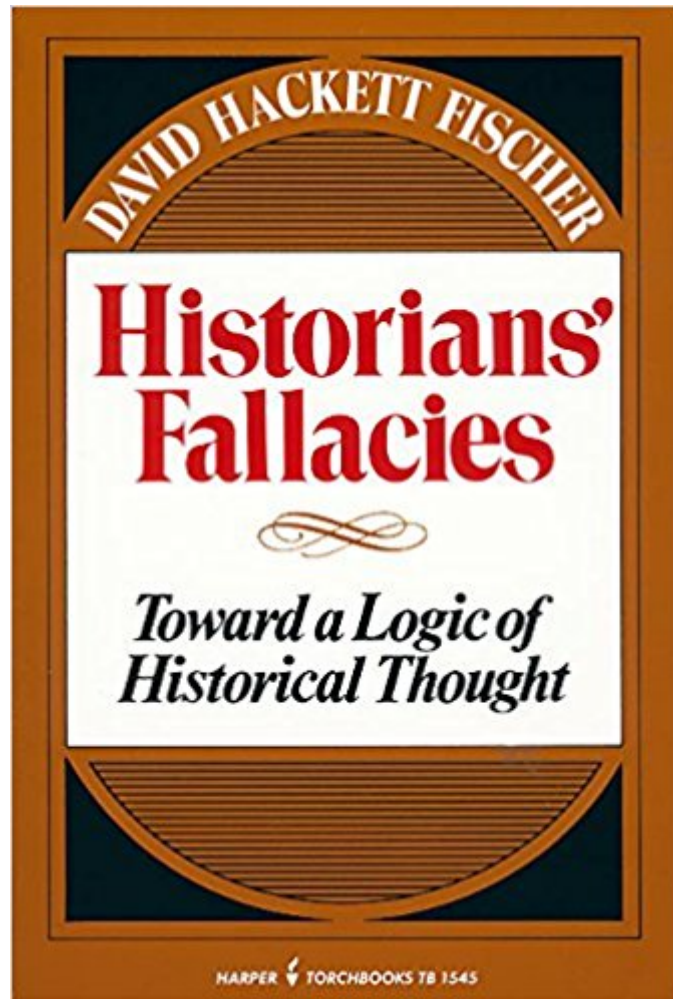


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Historians' Fallacies : Toward A Logic Of Historical Thought



Synopsis

"If one laughs when David Hackett Fischer sits down to play, one will stay to cheer. His book must be read three times: the first in anger, the second in laughter, the third in respect....The wisdom is expressed with a certain ruthlessness. Scarcely a major historian escapes unscathed. Ten thousand members of the American Historical Association will rush to the index and breathe a little easier to find their names absent.

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Customer Reviews

David Hackett Fischer's thesis is that there is a tacit and analyzable logic of historical thought and that historians can improve their historical thinking by applying this logic to their work. Historians' Fallacies is a successful attempt to make history a discipline better governed by reason. Fischer notes that history is mainly a problem-solving discipline; the historian asks pertinent questions and then develops a logical paradigm to answer them. He acknowledges that history will never be an exact science but it is his goal, by a careful examination of common historical fallacies, to develop a type of logic. Method is necessary in history, and logic makes a method more rigorous and useful. The historian must follow rules to write good, "scientific," history. Fischer reveals his ultimate goal in his conclusion. He discusses the goals of history and makes an eloquent apology for the historian. He astutely notes that social scientists have never found a justification for history, making illogical arguments to justify their interest in the past. Calling history "fun," saying that history should be

studied because it "is there," and stating "everyone needs to know facts" are three poor reasons for a defense of history. Likewise, claiming history provides a creative outlet and that it could prove useful for the future are spurious speculations, at best. Fischer's apology of history explains that as history becomes more logical, it becomes more useful to society. History can clarify the contexts of contemporary social problems and can help with forecasting, allowing us to discuss future issues before they arrive. History offers theoretical knowledge, helping social scientists understand past conditions that best brought, say, stability and peace.

...and then some The study of history carries with it a load of fascinating philosophical and epistemological questions. Beyond such generalities such as "what is the nature of truth?", historians have to decide which facts are relevant to the case they are studying, what are causes in history, and how to make a narrative, a book or a mathematical model, that will capture something significant of the world. All of these are interesting questions, but except peripherally, David Hackett Fischer doesn't discuss them. Rather, Fischer tries to track down specific fallacies that historians commit, and spell them out, apparently in order to help other scholars avoid them. "Historians' Fallacies" is basically a collection and a catalogue of errors, some well known ones, such as "the fallacy of post hoc, propter hoc" (following, therefore caused by, p. 166) or "the pathetic fallacy" (ascribing animate behavior to inanimate objects, pp. 190-193) and some as obscure as "the fallacy of indiscriminate pluralism" (enumerating multiple causes without discrimination, pp. 175-177). There are at least three commendable aspects to Fischer's study. First, Fischer is a fine writer, with remarkable turns of phrases: "Sir Lewis [Namier] was no enemy of chosenness in either facts or people. He was, indeed, a committed Zionist in both respects." (p. 69). Another is Fischer's willingness to name names. Too many critics prefer uses such as "many writers", etc, but although Fischer does occasionally shies away (such as in his discussion of ad hominem attacks pp.290-293), he's generally willing to openly criticize some leading historians and intellectuals. Nor does Fischer satisfy himself with attacking such usual suspects as Robert Fogel, Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

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