


## CLASSICS IN GLOBAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: SOME IDEAS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** Classics of historiography are not all the same. As with classics in literature, or in any other human expression, their status depends on both the historical and cultural context within which they were produced and the historical and cultural context within which they have been appointed as such. When we think of classics, the concept of canon arises. However, even in this case, it is important to consider not only the context in which the book belonging to the canon was written, but also the different historical contexts in which the same book was recognised as a classic: the history of the fortune and misfortune of these works is relevant to understanding it. Like the classics, each canon is not necessarily an enemy of intercultural dialogue because it may be used as a tool to express a clear cultural identity to interact with other cultural identities. Classics and canons are representatives of local cultural identities that cannot and should not be erased by global classics and a global canon. To improve our understanding of other cultures, we need to preserve both our own and other identities, represented by their different canons, with their slow-changing nature. In the future, global classics may arise as expressions of global intellectual dialogue, but the other classics will keep their value as manifestations of specific cultural identities.

**Keywords:** historiography, classics, canons, global dialogue, local identity.

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## HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

In the English language, the word ‘history’ has two possible meanings: *res gestae* (the past facts that happened) and *historia rerum gestarum* (the written description of these facts). Nevertheless, we also have the word ‘historiography’, a composite word coming from Greek, which precisely means ‘writing history’ and refers actually to the act of reconstructing from some sources and describing what happened in the past. Unfortunately, in English, even ‘historiography’ can be a tricky word, because it has a second, weaker meaning, implying the act of writing about what history is or what history means by including various theories and philosophies about it. However, the use of the second weaker meaning (above all among scholars) probably should be completely avoided because it only damages the clarity of any deep reflection on history. There are other useful expressions on the matter, such as ‘theory of history’ and ‘philosophy of history’. We should use them properly and keep ‘historiography’ to express only the *historia rerum gestarum*. As George Steiner once said, “we must purge our vocabulary”.

When we think about the features of how historiographical production has been understood, we detect a silent covenant between the author and the audience, the sender and the addressee, based on truth. The audience usually reads the historian’s work with the idea that they are trying to describe what really happened in the past. This does not mean that they are necessarily telling the truth (for voluntary or involuntary reasons). But readers are expecting true stories, sincere explanations. Historiography is defined by a necessary relationship with past facts that actually happened.

Therefore, we cannot consider a work of historiography, for instance, either *Metahistory* by Hayden White or *The City of God* by Augustine, given that the former is a theory of history and the latter is a philosophy of history. From Herodotus until Natalie Zemon Davis, readers read historical works because they think to find in them true stories about the past, no matter how they are stylistically written or methodologically based.



## CLASSICS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Understanding historiography as it has been described above brings us to the question ‘what is a classic in historiography?’. Every scholar has an idea of what a classic in historiography might be. In fact, quite often, academics who address this topic think of a definition of the classic by keeping some examples in mind and by assuming that whatever definition they arrive at, it cannot be one which excludes these examples, such as, for instance, the writings of Tacitus or Hobsbawm. Therefore, firstly, one thinks about what they assume to be a classic in their time and cultural context and then looks for a definition including their examples. But with this approach, the tendency is to ignore other examples that do not support the so-conceived definition. In other words, the majority of those addressing the definition of what a classic is fall into a kind of intellectual cage, with an approach that is not descriptive but prescriptive, because some features of these so-called classics have simply been underestimated or neglected. These scholars do not grasp that, historically, there are different reasons why a classic can be defined as such.

If we look at the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, we find different meanings of ‘classic’. As an adjective, classic can mean either “popular for a long time” because it is “very good”, or “typical”, or “standard”, or “of the highest quality”. As a noun, classic simply means “an established work of literature of high quality”. But all these adjectives seem to be quite different from each other.

Usually, we say that a classic has the value of endurance. It has survived the trials of time, therefore gaining temporal validation. However, the first question that may come to mind regards the length of this validation. How long is long enough? 50 years, 500 years? No one says anything about this in their studies. Does a validation have to be without interruption, or can a book have been, within 500 years, forgotten at a certain point and then rediscovered? The silence surrounding these points characterises the reflections on the topic.

The second and probably more interesting question considers the reasons for this endurance. Durability depends on what?



One may say that a classic has literary qualities: first of all, it is well written. In fact, we know that history is at the same time science, since expressed with a peculiar method, and art, with its aesthetic features (both method and aesthetic features belonging to some specific historical period). A classic – one could add – is a model: it is an example to follow in method and style.

Someone else might add that a classic has been continuously read because it contains a significant presence of metaphors, which allowed the author to speak about current facts and, involuntarily, other future human events. One may insist that a classic has a surplus of meaning, putting specific things in comparison to general matters implicitly, and vice versa. This is the reason why one may assume we read and reread a classic, which has the capacity to generate a thought-provoking relationship between past and present. But classics of historiography are non-fiction books. They are not like classics of literature, based on fictional and intriguing stories. It is not realistic to say that, even if new editions are sold, the classics of historiography are continuously and wholly reread by general readers and even by scholars.

For all these supposed characteristics, the conclusion is that classics can be considered tendentially timeless, expressing eternal human values. Do we have a list of these classics? Every history of historiography, every handbook of historiography, is composed of an implicit list of works worth speaking about and considered classics. This list of classics is called ‘canon’: the special club for special books. “Once a member, always a member” – this is the general and superficial conviction.

However, in order to be descriptive and not prescriptive, one must think of the history of historiography and definitively identify the historical works that may be defined as classics. The problem is that we cannot be satisfied with considering only our personal cultural perception. Classics have not only been defined in the present day and they are not only European. With an historical and global perspective, to answer the question ‘what is a classic?’, we must first answer ‘where is the classic?’ and then ‘when is a classic?’. Space and time are not something to undervalue.

First, we have several cultural traditions that have been



well-defined so far. Is an English classic in historiography necessarily considered as such in, for instance, the current Italian context? *English History 1914-1945* by A.J.P. Taylor or *The History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line* by Catherine Macaulay are not familiar works for the Italian reader. Does a Chinese classic in historiography even have to be a European classic? Does a Persian classic in historiography have to be recognised even as a South American classic? It is reasonable to think that Japanese or Arabic classics need not be artificially mixed with other cultures' classics. Equally, Western classics are not something to be ideologically decolonised because Western does not mean 'universal'. Each possible list of classics represents a distinct historical development and identity.

Second, we said that endurance may be a quality of a classic, but the same classic can retain its status, even for centuries, for different changing reasons. Therefore, in itself, endurance does not explain anything about the quality that determined it, which can be related to the relevance attributed to a book, either for its original importance or for the current cultural sensibility. On the contrary, if we do not consider only our present time, and look at the history of the alternate fortunes of some classics, we can discover how some historical writings were, explicitly or implicitly, considered to belong to the canon in certain moments and how they temporarily lost this status. With historical perspective and cultural sensibility, we must be conscious that, once selected, classics of historiography are not works that will necessarily retain their status forever.

'Where' and 'when' generate 'how'. Historically and globally, we can find extremely different kinds of historical production, with descriptions of facts mixed with either invented dialogues, documents, poetry, interdisciplinary notes or lists of names and other things. It is not necessarily a matter of genres but sometimes of unique cases.

However, the main question we must consider in order to answer the original problem 'what is a classic in historiography?' seems to be 'classic for whom?'. Scholars tend to be abstract in this matter and presume that we can all agree on the main authors and famous works. Yet, we must first distinguish common readers from specialists. And among both of them, we must imagine



that each reader or specialist may have different perspectives on what constitutes a classic.

One may think that a book is a classic just because it has been widely read or it is still sold very well among common readers (but, as noticed, buying and reading are not synonymous). Therefore, it had or has ‘social influence’ in moulding a certain idea of the past, as probably did Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, which sold more than two million copies. Some people may underline the relevance of a work for its ‘historical exemplarity’: it created a fashion, as Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. But some other people can state that it is a classic right because it was a product of ‘intellectual exceptionalism’. For instance, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* by Fernand Braudel did not create a model that was largely imitated. A classic can also be a book with incredible ‘documentary importance’, even if it is full of other defects. Paul the Deacon’s *History of the Lombards* is apologetic, full of poetry, with mistakes, and yet it is the only source to reconstruct some precise past events.

Therefore, there are different reasons ‘why’ a classic can be appointed as such by common readers or specialists, in a specific historical time and cultural space. Then, we can certainly add that classics of historiography are not works that constantly attract readers, like classics of philosophy and literature, with their respective theoretical and fictional natures. As we mentioned earlier, the quality of being a proper work of historiography is directly related to facts that actually happened, with their kaleidoscopic sources and ephemeral interpretations. Classics of historiography are not timeless but definitely ‘timeful’.

When we ask, ‘classics for whom?’, we know that there is a link between common readers and specialists. Scholars teaching history put some books in their exam programs; they may ask publishing houses to create editorial series called ‘classics’; they may persuade publishing houses to republish a work or even to translate it (by the way, translation is a big issue in this matter, often neglected in the reflection on classics in historiography). ‘Classics for whom?’ is the definitive question, which includes the ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘how’ and, above all, ‘why’ previously addressed.



## THE CANONS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

As the final result of speaking about classics, we arrive at either creating or detecting a so-called ‘canon’, as a defined list of classics. If there are classics, a canon exists, composed of these classics. However, on one hand, there is no need to explicitly list the classics and define this list as the canon. On the other hand, the canon is not necessarily describing how historiography should be written nowadays. As we have exemplified so far, the canon is actually composed of classics with different qualities and defects.

Distinguishing a classic from a canonical work is therefore an abstraction. It is totally useless to say that the second one endures, but it is not a model like a classic. In fact, a classic is not necessarily a model. Even saying that a canon may change, while the classic never loses its status, is nonsensical. History means place and time, and therefore change, and this change can affect everything.

Usually, the word ‘canon’ implies a conservative cultural attitude. Indeed, its etymology is linked to the idea of following some predefined rules. Common readers and even scholars talk quite often about canon as something that never changes or, at least, never loses those works that already belong to it. However, to properly think of a historiographical canon, we must always consider different conceivable historical moments and diverse cultural-geographical areas. When we do that, canon will appear as a plural concept. There are several canons for different cultures and even for various people within the same culture. The essential point is to agree upon and share a canon, which exists neither as a singular entity nor as a frozen unit. Each canon is constitutively dynamic because it is generated by the relationship between the ever-changing past and present. Classics create a bridge between past and present, but they are not meaningful in the same way for all people. Hence, each canon is always a mirror of the past, created by the present, where ethnic, gender, religious, and educational features may be relevant in the creation process.

‘Canon for whom?’ is the fundamental question that places the list of classics in its historical dimension of being part of a



communicative and cultural interaction. If we consider historiography itself as an act of communication with different possible purposes (mainly, political criticism, authority legitimation, and pursuit of truth), we can think of classics as the result of the relationship between their original historical contexts and the reader's new cultural perception.

Classics of historiography are not all the same. Their status depends both on the historical and cultural context in which they were produced and on the historical and cultural context in which they have been appointed as such.

The relevance of defining a book as a classic and including it in a canon is largely related to the agreement about this inclusion, existing within a specific cultural community. This agreement implies, to a certain extent, the capacity that this book had and continues to have to be read and known, and therefore to influence the same community.

With the process of globalisation, we are progressively participating in the creation of a global community with global consciousness. This fact does not mean that the other local communities are necessarily being cancelled. As already happened in history, local identities change but may survive by retaining some specific features. Therefore, it is natural that some historical works will gradually be defined as global classics and will belong to a global canon, without erasing the possibility of the existence of other canons with their own classics.

We must not forget that cultural canons can be intellectual tools to openly think of other cultures in reciprocal understanding. Each canon represents a historical development and identity, and therefore all the canons must be respected for what they can express about their own culture and, implicitly, today's other world cultures. Classics and canons are representatives of local cultural identities. They cannot and should not be erased by global classics and a global canon. To improve our understanding of other cultures, we need to preserve our own as well as other identities, represented in the same way by different canons, with their slow-changing nature. In the future, global classics may arise as expressions of an evolution of global intellectual dialogue, but other local classics will retain their value as manifestations of specific cultural identities.



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