

Arguing Without an End: The History Discourse Community

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### **Background**

A “discourse community” is a community in which members share a common goal through a common form of communication. By this definition, historians belong to a discourse community by participating in historical debates and arguing specific interpretations of the past. They do so by publishing articles, books, and papers within their field.

Yet, interpreting history has proven to be a difficult task— history has always (and remains) both a complex yet limited collection of information. In order to achieve a greater understanding of cultural, political, and social aspects of the past, historians must rely on information already present in the community. Thus, it is crucial for scholars of history to implement prior ideas and research into their own arguments to reach a better understanding of a specific event or the general past.

Thoroughly understanding the ways in which historians contribute to ongoing arguments is crucial for students observing or participating in this community. As famous English historian Edward H. Carr states: “History means interpretation” (Carr, 1961). All events are interpretable, and understanding the function of research in the history community would help detect the bias possible in these interpretations.

Prior to my research, I held a general understanding of how historians argue their beliefs and explanations. It’s obvious through reading any history book or article that historians rely on past references to support their ideas about the past, but I was unsure of the ways in which historians may select their research from the vast amount of cases and interpretations present. I reasoned that information available surely contradicts other information, so I was interested to

discover how this impacts historians' attempts to reach a greater collective understanding of the past.

I aim to present a brief overview of how historians construct their arguments in by referencing and debating prior ideas. In addition, my research intends to provide an understanding of how these references are specifically chosen in order to support the main argument of the author.

### **Methods**

For the sources of my research, I chose two history books of the same field that were likely to demonstrate contrasting interpretations of similar historical events. By doing so, I hoped to demonstrate the scope of interpretation in the community and the importance on building upon previous arguments and assumptions. The books belong to the historical field of United States Civil War history and pertains to the emancipation of Southern slaves. The books consist of *Redeeming the Great Emancipator* by history professor Allen Guelzo, and *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era* by historian David Williams.

In order to assess the arguments of the historians in the different sources of the research, I paid close attention to the ways in which the authors had referenced prior arguments, research, and assumptions in the history community. I analyzed the scope of the publications, and determined which portions consisted of original interpretation (using primary sources), which portions consisted of past arguments (secondary sources), and how often original interpretation on these past arguments themselves were applied throughout the papers (interpretation of secondary sources). I also noted the assumptions stated or assumed by the historians as they wrote their arguments.

Additionally, I focused on the authors cited throughout the publications. With the historians' arguments in mind, I looked for possible trends between the narrative of the argument and the arguments of the referenced papers.

### **Results / Analysis**

#### *Arguments of historians:*

In both *I Freed Myself* and *Redeeming the Great Emancipator*, assumptions of an opposing group of thought are stated in the immediate starting paragraphs. In *I Freed Myself*, Williams describes the notion that most Americans believe slave emancipation resulted from Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, and immediately attacks that claim by stating that "Lincoln made clear that his intention was... not to free the slaves." Instead, he argues that emancipation was overwhelmingly driven by the slave efforts themselves (Williams, 2014). Conversely, Guelzo details modern historians' cynical perspective on Lincoln and his actual involvement with slave emancipation, instead choosing to argue against the assumption by defending Lincoln's motives and beliefs. He argues that Lincoln and his impact in slave emancipation is understated by modern historians (Guelzo, 2016). These arguments evidently argue against one another to some extent, but act to disprove separate groups that initially may oppose their arguments (general public Americans and historians, respectively).

The variation between primary and secondary sources in the research varies— but only slightly. In *Redeeming*, Guelzo generally utilizes primary sources to support his argument. In this way, he relies on his direct interpretation of the events to argue against prior assumptions and arguments in the community. Williams, on the other hand, relies more on recent secondary sources to present his argument by comparing modern information to his primary sources. Yet,

nearly all of the secondary sources are accompanied by his debate and interpretation of the research, with little secondary sources present that directly agree with his argument. This variation in type of sources support each argument in different ways: Guelzo relies on information directly from the time period to support his claim, while Williams relies more-so on disproving modern beliefs to prove his argument through contradiction.

*Historian source selection:*

The authors of the referenced sources are very different. Guelzo bases his argument on prior ideas that are centered more towards direct research and anecdotes with Lincoln and American politicians than Williams. Williams, conversely, centers his argument on other anecdotes and research of the slaves themselves and freed slaves following emancipation. Additionally, for secondary sources referencing the time period, Williams uses primarily black historians (W.E.B. Dubois) in his references, while Guelzo generally cites white historians (David W. Blight). While not entirely obvious, this is important to consider as the historians only selected sources that are likely to be in favor of their argument, with little attention demonstrated to the information that lies outside of their arguments. While this strategy may seem obvious for debates, it is crucial in analyzing historian arguments and must be noted as a possible form of bias integrated into source selection.

### **Discussion / Conclusion**

*Argument without an end:*

As historians, Guelzo and Williams' primary goal is to interpret the past through available information and form an argument defending their interpretation. With the wide array of information from past historians and uncovered primary sources, historians build upon this

information in order to support their arguments as demonstrated through the variation of sources in both books analyzed.

Despite covering similar topics, both Williams and Guelzo contribute separate interpretations with separate sources. Both authors effectively attack the arguments presented in the books and do so through selecting and presenting past ideas and references that support their interpretation and argument. Even when their arguments conflict, both still contribute to a collective understanding of the time period. This form of debate creates a “living and flowing” community as both sides of an argument challenge assumptions and common ideas present in the community or the public as a whole.

As Dutch historian Pieter Geyl famously stated: “History is an argument without an end” (Kalela, 2011). Nothing in history is set definitively; all of history is composed of different arguments that reference information with no clear answer, similarly to what was seen in both authors’ interpretation of slave emancipation. Historians choose research and information that best support their specific argument and provide their own interpretation that will be refuted by future historians that form separate interpretations from the same amount of available information. Collectively, historians theoretically reach a clearer understanding from this available information. This answered my question on how conflicting information may impact historians’ understanding of history— it contributes, not hinders.

*A fair warning on bias:*

Yet, history is all interpretation. With these arguments, historians are sure to interpret events (and people) through bias. While not directly clear during initial reading the two books, both Williams and Guelzo selected research that accompanied their bias. The research and

references used by both demonstrate a strong leaning towards their specific side of the argument. This is natural and unavoidable, but not necessarily inhabilitating towards history as an academic discipline.

Historian Edward H. Carr advocates that members of the history community must learn to “study the historian before studying the facts” (Carr, 1961). Since history is open for interpretation it can be important to identify any possible bias present in a historian’s findings. Students of history must pay close attention to the references presented by historians and remain skeptical to every argument. Yet, this is much easier said than done; bias in history is often ingrained in publications and historians do not openly demonstrate their bias. Instead, it is important to consider every side of every discussion before subscribing to a particular argument. While this can be a very difficult skill to learn, it is crucial for effectively participating as an individual in the history discourse community.

## References

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