

GROUP ASSIGNMENT 6: Critical Thinking & History

The study of history is sometimes just a straight-forward re-telling of events; yet, no matter how straight-forward we think a historical narrative is we still have to be willing to think critically about what we are reading, discussing or thinking. In order to think critically about history, we need to make a few assumptions about our knowledge:

1. Our knowledge is always incomplete. No historical narrative includes every single important or necessary detail.
2. We often think we know more than we actually do. Frequently we *believe* we know something but the confidence we have isn't supported by the available evidence.
3. We are what we think about. The thoughts we have and the values we hold are a reflection of the experiences we have had and the ones we have not had.

We are going to investigate three important aspects (or problems) related to the study of history: the first is the problem of omission; the second is the problem of anachronism; and the third is the creation and interpretation of historical models.

The Problem of Omission

When we *omit* (leave out) people or events from history—whether intentional or not—we change the *impression* people have of what happened. Obviously, just because we leave out an action does not change the fact that action occurred. History, in this sense, is an objective thing.¹ Yet, when history is *written* down it becomes a subjective² thing. Thus, the quality or trustworthiness of a historical narrative depends to a great degree upon the values, assumptions and abilities of the individual historian. The role women played during both the medieval and Renaissance periods is frequently ignored. Historians of either period tended to focus on the accomplishments of men like kings, merchants, bankers, popes and knights. By omitting the actions of women in history the false impression that they did nothing or were unimportant is created. The

¹ If something is objective it is completely independent of belief; it is something that stands on its own merit and cannot be erased through either unbelief or ignorance.

² If something is subjective the truth of that thing is at least in part dependent upon belief, assumptions or it is subject to interpretation.

achievements and contributions of various minorities has definitely been either understated or ignored altogether by most historians until relatively recently.³

The Problem of Anachronism

The problem of omission largely creates unintended errors when it comes to historical interpretation. Anachronism, on the other hand, either reflects the historical writer's ignorance or a particular subject or a deliberate attempt to deceive. An anachronism is a chronological inconsistency where two things, e.g. a technology, an idea, material, plant or animal, etc. from two different time periods are presented as though they existed at the same time. For example, there are some people who believe dinosaurs and human beings lived at the same time. Some people go so far as to say humans actually placed saddles on velociraptors and rode dinosaurs like they were horses. The fact is there is no evidence of either human/dinosaur (they are separated by approximately 65 million years of history). Also, the saddle was not actually invented until around 365 CE by Sarmatians. Anachronisms do not typically affect general histories so much as make primary sources or documents untrustworthy that historians use to construct those narratives.

Model Dependent Realism

We are natural born story tellers: we have developed some interesting ways of interpreting what we see and experience. In 1700 BCE the Babylonians saw what they believed to be divine displeasure whenever eclipses occurred. For this reason Babylonian priests conducted elaborate rituals to appease their gods Tiamat and Abzu. Comets have always evoked fear and superstition. Their occasional appearance disturbingly challenged the notion of an unalterable and divinely ordered universe. The ancients deduced comets were there for a reason: they were harbingers of disaster, indications of divine wrath—foretelling the deaths of princes, the fall of kingdoms. We no longer look at eclipses as some sort of sign of divine displeasure. We have a different model or way of understanding cosmic events. Specifically, we are scientific now in our thinking explaining things now not by appealing to the will of the gods but to material forces and causes like gravity.

In terms of history, the model medieval historians came up with was dividing time up into a period of darkness (all the time before Jesus' birth) and a time of light (all the time after Jesus' resurrection). Renaissance historians divided time up into three

³ The situation has largely been rectified with the present's greater emphasis placed upon describing the role of sociological forces as opposed to focusing mainly upon political histories or the deeds of "Great Men".

distinct time periods, e.g. the ancient world, the dark ages (or Middle Ages) and the Renaissance (or their present) in the 15th century. Interestingly, the people who lived during the Renaissance period did not actually use this word. Instead, the term Renaissance was applied by French 19th century historians to describe a period of cultural renewal that took place in Europe between the 15th and 18th centuries. Models are not really a problem, only that, it is important to be aware of the role they play in both our interpretation and telling of history. Specifically, we could create, and we have created, many equally valid models to interpret the meaning and significance of history.

Procedure

1). Read the introduction to this assignment (see above) as a whole class. Then answer the following discussion questions:

- The class read about three issues affecting the trustworthiness of human knowledge: firstly, our knowledge is always incomplete; secondly, we often think we know more than we actually do; and lastly, we are what we think about.

In your opinion, which of the three issues is the most difficult to overcome? Explain.

2). In your small group, read the article *The Study of History during the Renaissance*.

3). In your group, discuss the following questions reflection questions based on the above article:

- In the second paragraph of the reading, the article's writer reveals that we still use BC and AD to organize history despite the fact we no longer hold a medieval understanding of time. In your group, brainstorm one or more things (words, beliefs, expressions, understandings) that the modern world has adopted but forgot the original reason for being. See footnote 1 on page 1 for guidance.
- Which model of history do people in the West currently use—the medieval or the humanist model? Explain.
- Renaissance thinkers like Erasmus believed they were living at a time of progress. Based on your own understanding and experience, is history a story of

humankind's progress (improvement) or does it reveal something else to us?

- Why is it important to test the accuracy of historical documents, events, perspectives and personalities?
- In your opinion, was Erasmus being a good or a bad Christian by demonstrating how the Catholic Church altered scripture?
- Is it ever useful to interpret history and historical personalities in black and white terms? Or is it better to interpret history/personalities taking a more nuanced approach? In your answer, consider how the three issues related to knowledge (see page one of this handout) might influence your interpretation.

4). In groups, discuss and then submit an answer to the following question: in what ways does a thorough and disciplined study of history incite the student to virtue and discourage vice?

Note: the group's answer must be a minimum 150 words in length and contain references and appeals to both supporting evidence and logic. Submit the answer using *Google* docs sharing read/write permission with the classroom teacher at the following email: rdelainey@lcbi.sk.ca.