Why History? Thinking About the Uses of the Past

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THREE INTELLECTUAL ISSUES ARE VITAL to the historian’s vocation: the objectivity question and problems of historical truth; the audience question, or how specialized scholarship reaches non-specialist audiences; and the utility question, or the reasons for studying history. Although the first two will be touched upon, this essay focuses on the “why-history” question. It is addressed to secondary school and college teachers. Most of its examples are drawn from U.S. history, with which I am most familiar.

The value of historical study must be an enduring question, but it may have become more pressing in the last twenty-five years. The disarray of liberalism and Marxism and the neo-conservative challenge make the political and moral uses of historical study a matter of national controversy. European literary and philosophical currents — deconstruction and other post-modern theories — erode our faith in finding secure truths. Finally, the latest educational crisis, which first made a big splash with A Nation at Risk (1983), reflects fundamental questions about how we motivate students to learn and how we counteract the far more immediate uses and attractions of peer groups, pop music and television.

Although we may teach history with confidence, it is my experience that we rarely talk with colleagues and students about its rationales. We assert that history “teaches us lessons” without which “people would have learned nothing from their mistakes and triumphs,” and we are sure that
our discipline contributes to skill-development, civic awareness, and cultural improvement. But for many of us these are unexamined slogans. Should we be surprised that many of our students don’t respond? To stimulate reflection among history teachers and as an aid to including a discussion of “why-history” in our courses, this paper evaluates common rationales for historical study.

Preliminaries: Is There Really a Why Question?

Except briefly here and later in another context, I will not deal with the other two vital issues: the question of historical truth and the historian’s objectivity; and the matter of reaching wide audiences, which might be called the presentation problem. As to the first, if historical “truth” and its interpretation were clear to all, we could draw lessons from the past and our why-history problem might be solved. On the other hand, if historical work were wholly subjective, piecemeal, and biased, it could provide raw material for appealing myths and moral tales, but that wouldn’t be the kind of history most of us want. A thoroughly relativist history would bleed into fiction and propaganda and would be judged not on its fit with the evidence, but “its persuasiveness, its political utility, and its political sincerity.” Most of us aren’t satisfied with that; we can’t help believing there are “facts” out there against which we have to measure our constructions. Few of us can believe sufficiently in either the objectivist or the relativist extreme to solve the why-history problem.

Questions of audience and presentation are too complex and contentious to be explored in this paper, but the following points must be made. Historians should do a better job appealing to broad audiences through film and video productions, dramatizations, and discussion panels. Is it utopian to ask for more emphasis on presentation (including teaching) in our graduate programs? Also, although the narrative can’t be used in all our presentations, the scholarly tilt away from the story part of history may starve the soul of those almost magical qualities narrative provides and that cannot be set down in an abstract way but whose “lessons” and feel are as useful as experience itself.

Although we need more synthetic works in U.S. history and its subfields, this necessity should not be confused with the political agenda of those who, bemoaning the loss of the grand patriotic synthesis and the impact of ethnic history, women’s studies, and radical perspectives, demand a restoration of U.S. history as a simple story of the march of liberty. It’s too late for that. Neither the historical profession nor many of its audiences can be dragged backward by force of assertion. And they should not be: debates about the past are integral to values we want to impart to audiences.
To the degree that presentation improves, most of the utility arguments discussed below become less pressing; the style of our work may win larger audiences whether or not we can convince them of the utilities of history with logic. But improved delivery alone cannot settle the problem. Much that we want to teach is too complex for stories or dramas.

If improved presentation is insufficient and either pole of the truth-relativism continuum impossible, we must confront the why-history problem head on. Our students will continue to ask, often by their indifference, what is so good about history. Have we done a satisfactory job answering them? Do we show by example and argument the value of historical study to their understanding of the world? Can we argue, as Herbert Butterfield asked, "that historians are wiser than the rest of their contemporaries on political matters?"10

The following evaluation of rationales for historical study may help others reflect on the uses of history and provide resources for classroom debates. I do not believe that argumentation alone will win students, but I do believe that when they question the value of history, we ought to supply reasonable answers. Unless we think people are impervious to reason, we must have faith that compelling arguments for historical study have some small effect on the attitude our students carry with them through life.

Why History?

1. History is fun. What provides "more agreeable entertainment to the mind than to be transported into the remotest ages?" asked David Hume. Historians have been accused of a "defensive flight from emotion" into the externals of past behavior, but it seems puritanical to deny the delights of historical time-travel. Often on first glance the past seems a better time and that provides a wedge for discussion. Some of us like the detective work of research; others find it exciting to struggle with the controversies over historical interpretations. All the simple pleasures of history cannot be listed here.11

Teachers at all levels have been successful with Renaissance faires, debates, and dramatizations. How many use these techniques I do not know; perhaps at the college level we have neglected them as out of keeping with the stern Germanic origins of our profession, or as too time-consuming. Certainly not all our work can be aimed at the average reader, but more should find its way to general audiences through joyful actions.12

Approaches of this kind carry risks. Medieval history, for example, becomes stirring tales of handsome knights and beautiful ladies; no poverty, disease, or domination. The more dramatic the story, the more likely it focuses on colorful individuals who seem to act outside of history.
Although there is a wide audience for non-academic productions (the American Bicentennial, historical novels), we cannot assume that an audience waits for history as many of us practice it, with all its complexity, critical ideological analysis, and attention to people at the bottom. While popular interest by itself may prove only that people want escape, however, it also provides an opening for our kind of history — one that we haven't tapped. To the degree that people want history and even feel a need for historical narratives that structure life's larger meanings, the why-history question is not simply a matter of argumentation but, as mentioned above, attention to audiences and modes of presentation.

2. **History is the great tradition and a storehouse of great ideas.** This justification locates history firmly in the humanities. It includes traditionalist and modernist variations. The former reaches back at least to the study of classical texts in the Renaissance. Around 1900 it bolstered American professors opposed to academic specialization. Western Civilization courses are still taught this way; directors of the National Endowment for the Humanities emphasize it of late; and it informs much that we do in all our courses. Here students are put in touch with the great ideas of (usually) Western Civilization because, it is argued, this is their heritage and because the great western thinkers wrestled with enduring issues in ways that have universal and lasting relevance.¹³

Not surprisingly, the justification and teaching of history in this way tends toward conservatism; it may be hostile to the present and assumes without debate that the Greeks did it better. Charles Eliot Norton and Irving Babbitt at Harvard decades ago and Allan Bloom, Lynne Cheney, and William Bennett today exemplify this combination. The traditionalists' shortcomings have changed little since Babbitt. Like Cheney in our time, Babbitt assumed that discovering truth was easy and that some truths — the Greek idea of moderation and the dualism in us between higher and lower faculties — are transhistorical. Like Cheney, Babbitt shunned argumentation and evidence. He claimed that observing a variety of cases over time helped distinguish the ephemeral from the essential, but I don't think he or historian-humanists in our time have approached this in a systematic way. That Babbitt always found the same few essentials (even in non-western traditions like Buddhism) and that latter-day disciples like Cheney do little beyond asserting their faith in “abiding truths” suggests that great-ideas conservativism is pushing a line rather than evaluating Western tradition. It is not self-evident, as it appeared to Matthew Arnold and Babbitt and now Cheney, just what is “the best that has been thought.” Nor, I hope, are most historians averse to comprehending the personal, social, political, and ideological determinants of ideas. By profession we link ideas to historical contexts and ramifications. We want to know what
the big ideas meant at different points in time. As we think about Greek
democracy and moderation, we can’t help recalling that the Greeks had
slavery.\textsuperscript{14}

Were Babbitt and Cheney encouraging dialogue with the past, I would
applaud them. They go further, however, and argue by assertion and
idealist faith for consensus on their canon of truths and beauties. But surely
beyond a handful of sometimes tautological statements — justice is good,
people have rights and responsibilities, people are social animals, careful
thinking is better than thoughtlessness — there is little agreement. Does
justice require positive, affirmative action to achieve sexual and racial
equality? What is the role of the emotional and idiosyncratic in ratiocination?
Should we glorify ideas that were linked to racist, sexist and imperialist
practices? If traditionalists excuse these sins as understandable for their
time, that is, by placing them in their historical and social context, why not
apply historical methods to the whole of the great tradition so that all
“truths” are torn apart by the scalpel of critical history. Traditionalists
advocate a highly selective version of great ideas. They are vexed about the
relativism of historical and critical methods; they wish the twentieth
century had not happened to epistemology; they are deeply ahistorical.
Their philosophical idealism allows them to wrench out of history beliefs
that fit their preconceived value systems and their fundamentally Eurocentric
view of the world.

But history, “the great tradition and storehouse of great ideas,” has
better, modernist uses. The treasury of great ideas must continue widening
its embrace to new groups and perspectives. These may then be used to
initiate students into debates about the historical context as well as the
lasting value of these ideas. This process historicizes the canon of great
ideas, great literature, and great events. The result is a contextualism that
threatens the conservative’s goal of restoring authority; but what has been
opened up by the political and intellectual turmoil of our times should not
be wiped away by assertion. Gerald Graff urges English professors to make
the debate about the literary canon part of course work. Historians should
do the same for the “canons” of all national histories and the Western
tradition, not to erase all grand ideas, but to understand what they meant to
different groups in different periods. The implications of the statement, “all
men are created equal,” may have been self-evident to Jefferson but they
cannot be to us.\textsuperscript{15}

Approaching history in this way has many benefits. As with the
traditionalist approach, students learn critical skills and gain cultural
literacy. In my experience returning adults feel power from being conver-
sant with the big ideas; wanting not to seem ignorant can be a powerful
motivator. On a more practical level, teachers can and do utilize major
ideas, figures, and events for actions that give pleasure and develop skills. And above all, by understanding traditions as historical creations rather than ready-mades, we show that the past as we know it is many stories constructed by many people, that even children may participate in their creation, and that it is often the pasts and values of their own people whose inclusion is being fought over. 16

Too much debate about conflicting interpretations, however, seems to erode faith in history, which can appear as waves of ever changing "opinions." Obviously, care must be taken with youngsters, but in my experience, confusion does not follow from debating conflicting historical interpretations with college students. The feeling of discovery and participation in the endeavor of interpretation overcomes the bogey of relativism. In any case, can we any longer serve up a predigested story or a timeless body of great truths? Intellectually, that sends the wrong message: that the truth is closed, simple, even transhistorical. Pedagogically, it is a wrong lesson to give the impression that professors have the truth and students must swallow it. It is precisely the unsettled nature of national histories and the complex meanings of traditions that make the modernist struggle over history and tradition so valuable.

3. The past is a consoling tale of human folly; the past is a bulwark against contemporary confusion and overload. These are opposite slants on the past and support apathy in the present. The first looks not at history's great ideas and figures but its great evils: poverty, racism, murder, wars and more wars. Nothing, it seems, ever changes; at best people are foolish, at worst vicious. This reading of history, that nothing really ever changes, is paralyzing. It leads to a conclusion that reflects excessive and selective deference to the past, a surrender of power to inherited groups and forces that dominate the present, and to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The second variation echoes the tradition of great ideas. The past and its heroes are set against a present of materialism or industrialization or nuclear holocaust. A century ago, Matthew Arnold found that "commerce with the ancients" instilled composure against the "confusion of the present times." This position has long provided an occupational ideology for humanities teachers. Like the great-ideas tradition, it risks being idealist and ahistorical. It may be elitist; truth is vintage stuff that we, the cultured, impose on the great unwashed. It may seem to encourage disdain for vital elements in current cultures and student interests.

Fortunately, the line between highbrow and lowbrow cultures is fading. Academic hostility to popular cultures seems less common than a half century ago; witness the spread of history courses that use films and popular fiction. But cultural elitism and the assumption that past ideas are always better remain tempting illusions.
Except for an occasional vacation, the past should not be used to avoid the demands of citizenship. Arnold saw too much mindless action in his day, but perhaps history should excite us to action, should not only inform but inflame. Regardless of our political values, the study of history should shake us up. There are dozens of teaching tools that do precisely that. An example for lower-division students is Chapter One of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, “Columbus and the Indians.” Zinn’s portrayal of Columbus as a power-hungry murderer of Indians shocks many students for whom the explorer has always been a hero. Videos that work well with junior high students include *America and Lewis Hine* (1984) — especially its emphasis on child labor — and *Half Slave, Half Free* (originally *Solomon Northrup’s Odyssey*) (1984), about a free African-American taken into slavery.\(^{17}\)

4. *History is the story of noble deeds, noble persons, moral examples.* This has affinities with other points that history is fun, a storehouse of great ideas, a bulwark against the present. It is more often a form of civic training, a nationalist legitimizer, and a source of possibilities. Academic scholars have pretty much left the genteel version of extolling noble persons and deeds and offering moral examples to others, although among recent discussion of the role of history in elementary school reform this plays a part and some biographies fit this mode. The pitfalls of this approach are those of “the great man” theory; it attributes excessive power to individuals and underemphasizes contexts. Individuals do make a difference but within collectivities and institutions; those who stamped their times — Franklin Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mikhail Gorbachev, and Ronald Reagan — would have been impossible without the social and political forces to which they responded.\(^{18}\)

On the other hand, academic historians have underplayed the drama of human exploits even as others exaggerate it. A middle way for me is suggested by Gabriel Kolko’s study of the Vietnamese revolution, *Anatomy of a War*. This book is animated by the noble purpose of showing the interaction of historical forces and individual will-power without glorifying a few “great men” (but is so turgidly written that it cannot be assigned in most college classes). Other teachers might focus on the interplay of individuals, social change, and institutions in the rise of the civil rights movement; or the blend of historical forces and willful capitalists in the late 1800s.\(^{19}\) The case is less important than the theme: extraordinary deeds can be accomplished even by apparently ordinary people. New heroes are possible, but they must be comprehended within the possibilities of their time. When we teach that history is the blend of shaping contexts and individual effort, we touch something fundamental about life and temper the common view that if only another great X, Y or Z came along, all would be well.
5. History serves as a nationalist legitimizer. Philosophical rationales aside, bolstering established authority is the reason that political bodies subsidize history in the schools; and it is in this role that historians have volunteered to bring glory to governments, national goals, races, sexes, and classes. In the United States at the turn of the century, eminent historians used racist history to advance sectional reconciliation. Progressive historian James Harvey Robinson argued that social history would teach the humble to value their lowly role. Prominent historians gladly signed on for service in World War I, casting aside all sense of balance to denounce “the Hun.” Much history in the 1950s masked Cold War partisanship with a facade of facts. Some current curricular reforms, despite a nod toward critical thinking, aim largely to restore respect and obedience. In short, history turns easily into nationalist propaganda.²⁰

Not all legitimization is conservative in this way. The other side of the process may be delegitimizing simplistic patriotic history (discussed below) or legitimizing minorities and dissidents. Labor historians have shown how nineteenth-century workers used patriotic ideas to express their attacks on wealth and monopoly. Roots popularized the thrust of recent African-American studies by recapturing a past of strength and pride. Despite the dangers of romanticizing the “oppressed,” students certainly have a right to have their past included in official versions. Moreover, the study of formerly excluded groups can hook student interest and be a wedge into the general debate about what academic history is, whose purposes it serves, and how it is constructed.²¹

In general, of course, public authorities subsidize history in the schools to promote social stability and unity, patriotism, and loyalty to the reigning political economy. What conservative Duke historian W. T. Laprade wrote in the 1930s may now seem crude but it prefigures current attempts to restore laudatory national histories and de-emphasize history from the bottom up: “Washington and Lincoln of the history books and the flag on the pole in the school yard are part of the ritual by which the country regiments its growing citizens and accustoms them to obedience.” Gertrude Himmelfarb’s sermons for traditional political history make valid points about the failings of social history, but her main goal is to resuscitate national authority; she assumes what must be investigated, that political leaders are rational and that they aim for the common good.²² Nationalist legitimization finds favor with bewildered parents, politicians, and teachers who equate good citizenship with deference; but it does not mix well with open enquiry and the idea that in a democracy students should learn to judge for themselves. For me, it is one of the least attractive rationales for historical study; for others, it may well be the most attractive.
6. **Bad history surrounds us; historical thinking of some kind is instinctive. We need to correct the bad and educate intuition.** We think historically in a common-sense way about ourselves and daily events. Our thoughts and conversations find meaning and structure in the past. We accept or create narratives that tell stories in time. Strictly speaking, all that we know is past, for the present is but a fleeting instant. Policy-makers inevitably use and misuse the past. All societies devote resources and personnel to remembering some kind of past. If humanity is a thinking species, a chronological framework for understanding reality seems as natural as other methods, especially in Western societies which value positive secular change — what was once called progress. In these ways, thinking historically seems “natural” and historical scholarship is an extension, intensification, and a bringing to consciousness of what we all do, if often badly.\(^\text{23}\)

But it is one thing to say that daily life, Western values, and decision-making are saturated with memory, that all societies support specialized keepers of the collective past, and that for some of us historical thinking is as “natural” as breathing. It is another to say that for most people analytical history or the study of the distant past is instinctive. For some the very pace of technological and political change renders serious study of the past irrelevant.\(^\text{24}\) Others escape in John Jakes’ novels and Disney’s Main Street. Some yearn for an authentic sense of roots, which may find fulfillment in narrowly conceived family histories. Critics of the historical profession and especially of social history imply that there is a large audience waiting for scholarly historical productions, but that is not self-evident.\(^\text{25}\)

As abstract argument, the historian’s case is strong. Start with the idea that history is one of the humanities. To the degree that a more informed and richer consciousness makes one more human and that historical knowledge provides information and depth, historical thinking humanizes. Or, to take another tack, it can be argued that people are always engaged in making their worlds meaningful — in organizing their realities into moral and narrative patterns. Narrative historians provide stories that may be bigger and richer but which are similar in that they structure experience rather than put forward abstractions and analysis. If we are a story-telling species, then history is one of several ways we organize our world, as natural a way as the soap operas. Merely stating this utility doesn’t mean we will win out over the soaps; but it does open up new perspectives for classroom work and writing.\(^\text{26}\)

Despite these arguments, it is obvious that most people get along just fine without serious history, just as they do well, thank you, ignorant of Plato. Some of us are quite certain that their lives are less rich, but it is hard to prove these people are less human or happy. Logically, it is quite a jump
from the point that the past resides in the daily thoughts and actions of Ms. X and Mr. Everyman to the conclusion that each "needs" the works of academic historians. It may be natural to carry around a bundle of facts and myths that is for each of us the past; it is not "natural" to add to that material the results of critical research and analysis. Nevertheless, in the classroom, what is common may provide an opening for historical study. Duffy and others suggest an experiment to show students how totally disabling amnesia would be and from this they argue the case for history. But this gambit must proceed to others, for while students might agree that personal loss of memory is a bad thing, many may not care about that collective memory in books. One must go a step farther to ask students if they want to forget the Holocaust, or American slavery, or the Mexican-American War, or the World War II internment of the Japanese, or whatever historical event ties into their personal histories. If the answer is negative, they must have some sense of the value of remembering and we can begin from there. If they don’t care about any past at all, we have to work hard to make active those pasts that run through their heads.27

7. Knowledge of the past is essential to understanding and judging current events and participating in current debates. As a practical matter, understanding the present is impossible without history, and this for several reasons. First, it is difficult to grasp and appreciate the present except as part of an ongoing process. How can we judge the significance of the breakup of the Soviet Empire without some knowledge of how long it lasted and how absolute and eternal it once seemed? Second, governments, public agencies, and private institutions guard their secret lives. We may gain a sense of what might really be going on, however, by analogy to the past for which we have some part of the inner history of these bodies. We now have more inside information on the decision to use nuclear weapons in 1945 or U.S. policy during the war in Vietnam than we have for the U.S.-Iraqi war of 1990-1991. Knowledge of past events might make people sceptical about what they are being told in the present. Third, we know some consequences of past events and that is an advantage over the present. Although history never repeats itself, we get a feel for how things might develop and "an intuitive understanding of how things do not happen." There may even be "lessons" from a series of similar events; most big wars, for example, seem to confirm the law of unintended consequences. Check out the fate of the last Kaiser, the last Tsar, Adolph Hitler, and Lyndon Johnson.28 Finally, to discuss present-day issues, that is, to take seriously one’s citizenship, one needs historical "facts." Recent debate over conflict in the Mideast was in part a debate over the history of that region and the history of appeasement in our century. It was also a striking example of how political and military leaders learned from the history of Vietnam.
Thus, historical information, a sense for broad parallels between past and present, and awareness that the recent past endures in groups contending over current policy all seem essential.  

Historical study does not guarantee sound conclusions, however, for conclusions involve ethical and political preferences as well as data. We might hope with Ernest May that policy-makers learn enough to avoid simplistic lessons. Historians can help erase bad history and wean people from spurious appeals to its lessons—in Namier’s words, keep them “from expecting automatic repetition.” Doing so will complicate people’s view of change, showing how good and evil are often mixed, that advances contain the seeds of future reverses, that what looks like a good principle today (the secession of Soviet States) did not look so good a century ago (Southern secession). Admittedly, it is unlikely that better history would have qualified Dean Rusk’s use of the Munich analogy for American intervention in Vietnam or have convinced Lyndon Johnson to keep the troops at home, but if the study of history does not assure “correct” policies, in a democratic society it is the right and duty of every individual to make informed judgments about policy, however those turn out. History offers facts, knowledge and perspectives that help inform our judgments. Furthermore, if it is true that experience brings wisdom, then historical study widens one’s fund of experience and enriches that intuitive sense of what is good and what is possible. This is a kind of wisdom whose “lessons” are essential even if often imprecise and ineffable.  

Historical facts and perspectives allow people to participate in the great debates of their time. They inculcate cultural literacy. Many of the great debates of our time directly involve the meaning of the past—the movements of the 1960s, Vietnam and third world interventions, the Holocaust, the New Deal and Great Society social programs, Cold War Communism and anti-Communism, Westward expansion, and reparations for Japanese internees. Older students especially do not want to feel stupid when these issues are being discussed.  

It is not easy to understand why the values in this category aren’t obvious. Perhaps again we can demonstrate to students by negative example what life is like in a totalitarian society that makes history a branch of state ideology. Perhaps they should read Orwells’ 1984 or imagine the present had Martin Luther King or Madonna never lived.  

Serious history might win wider audiences if the U.S. had more authentic political cultures, for example, a labor movement with a deep sense of its past, or a conservatism that acknowledged the disruptive effects of capitalism. Would our jobs be easier if more Americans felt they could make a political difference and if the level of political discourse were higher? If the answer is affirmative, we can escape some of the blame for
our problems, but to leave it at that condemns us to irrelevance. We have
the duty to use historical studies to nurture the more sophisticated political
culture which will in turn feed interest in history. If we succeed in
convincing others of the necessity of understanding history for citizenship,
we make the case especially for recent history. We can show high school
students that they need to know about Vietnam because similar crises may
shake their lives. We can convince adults that it is important to study the
New Deal whose legacy is still being fought over. Can we persuade anyone
that knowledge of the Magna Carta is essential to civic action? Although
I am not convinced that we can, I suppose some of the medievalists will
disagree.  

8. History has negative, cathartic, and delegitimizing values. History is
a useful negative force, showing us what was not true or was more complex
than we thought. It protects against nostalgia and insulates us from
manipulation by politicians, advertisers, and news media. To the degree
that it frees us from a past whose hold we are unconscious of, it is like
psychoanalysis, a liberating force. Exxamples of the historical
delegitimization of tradition abound, especially on the left. Beard’s famous
economic analysis aimed to destroy Constitution-worship and Supreme
Court roadblocks to reform. New Left historians of the 1960s believed that
facts were revolutionary; the truth would unmask ruling-class ideology
and document examples of popular resistance. In the 1980s, some feminist
historians began to deconstruct gender concepts that structured historical
reality. In a conservative vein, Paul Gagnon claimed that recent U.S.
history showed that since reform is difficult and change complex, we must
learn to respect our leaders. Thus, he strove to achieve delegitimized of
the 1960s and relegitimization of governmental authority.

Delegitimization can degenerate into cynical muckraking, as the veneer
is peeled away to reveal greed, hypocrisy, and violence. But it supplies a
healthy dose of skepticism and humility. A surprising example — one that
all historians should read — is Peter Novick’s That Noble Dream: The
“Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession. Other
stories of our past are possible, but it is hard to deny that Novick’s data
challenge objectivist faith and professional arrogance. Paradoxically, a
book that ends in dismay about what subjectivist epistemologies have done
to historical truth proves at least to this reader the power of basic historical
research to achieve credible truths.

The self-destructive possibilities of history’s negative value are spelled
out by David Donald: “my most useful function would be to disen thrall
[students] from the spell of history, to help them see the irrelevance of the
past,” and to liberate them to face the new and threatening problems of the
present. Most of us won’t be satisfied erasing bad history and it is clear
that some historians strive to restore legitimacy to old heroes after the attacks of radical historians. Yet it seems undeniable that historical debunking appeals to students, and is a valuable lesson against manipulation by media and politicians. Again Zinn’s chapter on Columbus and the Indians is a good text for introductory courses. 37

9. History shows what is and is not possible; historical study empowers. History shows the best and worst in human nature. It shows that things were not and need not always be as they are, that people’s behavior varies in different circumstances. On the other hand, it “impresses on us those tendencies in human beings which have not changed” and are unlikely to change soon. 38 Students should know that communism, capitalism, and western-style democracy are not eternal and that all historical periods sow the seeds for different futures. From the 1920s came the depression and New Deal of the 1930s, from the radical 1960s the counterrevolution of later decades. Whether we believe in cycle theories is less important than to demonstrate that historical change is ever-present, that students are part of the process, and that they can work consciously to affect historical change. Perhaps if historical study were linked to student involvement in community action and politics, it would seem a natural resource for parallels — for information, inspiration, and cautions. More civic action would equal more interest in history; more interest in history would equal more civic action. 39

For some of us it is precisely the sense of possibility that makes historical study liberating rather than conservative. Left historians have tried to counteract apathy and disillusionment with historical examples of resistance to exploitation and of pressure for reform. Students can be impressed with how youngsters their own age propelled the civil rights and anti-war movements in the 1960s. Who cares about a bunch of protesting college kids? In 1960, the whole world did. That lesson bolsters empowerment and excites student interest. 40

This upbeat approach has drawbacks. Many do not find it politically or intellectually congenial to emphasize the victories of workers, women, and minorities because that seems simplistic or nurtures resistance to authority. And even the optimists must teach, in Howard Zinn’s phrase, how good movements go bad; in the end, radicals in the 60s blew it. And does not history show how the heavy hand of the past warps reform? For this reason, from the history of the 1960s and its aftermath, Gagnon concludes that the masses should be patient, learn to sacrifice and defer to central government. Donald Dozer claims that historians “cannot be revolutionists,” for revolutionists drive society beyond the constraints of history itself.

The sweep of modern history — two world wars of horrible destruction, the Nazi Holocaust, the tragedy of third-world poverty and the threat of environ-
mental catastrophe — show mountains of ignorance and wickedness. It's enough to give an optimist pause. But historical study shows both positive and negative possibilities. It is as useful as psychology because it suggests how diverse historical contexts encourage varied behaviors; human nature is plastic. It breeds relativism toward the present and toward melodramatic theories that assert that human nature is overwhelmingly villainous or glorious. History does not argue against revolution but it should give revolutionists a sense of patience and respect for democracy.

10. *History is citizenship-training.* Contained in previous points (#7, for example), this one deserves separate consideration. History, it is said, supplies valuable political knowledge and skills; it increases toleration for a variety of viewpoints and backgrounds. But particularly in lower schools this citizenship-training may slide into an uncritical account of American institutions that amounts to obedience-training. Furthermore, the focus on civic skills may end up with no history at all. The arch-utilitarian interested in training for citizenship demands that we study the present, since that, after all, is what we are interested in. In 1932, pragmatist professor of education David Snedden put the point sharply: history was not functional for citizenship in a rapidly changing world; more valuable were “two or three of last year’s novels” and the Pulitzer Prize comedy, *Of Thee I Sing.* Put another way, if you want to understand the present, why not read the daily papers?

Snedden’s plea for historical amnesia willfully ignores a great deal of material that we have for comprehending the world. Snedden surrenders to the present and makes us unconscious pawns of the past that lives in mass culture. Historians have long criticized the inaccurate or simplistic pasts we pick up as we go through life, but in the modern era, the history that permeates our culture may be more confusing than ever. Movies, advertisements aimed at baby-boomers, post-modern theories, post-modern architecture, T.V. mini-series, and Disney parks mix and match artifacts and styles from various periods in a way that grinds out the integrity of historical eras and events to produce mush for the nostalgia biz. Rational analysis pales beside the dazzling array of images. Fake pasts are everywhere and so at the very least critical history must sort out the myths from some kind of reasonably accurate story. If earlier justifications for its role in judging the present and delegitimizing mythic history are valid, historical study is essential to citizenship training, especially if by that we mean not reactive flag-waving but thoughtful action in defense of the best values of democracy and social justice.

11. *Studying history imparts skills, breadth, and tolerance.* Common justifications for history in the schools include the arguments that it teaches critical thinking, learning how to judge evidence, thinking about causality, distinguishing the trivial from the significant, cultural literacy, and, as an
antidote to parochialism, contact with other cultures and times. These are solid benefits; some have been discussed earlier. But this line of reasoning risks omitting historical process, and if it does, history functions largely as did the Greek and Latin classics in the nineteenth century — the raw material for mental discipline. If critical thinking is needed, why not a logic course or exercises in analyzing the daily press? If ethnic sensitivity is required, why not look at contemporary world cultures? One might argue that history provides skills and broadening as effectively as other subjects, but if the skills argument is to justify a special place for our discipline, we must show that historical skills as such are essential. We must show, for example, that the unexamined past we carry around with us needs to be examined, that understanding change offers a way to comprehend the present and its possibilities, and that history shows the complexity of change and frequency of unintended consequences.\footnote{45}

12. History supplies a sense of place and identity. A century ago, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that history enables us “to behold our own time and place as a part of the stupendous progress of the ages” from primitive times to the glorious present. We may be too jaded for the Victorian optimism that animated Turner’s sentiment, but perhaps young people really want to locate themselves in the grand sweep of history. They are often involved in a confusing struggle to fashion their identities. How does this relate to history? For adults, historical memory confers a kind of immortality and respect on those who have gone before and offers a promise that if not by name at least as members of larger groups they will not be forgotten. Does this matter to young people? It is clear to G. R. Elton that they need the past to counteract the self-absorption of youth and to learn that actions have consequences, but students may be forgiven for thinking it is not self-evident that history is better socialization than a job or a place on the football team. Can we make compelling the connection between World history and self-definition? Active learning methods combined with serious study of African-American history, Vietnamese history, women’s history, and so many other subfields may legitimate adolescents’ feelings, help them identify with historical figures and movements, and excite them about the world beyond themselves. To the extent that this works in practice, it demonstrates that people can find identities and vicarious roles in our subject. In this way historical study meets fundamental human needs.\footnote{46}

Conclusion: History and the Reflective Life

Some rationales for historical study hold up well, even if they are not automatically compelling to general audiences. We have to proselytize for our subject, but we can do it with confidence. Fundamentally the uses of
history are linked to the value of all thought. Concede that reflection and
analysis enrich political and moral behavior, and it follows that historical
study is essential, if only to the degree that we all in our daily lives and those
who make policy already think in historical ways but often carelessly.
Other subjects seem more practical, but have their own limits. Physics does
not tell us how to act, political science does not offer richer understanding,
and psychology is not a smashing success at spreading happiness. History
does not provide infallible knowledge and indisputable lessons, but all
knowledge of human society — of the present as well as the past — is
imperfect and mediated by documents and other people.47 Historical study
provides data and perspectives without which thoughtful culture and
politics seem impossible. At rock bottom, the presence of many pasts in
every fleeting present argues that the why-history question is, finally, a
question of why we should reflect at all.

Students should be involved in the why-history question, and the debate
about canonical traditions and histories. These involve questions about
culture and power, about whose interests particular versions serve, about
who is to be included, about the function of history and tradition in the
schools, and, finally, about how we construct meaning and value in our
lives. Shouldn’t our history classes involve students in the interplay of “is”
and “ought”? Should they not be the arena for moral discussion of what was
and what might have been?48 Despite post-modern theories that mock our
efforts to win truth, we can teach students that as a practical matter, there
are historical “facts” and that people need them to guard against media
manipulation, to avoid feeling stupid, and to participate in the events of
their times. But we can also teach them that interpretation and moral
implications are disputable. Is that not how education and politics should
work in a pluralistic democracy?

The point of this paper has not been to defend a single rationale but to
help us think about why we do what we do. I am told that high school
teachers, instead of cheerleading for their subject, apologize and com-
miserate with students who say that history is hard and boring. Do college
professors do better talking to business majors? Have professors preserved
a large place for World history or Western civilization among general
course requirements? Each of us needs clear ideas about the value of
historical study, not only to include the question in our courses, but to labor
with confidence and to become models of how historical thinking is an
active force in our approach to the world around us.
Notes

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7. Robert Coles, The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination (Boston, 1989), contains food for thought on this topic, but, true to its subject, refuses to step back and analyze the appeal of stories. Lawrence Stone, “The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history,” in his The Past and the Present (Boston, 1981), pp. 74-96, also does little to analyze the appeal of the story, which is only a small part of what Stone includes under the term “narrative” but is an excellent survey of historiographical trends up to 1980.


9. A fascinating topic which cannot be discussed in the text is the long history of student disinterest and faculty lamentations about it. See, for example, Woodrow Wilson, “What Is College For?” Scribner’s Magazine, 46 (1909), 570-577; Irving Babbitt, “English


12. Many creative classroom projects are listed in publications of the Los Angeles Educational Partnership (LAEP), 315 W. Ninth St., Suite 1110, Los Angeles, California, 90015.

13. Another motive, more vital in earlier years than today, was that the Greco-Roman classics in particular were distant from the grubby cares of daily life and thus a badge of high status and spirituality. Perspectives on this can be gleaned from Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987); Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago, 1965), pp. 180-251; and Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York, 1953, New American Library rpt. of 1899 original).


22. Laprade quoted in Novick, *Noble Dream*, p. 246. Gagnon's "Why Study History?" can be cited along with Himmelfarb (n. 5) for sometimes proposing what amounts simply to a defense of existing authority and nationalism.


27. Duffy, "Why History?"; the Harrison quotation in the Henry Commager selection in Vaughn, *Vital Past*, pp. 121-122; Gustavson, *The Mansion*, pp. 3-6. The amnesia argument is common. Perhaps it reflects the difficulty of showing precisely what we learn from history; it argues that although we may not know what we get from history, imagine what it would be like without it!


29. Along the same lines, see May, "Lessons" of the Past.


31. Is there a larger audience for serious history in Great Britain which seems to have a livelier political culture? Or is the British obsession with the past only the cultural elite's nostalgia for the day when the sun never set on the Empire?


38. Winthrop Jordan, quoted in Degler, "Remaking," p. 20. A perfect illustration of the way research can liberate by showing the historical rather than the eternal nature of structures and ideas is Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

40. This point about empowerment was emphasized to me by Professor Steve Ross, based on his experiences with college students and union audiences.


