

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS
PAPER

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Research Methods
Dr. Hurt
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A good job. Well conceived. My
major objection is your style.

If you use "I shall" and then
use an "I don't" in the same
paragraph, you have a stylistic conflict.

My advice is to delete the
contradictions. Otherwise, a good
paper.

A/375

In this paper I will compare and contrast Phillip B. Eppard's article, "The Rental Library in Twentieth Century America," which appeared in the Journal of Library History, in July, 1986, with John Bodnar's article, "Symbols and Servants: Immigrant America and the Limits of Public History," which appeared in the Journal of American History in June, 1986. In my comparison of these two articles, I will use the criteria for evaluating historical writing set forth by L. Gottschalk in his book, Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method.

First of all, I shall describe Gottschalk's criteria for reviewing historical writing. His five main concerns are listed below:

1. Does the work establish its factual details by a strict application of the historical method?
2. Does it have a philosophy or frame of reference that is more than transient and local significance and of more than private validity?
3. Is it written in a style that helps rather than impedes a reader's understanding?
4. Is it merely a piece of hackwork repeating an already well-known story, or does it present new data or new interpretations of old data?
5. No matter how limited its subject may be, does the author seem aware of the questions that all men in all times and persist in asking?¹

Turning to the articles in question, I shall first give a brief synopsis of Eppard's article, and then evaluate it according to the criteria I've just listed. Then I shall do the same for Bodnar's article, and finally contrast the two and give my reasons why I prefer one over the other.

Eppard's article describes the rise and fall of the popularity of the rental library during roughly the first half of the twenti-

eth century, and provides details about the people and companies that ran these outfits. In his description and analysis of this phenomenon, Eppard attempts to measure the increase in popularity of these libraries through the use of various secondary sources, since no factual statistical evidence exists about them. He also offers his views as to why and how the rental library in America declined in popularity, citing television, the rise of the public library, the introduction of the paperback book, and increased book prices as the main factors contributing to the decline.

As to whether or not Eppard's article is good history, I contend that it is lacking in too many areas to qualify. First of all, Eppard fails to meet Gottschalk's criteria for establishing factual details by strict application of the historical method. Practically no primary sources whatsoever were consulted, nor was there any reliable data given on which to base any of the arguments put forth. The materials used by Eppard were previously published sources such as Publisher's Weekly and The Retail Bookseller among others. Not that the use of such sources is necessarily all that bad, but Eppard makes ~~lots of~~ ^{many} speculations and offers ~~very~~ little in the way of valid, reliable documentation. Although he admitted more than once that there existed very little information on rental libraries to begin with, I think he could and should have dug deeper into the subject matter. Secondly, I don't think Eppard had any underlying philosophy or frame of reference in writing this article. He doesen't say one way or the other whether or not he thought rental libraries were a good thing, whether or not they should be introduced to the public, or what. He does what Gottschalk says one should not do, and that is, he has written a "piece of hackwork" and although the story

of the rental library in America isn't all that well known, I don't think Eppard has offered any new data, evidence or ideas. Finally, although Eppard's writing style is well organized and clear, I think that the article lacks relevance. Eppard has failed to connect or correlate the subject matter to what is going on in today's world. Although he did mention that the rental library peaked in popularity during the Great Depression and has had some resurgence during the 1982 recession, he does no more than that. For all practical purposes, I think that this article is a poor peice of historical writing.

In contrast to Eppard's work, John Bodnar's article, "Symbols and Servants: Immigrant America and the Limits of Public History," is a much stronger piece of writing. Briefly, it is a response to two other works by Barbara Blumberg and Harlan D. Unrau, contracted out by the National Park Service, which in Bodnar's view, paint an unrealistic, rosy picture of immigration to the U.S. during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bodnar's main thesis is that many immigrants did not necessarily experience the attainment of freedom and opportunity in this country, as many historians and public officials would have one believe. He argues that the topic is much more complex and provides the reader with an alternative viewpoint, one which is critical of much of the historical writing of the past and one which takes into consideration the social and political positions and perspectives of both the immigrants who came here, and those who have written our history books.

In terms of evaluating Bodnar's work, I think that it does a much better job of fulfilling Gottschalk's criteria than Eppard's does. First of all, Bodnar offers sound evidence through the use of his own research and that of other historians to support his claims. Primary as well as secondary source material was used in an effective

and cogent manner. Secondly, Bodnar asserts his frame of reference almost immediately, thereby letting the reader know what his point of view is. Thirdly, Bodnar's writing style is very clear and interesting. Although his article was longer than Eppard's, it took me less time to read. At least it seemed that way. Fourthly, Bodnar's article was both informative and provocative in that it gave an alternative point of view using both new data and a re-interpretation of old data. Finally, I think Bodnar's article is very timely and relevant both now and to those who might read it in the future. In these days of Rambo-like, gung-ho, all-American patriotic fervor, it is good to know that there are some historians who have not been taken in by the hoopla, and who take seriously the study of the American past.

In conclusion, I liked Bodnar's article much better than I liked Eppard's, not only because it did a better job of meeting Gottschalk's criteria, but because it gave me something to think about, and it stimulated my interest in immigration, American history and historical writing.

SOURCES CONSULTED

1. Gottschalk, L. Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method. 2d Edition. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1969). p. 25.

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- Bodnar, John. "Symbols and Servants: Immigrant America and the Limits of Public History," in The Journal of American History, vol. 73, no. 1, June 1986.
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