Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Advanced American History

“Why Do Historians So Often Differ?”

*Adapted from “American History-Connecting With The Past” by Alan Brinkley*

Early in the twentieth century, when the professional study of history was still relatively new, many historians believed that questions about the past could be answered with the same certainty and precision that questions in other, more scientific fields could be answered. By sifting through available records, using precise methods of research and analysis, and producing careful, closely argued accounts of the past, they believed they could create definitive histories that would survive without controversy. Scholars who adhered to this view and believed that real knowledge can be from derived only from direct, scientific observation of clear “facts” were known as positivists.”

Although a vigorous debate continues to this day over whether historical research can or should be truly objective, almost no historian any longer accepts the “positivist” claim that history could ever be an exact science. Disagreement about the past is, in fact, at the heart of the effort to understand history. Critics of contemporary historical scholarship often denounce the way historians are constantly revising earlier interpretations; some denounce the act of interpretation itself. History, they claim, is “what happened.” Historians should “stick to the facts.”

Historians, however, continue to differ with one another both because the “facts” are seldom as straightforward as their critics claim and because facts by themselves mean almost nothing without an effort to assign meaning to them. Some historical “facts,” of course, are not in dispute. Everyone agrees, for example, that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and that Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860. But many other “facts” are much harder to determine-among them, for example, the question of how large the American population was before the arrival of Columbus. How many slaves resisted slavery? This sounds like a reasonably straightforward question, but it is almost impossible to answer with any certainty-because the records of slave resistance are spotty and the definition of “resistance” is a matter of considerable dispute.

Even when a set of facts is clear and straightforward, historians disagree-sometimes quite radically-over what they mean. Those disagreements can be the result of political and ideological disagreements. Some of the most vigorous debates in recent decades have been between scholars who believe that economic interests and class divisions are the key to understanding the past, and those who believe that ideas and culture are at least as important as material interests. The disagreements can be a result of the particular perspectives that people of different backgrounds bring to the study of the past. Whites and people of color, men and women, people from the American South and people from the North, young people and older people: these and many other points of difference find their way into scholarly disagreements. Debates can also occur over differences in methodology-between those who believe that quantitative studies can answer important historical questions and those who believe that other methods come closer to the truth.

Most of all, perhaps, historical interpretation changes in response to the time in which it is written. Historians may strive to be “objective” in their work, but no one can be entirely free from the assumptions and concerns of the present. In the 1950s, the omnipresent shadow of the Cold War had a profound effect on the way most historians viewed the past. In the 1960s, concerns about racial justice and disillusionment with the Vietnam War altered the way many historians viewed the past. Those events introduced a much more critical tone to scholarship and turned the attention of scholars away from politics and government and toward the study of society and culture.

Many areas of scholarship in recent decades are embroiled in a profound debate over whether there is such a thing as “truth.” The world, some scholars argue, is simply a series of “narratives” constructed by people who view life in very different and often highly personal ways. “Truth” does not really exist. Everything is a product of interpretation. Not many historians embrace such radical ideas; most would agree that interpretations, to be of any value, must rest on a solid foundation of observable facts. But historians do recognize that even the most compelling facts are subject to many different interpretations and that the process of understanding the past is a forever continuing-and forever contested-process.

1. What are some of the reasons historians so often disagree?

2. Is there ever a “right” or “wrong” in historical interpretation? What value might historical inquiry have other than reaching a “right” or “wrong” conclusion?

3. If historians so often disagree, how should a student of history approach historical content? How might disagreement expand our understanding of history?