrangements?

5. *Plots, Stories, and Metastories.* From whose viewpoint does the author tell the story or make the argument? To what extent does the author presume progress, decline, cyclic, or other basic modes of comprehending time through history? Is the work in question chronologically or analytically arranged? How does this affect your understanding of what went on and why? Of what larger story or history does the text or interpretations presume its story to be a part? Why does the author begin and end when he/she does? Do the beginning and end points build in certain biases in the making of the argument?

6. *Models of Human Nature and Causation.* Does the author presume that human beings change their ways and outlooks easily, or are they fundamentally hostile to change? To what extent do changes stem from willed human activities? Or does change come from unanticipated consequences of aimed-for actions or from larger forces and/or structures working on human beings? To what extent are humans constrained by their culture, society, or times, and to what degree are they free to create at will? To what extent do latent factors (those unknown to the people in the time under study) contribute to historical change?

Your written and oral critiques should cover the same material; the biggest difference, perhaps, is that your written analysis will also contain *your own thesis*, a thesis that will be the focal point of *your* analysis of someone else's work--your thesis identifies what you want the reader to learn from your essay. For examples of short secondary source critiques, some well-conceived, others not, see *The American Historical Review* and *The William and Mary Quarterly*. Your oral presentation should be about fifteen minutes long, and is due the week that we discuss that type of history. Your oral report should consist of the following three items: the author's thesis, the author's technique for proving the thesis, and your evaluation of that technique. In preparing your oral report, ask yourself what it is that you want the listener to learn from you.

"One can accept the view that the historical record is fragmentary and incomplete, that recovery of the past is partial and difficult, and that historians will never finally agree in their interpretations, and yet can still believe intelligibly and not naively in an objective truth about the past that can be observed and objectively verified. Historians may never see and represent that truth wholly and finally, but some of them will come closer than others, be more nearly complete, more objective, more honest, in their written history, and we will know it, and have known it, when we see it."

----Gordon S. Wood, "Novel History"