

## GROUP ASSIGNMENT 6: Critical Thinking & History

Studying history is sometimes a straight-forward task; yet, no matter how simple we think the history is we are studying we still need to be careful: this is because we frequently make assumptions without ever being conscious of it. Below you'll find three such assumptions defined and illustrated:

1. **Firstly, we believe our knowledge is complete.** No historian has perfect insight or all of the facts. Further research might unearth some information either confirming what the historian thought or successfully challenges that thinking. You can never have access to too much information (if it is relevant).

For example, many people still believe Christopher Columbus and the Catholic Church argued about whether or not the Earth was round or flat. In reality the argument was actually about the Earth's *circumference* (or the sheer size of the planet). The Church argued it was much larger than Columbus assumed. The reason people continue thinking the Church believed the Earth was flat is because of the perpetuation of a historical error committed by an amateur historian named Washington Irving in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The error first appears in Irving's book *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828). The book was considered authoritative shaping the understanding of readers for decades. Teachers who subsequently used Irving as a resource in their classrooms inadvertently taught millions of students a historical error—and some of those students became history teachers or even professors themselves.

2. **Secondly, we think we know more than we actually do.** Frequently we *believe* we know something but our confidence is not supported by the available evidence. By acknowledging our tendency to *believe* in things as opposed to *understand* them, we appreciate how uncertain even our best established theories and histories really are. For this reason it is wise to possess a questioning attitude (testing both our assumptions and those of others). The example of Washington Irving's error cited above demonstrates the dangers of believing ourselves more certain than we should.
3. **Thirdly, we are what we think about.** The thoughts we have directly reflect the experiences we have had (and, perhaps even more importantly, reflect the experiences we have not had). For this reason it can be difficult for men to appreciate the experiences of women. Also, it can be difficult for white people to

appreciate the experience of people of color. This is because white men and, say, women of color have very different experiences with power or a lack thereof.

Further, an expert in physics is not necessarily an expert in psychology or economics. This does not stop the physicist from expressing opinions about either psychology or economics. In the end, expertise in one area does not necessarily mean a person will possess expertise in *every* area. Since there are so many different types of knowledge, it makes sense that a person must possess a certain minimum amount of expertise before their opinions might be considered trustworthy. For example, there are a lot of people with a background in economics who challenge the scientifically proven theory that climate change is the result of human industrial activity. What these economists do not recognize is being an expert in one area (economics) does not translate into expertise in fields related to climate science (chemistry, physics, climatology, marine biology, and so on). Thus, the economist in this case literally *does not know what they do not know*.<sup>1</sup>

Again, we are what we think about and our individual worldview reflects the parenting we have had (or the absence of parenting), our education (or lack thereof), and to a certain extent genetics or our personal temperament (in a sense the world looks like it does to us because of our personality, e.g. a pessimist has a darker view of the world than say an optimist does, and so on).

We just looked at three assumptions affecting both readers and writers of history.

- We believe our knowledge is complete
- We think we know more than we actually do
- We are what we think about

These assumptions share one thing in common: in one form or another they all reflect problems with the *thinking* of the individual. The next three problems to discuss are structural issues associated with writing and interpreting history. These problems are known by the following names:

- The problem with omission

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<sup>1</sup> In the field of psychology, the Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias in which people mistakenly believe their cognitive ability is greater than it actually is, i.e. they literally do not know what they do not know.

- The problem with anachronism
- The problem with historical models

### **The Problem with Omission**

When we *omit* (literally leave out) people or events from the telling of history—intentional or not—we change the *impression* people form of the past. The role of women, for example, often gets downplayed or even ignored in histories covering either the medieval period or the Renaissance. By omitting the actions of women a false impression is created: it becomes as if they did not do anything noteworthy. In reality many women—like Eleanor of Aquitaine, Sibylla Fugger, and any number of women from the Medici family—played critical roles in the respective evolution of their nations. Historians have tended focusing on the accomplishments of great men like kings, merchants, bankers, popes, generals and knights. Also, the contributions of minorities have typically been either understated or ignored until relatively recently.<sup>2</sup>

If the purpose of telling history is to describe events as they actually happened, it makes sense taking into consideration many perspectives. In so doing, we might approach a more complete and comprehensive picture of both what happened in the past and its significance to us in the present.

### **The Problem with Anachronism**

Anachronism reflects either the individual historian’s ignorance on a particular subject or a deliberate attempt to deceive on their part.

An anachronism is the attributing of a custom, event, or object to a period in which it does not belong. For example someone writing about how people “surfed the web” during medieval times would be guilty of anachronism. If you have a little knowledge, anachronisms are easy enough to detect. Sometimes they are subtle (see the second example below) and sometimes obvious (the first example):

Some people, for the first example, insist dinosaurs and human beings lived at the same time. They go so far as to say Adam and Eve actually domesticated (tamed) and then placed saddles on velociraptors (riding them like horses). The fact is no evidence whatsoever exists of human beings and dinosaurs living at the same time. The fossil record is quite unambiguous firmly establishing these two species are separated by 65

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<sup>2</sup> 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”.

million years. Complicating matters is the saddle itself was not even invented until around 365 CE by the Sarmatians. This is 300 years after the time of Jesus. If Adam and Eve existed around six thousand years ago like is claimed by Creationists, and it is not entirely certain they even existed,<sup>3</sup> they could not have placed saddles on horses let alone raptors. Saddles did not exist yet.

A famous second example of an anachronism is found in a document called *The Donation of Constantine*. The Catholic Church argued the land they occupied in Italy (called the Vatican) was a gift from the Emperor Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. The Church pointed to *The Donation of Constantine* as proof of this gift. Enter Lorenzo Valla. Valla was a historian during the Renaissance. He caused a ruckus by demonstrating in 1440 that the *Donation* was a forgery (fake). He showed how the document's writing style did not reflect that of the late Roman imperial period. Instead the style used in the *Donation* reflected one dated conclusively to a much later time (around the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE or a full 300 years after the death of Constantine). Additionally, Valla pointed out the document contained the word *satrap*. This word is a *Persian*, not a *Roman* word, meaning roughly "governor." It is exceedingly unlikely a *Roman* emperor would use a *Persian* term in a *Latin* document.

### **The Problem with Model Dependent Realism**

Human beings are natural born story tellers. In 1700 BCE the Babylonians interpreted eclipses as a sign of divine displeasure. For this reason Babylonian priests conducted elaborate rituals to appease their gods Tiamat and Abzu. Comets likewise have always evoked superstitious reactions. Comets were harbingers (warnings) of impending disaster or indications of divine wrath. The ancients believed comets even foretold the deaths of princes and the fall of kingdoms. Fairly early on in their existence the Israelites adopted the Babylonian worldview (like most Semitic people). This, in part, explains the description of a star following Jesus' mother Mary around when she was pregnant as presented in the *Gospel of Mathew (Matthew 2: 1-12)*.

In the present day, we do not interpret eclipses as signs of divine displeasure. This is because, unlike the ancient Babylonians and Israelites whose histories essentially took the form of storytelling, we use science. We test claims. Specifically, stars do not normally follow people around; it is not possible for one entered Earth's atmosphere

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<sup>3</sup> Biblical literalists read and interpret scripture literally, i.e. if scripture says X happened then X happened exactly as described; however, there are also people called biblical contextualists. Contextualists do not read scripture and think they are reading a scientific historical account; rather, they read stories in *Genesis* for the lessons presented and for meaning.

(as described in *Matthew*) and not destroy the planet. This does not mean the author of *Matthew* was intentionally lying. Rather, since the ancients stressed storytelling over science, the incorporation of a symbol like a star would help a First Century CE audience better appreciate Jesus' "kingly" significance. Again, today, we stress a scientific model over a story-based one: we do not appeal to the *will of the gods*. We understand the world by appealing to the existence of *proven material forces*.

The historical model medieval historians developed was divided into two periods: a period of darkness (e.g. all the time before Jesus' birth) and a time of light (e.g. all the time after Jesus' resurrection). Renaissance historians actually divided time up into three distinct time periods, e.g. the ancient world, the so-called Dark Ages (medieval period) and the Renaissance (or *their* present) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, people living during the Renaissance did not actually use the word "renaissance" to describe their time. Instead, the term Renaissance was literally coined by French 19<sup>th</sup> century historians to describe a period of cultural renewal between the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

Historical models, like dividing human history into two or three distinct periods for instance, are useful primarily because they help people describe see the "big picture." However, models oversimplify the situation because history is not neat and tidy; and ultimately the "big picture" has more to do with storytelling than with describing how the world actually works. Certainly there are patterns in history we can identify and explain and learn from, e.g. when a society experiences stress minorities are often the victims of persecution.<sup>4</sup> Yet, there are forces at work shaping events randomly like a storm destroying a Spanish invasion fleet off the coast of England in 1588 CE.

The point is history is not as "neat and tidy" as historical models and historians make them out to be. Not really. Many historians in the present day argue the Renaissance was not even a "thing." Instead, the "renaissance" was really just an extension of an existing and flowering medieval culture. Historical models are problematic then because they can be used to force events to fit a structure; and this reveals something important that needs to be understood about using models: since we are *creating* models—sorting events into neat and tidy time periods—we run the risk of *inventing* history. For this reason it is important to think deeply about how we go about

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<sup>4</sup> When the Black Death hit Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Jews were accused of causing it and killed. Similar to that in the 1930s Jews were similarly persecuted during the Great Depression in Nazi Germany.

interpreting history: our interpretation is only one of the many potentially available interpretations.

### Procedure

1). Read the information (see article above) as a whole class.

2). Organize yourself into groups of three to four. Now *discuss* following discussion questions based on the reading above. Take special note of the headings used below to help organize your discussion:

- a) **We think we know more than we actually do.** Read the following phrase from this section: frequently we *believe* we know something but our confidence is not supported by the available evidence. What is one concrete thing you can do to increase your ability to *know what you do not know*.
- b) **The Problem with Anachronism.** Motivated reasoning is a form of cognitive bias. Basically, a person affected by motivated reasoning starts with conclusions and makes evidence fit the conclusion (rather reach the conclusion after an honest evaluation of the evidence). As a group *Google* the concept “motivated reasoning.” Based on the description of motivated reasoning you found, are people who insist Adam and Eve rode dinosaurs like horses affected by motivated reasoning? Why or why not?
- c) **The Problem with Model Dependent Realism.** The ancients looked at the world and saw it as abounding in gods and spirits. We look at the world today quite differently. Finish the following phrase based on how people in the modern world look at the world.

Ex. When modern people look at the world they see it abounding in....

Now justify (explain and prove) why your response is accurate or useful.

- d) The section discussing Model Dependent Realism points out a problem with organizing history into “neat and tidy time periods.” What exactly is that problem? If you can try to illustrate the problem by making reference to some sort of example or situation. *If you cannot do this, do not worry about it.*

- e) For the final task you must literally write a response. Submit your response using a *Google* Doc and give the teacher ([rdelaine@lcbi.sk.ca](mailto:rdelaine@lcbi.sk.ca)) full editing privileges. Label the document Assignment 6. At the top of your document write down the names of all your group members. You will receive a group mark based on the quality and thoughtfulness of your response to the question below.

The class read about three issues affecting the reliability 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 these three issues is the most difficult to overcome? Explain.