



The Historians' Paradox: The Study of History in Our Time

By Peter Charles Hoffer

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How do we know what happened in the past? We cannot go back, and no amount of historical data can enable us to understand with absolute certainty what life was like “then.” It is easy to demolish the very idea of historical knowing, but it is impossible to demolish the importance of historical knowing. In an age of cable television pundits and anonymous bloggers dueling over history, the value of owning history increases at the same time as our confidence in history as a way of knowing crumbles. Historical knowledge thus presents a paradox — the more it is required, the less reliable it has become. To reconcile this paradox — that history is impossible but necessary — Peter Charles Hoffer proposes a practical, workable philosophy of history for our times, one that is robust and realistic, and that speaks to anyone who reads, writes and teaches history.

Covering a sweeping range of philosophies (from ancient history to game theory), methodological approaches to writing history, and the advantages and disadvantages of different strategies of argument, Hoffer constructs a philosophy of history that is reasonable, free of fallacy, and supported by appropriate evidence that is itself tenable.

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Review

“Hoffer expands the theory of history beyond its usual narrow confines. A readable and instructive book on a complex topic.”

-*Choice*

“[C]onsistently amusing and edifying throughout. [Hoffer] demonstrates an extraordinary mastery of a wide variety of materials. He’s a mature historian at peak form.”

-Peter Onuf, author of *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson*

“Hoffer has a knack for using contemporary situations that will eventually be topics for historical writing.”

-Claire Potter, Wesleyan University

“A rattlingly good read....[S]trongly recommend[ed]...in any teaching context where students of history are being asked to reflect philosophically upon the nature of their subject.”

-*American Historical Review*

“*The Historians' Paradox* can be read with profit by practitioners and graduate students because it is more insightful, better balanced, and more concise than most recent books on the nature of the historical enterprise.”

-*The Journal of American History*

About the Author

Peter Charles Hoffer is Distinguished Research Professor of History at the University of Georgia. He has authored and co-authored more than twenty books, including *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, and Fraud in American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis and Goodwin* and *The Supreme Court: An Essential History*.

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