



# HISTORY? WHO CARES!

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It is curious that history in our day and age is in a state of paradox. On the one hand, we have professional history, which is specialized, and therefore highly sophisticated; and on the other, we have popular history (historical knowledge possessed by the ordinary members of society) which is shallow and superficial at best.

There are various reasons for this paradox (cultural, economic and political expectations), but the chief one is that we as a culture have chosen to side-line the importance of history, because we view the past as inherently backwards and not worth bothering about.

We have taken on this view because we like to believe that we are far better than the past. For us, history serves only to enforce a self-congratulatory view of ourselves.

This is a dangerous view to possess for several reasons.

First, it means that we perpetually sit in judgment of the past so that we might the more easily pat ourselves on the back for being so much better than all those benighted souls that lived before our time; and so when we look at history all we do is search for examples that will highlight our own superiority.

Second, we have been struck by historical amnesia, because we have lost all sense of how it is that we came to live in a society and culture that we all value and want to be a part of.

Why do we cherish discovery and invention? What things guarantee our happiness, our prosperity, and our personal ambitions?

If we cannot answer these questions, can we actually believe that these important values will continue into the future, in our society?

Such questions are not philosophical, anthropological, sociological, or even psychological – they are deeply historical. If we no longer understand these questions, we certainly cannot answer them.

Indeed, without history, we only possess atomized, personal experiences, which are tentative and incomplete at the best of times – and hardly valuable enough to build an entire society on.

Third, when we view ourselves as somehow better than the past we overtly state that we do not know how to change things. Indeed, how can we change anything if we do not understand anything?

By not comprehending the nature of our society, we are forced to abandon control to those who actually have an understanding of things.

In effect, because of ignorance our minds are easily hijacked.

If we do not know history, we have no knowledge of ourselves. If we do not know ourselves, how can we know what is good for society?

Humans are uniquely and thoroughly historical creatures. Humans cannot live without history. We need it, just as much as much we need to eat and to sleep.

We forever talk about ourselves; what has happened to us, where we come from; we concern ourselves with causes; we believe change to be inherently good; we are constantly seeking ways to make ourselves and our society better. We set standards for our politicians, for our institutions, for our charities and welfare organizations.

All of these concerns are about building the good society – and therefore, all of these concerns stem from our history.

It is only because of certain and specific historical ideas that we are who we are.

In turn, history becomes the desire to comprehend who and what we are. History gives us a deeper knowledge of what we can and cannot do. And it is by juxtaposing our abilities with our inabilities that we come to understand ourselves.

Thus, history is a record of human abilities and inabilities. It is a record of the human pursuit of self-knowledge. It is a record of humans living in community.

So, why bother with history? For one simple reason. So we can all define and then build the good society – without being told what that society should be by politicians, or those who think that they know better than we do ourselves.

We must know the strengths and weaknesses of our society, which is called a "liberal democracy." We need to constantly rediscover, individually and as a community, those historical processes which have led us to create the society we enjoy and cherish.

Why? Because it is only through such a rediscovery that we come to understand how we must maintain and constantly revivify our society so that it may continue to guarantee to us and to others both freedom and happiness.

This is also why we cannot live without history – for how can we imagine how we shall live if we have no comprehension, or knowledge, of our own liberty and our own happiness?

History depends on two things in order to be known: material culture and intellectual culture. The former consists of all objects created by human beings, from a brick to a fortress, from a pot to a marble statue.

Intellectual culture, on the other hand, is the residue of ideas that people living in a community leave behind; and ideas can only properly be left behind in written form.

In the absence of writing, history can only remain guess-work, because getting inside the head of an ancient man or a woman is impossible by way of a brick or a pot or a building.

Things are functional; they are created to facilitate daily life. Ideas are structural; they organize and give meaning to our lives.

History becomes possible only when we have both material remains and intellectual residue, because in order to live happy and meaningful lives, people need both material things and ideas.

Therefore, history is not merely a record of all the things made by people – it is also a record of all the ideas of people who lived before us, because ideas contain not only a worldview, but also morality and philosophy. Humanity disappears if it has no morality or philosophy to live by.

And as a result, history is the best attempt at retelling what happened in the past. But because it is only a “best attempt” – and never a complete version – history needs to be constantly studied and understood in the light of new discoveries both of objects and ideas.

Since writing is so very recent, knowing the history of preliterate ancient societies is very problematic. The best we can do is look at the material remains they have left behind and construct some kind of narrative that will explain what went on.

In other words, we have to add our own ideas on to the objects that are left behind. A case in point is the [Indus Valley](#) civilization.

Here we have an entire city, and a rather sophisticated one at that, and we have lots of pots and tools and jewelry – all those things that these people needed for their ordinary lives. There is even evidence of writing, which is known as the Indus Valley script – but we cannot read it.

And because we cannot read it, we can never know what kind of people these ancient Indians were, which also means that we cannot ever understand the nature, importance, or even influence of this civilization by the Indus River.

It would be like trying to explain the entire game of hockey sometime in the distant future when all that remains is a puck.

Without intellectual culture, objects are always surrounded by an impenetrable mystery.

For this reason, history is divided into two areas. There is history proper, which is the known past as reconstructed from both material and intellectual cultures.

And then there is prehistory, the preliterate past of humanity, from which only objects survive. It is only by studying these objects that we are able to construct some kind of account of what might have happened. And the best thing that these objects tell us is that human beings were using and creating technology.

This is the reason for the convenient terms we use when talking about the preliterate past, or prehistory. Thus, first, there was the Stone Age, which is divided into early, middle, and new, that is Paleolithic, Mesolithic (or Epipaleolithic) and Neolithic. In the Paleolithic period humans began to flake stones into points or edges to make hunting or cutting tools. This era covers a vast swath of time, from 2.5 millions years ago (back to the time of the first hominids) down to about 12,000 B.C.

Next comes the Mesolithic, or Epipaleolithic, period (from about 12,000 B.C. to about 9,000 to 6,000 B.C.) when humans learned to grind stone into tools; and also we have the first evidence of farming.

Lastly, there is the Neolithic age (from about 9500 B.C. to 3000 B.C.), during which humans became engaged in full-blown farming and domestication of animals.

Still dependent on technology, historians have constructed a consequent set of chronologies, which take into account mankind's discovery of metallurgy, namely, copper, bronze, and iron. Thus, the Bronze Age follows the Neolithic era, and this is dated to around 3300 B.C. to about 1200 B.C.

Thereafter, we have the Iron Age, when humans discovered and used iron; it lasted from about 1200 B.C. to about 800 B.C. in most of Eurasia.

It is in-between the Bronze and Iron Ages that intellectual culture starts to become evident, which allows us to know and understand the past in a clearer and more cohesive or historical manner.

The term "civilization" thus is very specific and precise. It means "life in a city." This is a very important definition, because for many long millennia humans did not live in cities. They were content to be hunters-and-gatherers, or lived a nomadic life.

City life means a stronger and more clearly defined sense of community, by which we mean that people live differently in cities than they do as nomads or as hunters-and-gatherers.

City life requires specialized labor, a food supply secured by agriculture, animal husbandry and trade, maintenance of infrastructure, organized religion (the earliest beginnings of what we call literature and the arts), laws, a system of defense, and politics.

In effect, civilization needs writing in order to stay organized; records have to be kept in order to categorize the economy; gods have to be made happy in temples on a regular basis, which leads to the creation of a calendar; kings need to make laws to keep the city running properly and smoothly, so that

daily life is properly systematized.

Therefore, a civilization cannot help but produce "history," which is the record of human activity and human thought.

If we continue being amnesiacs when it comes to the past, if we continue to view ourselves as far superior than people who lived a hundred or more years ago, we will always fall victim to oppression, because we will have no capacity for understanding how to sustain the good society.

Without history, we are easily led by those who control power structures, such as politicians or the captains of industry. How? Because without history, we have no ideas upon which to formulate good questions.

And if we have not developed the ability to ask good questions, we can only mindlessly accept what is handed to us.

Without questions, we become mindless – and it is mindlessness that creates and then strengthens despotism of the worst kind.

To paraphrase the words of Jacques Maritain – how shall we be good when we are standing on nothing?

***The photo shows, "Ruins of a Doric Temple," by Hubert Robert, painted in 1783.***

