

Why Study History?

Several Historians Address the Question

Gerda Lerner, Why History Matters: Life and Thought (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Excerpts from pp. 199-201, 204, 211.

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All human beings are practicing historians. As we go through life we present ourselves to others through our life story; as we grow and mature we change that story through different interpretations and different emphasis. We stress different events as having been decisive at different times in our life history and, as we do so, we give those events new meanings. People do not think of this as “doing history”; they engage in it often without special awareness. We live our lives; we tell our stories. It is as natural as breathing.

Our self-representation, the way we define who we are, also takes the shape of the life story we tell. What we remember, what we stress as significant, and what we omit of our past defines our present. And since the boundaries of our self-definition also delimit our hopes and aspiration, this personal history affects our future. If we see ourselves as victimized, as powerless and overwhelmed by forces we cannot understand or control, we will choose to live cautiously, avoid conflict and evade pain. If we see ourselves as loved, grounded, powerful, we will embrace the future, live courageously and accept challenges with confidence....

There is another way in which history affects our personal lives. In traditional, rural societies, time and place are stable over a person's lifetime. One is born, lives and dies in the same place. Each person lives in the circle of a larger family encompassing different generations. Life has meaning as a generational passage. In such societies, which means in most societies in the world up to the beginning of the 20th century, religion was a more important factor in creating personal identity and in giving life meaning than was history. In the 20th century the opposite is true.

Urbanization, removal from the land, and the spatial mobility fostered by industrialization have deracinated people. Modern woman and man feel alone and anxious in their ever shifting settings, their smaller and smaller family units, their isolation from meaningful and stable communities. In a world in which personal contact with different generations is often severed, history can link people to past generations and root them in the continuity of the human enterprise. People in modern societies express their deep need for history in tracing their own families through genealogies, and in documenting their own generation by means of modern visual technologies—cameras, videos and tape recordings. Today, in each person's life, the record of images gets more and more voluminous, larger and larger, filling walls and shoe boxes and video-screens, but it lacks context, and therefore it lacks meaning.

The media create a false “virtual reality” by packaging the past into boxes neatly labeled by decades and offering these for nostalgic reliving. For a price, we can acquire the packaged decades—music, famous speeches, newsreels, movie revivals—a surrogate history, all form and no content. Romanticized versions of the past in film and fiction are offered the public by the nostalgia industry as surrogates for a meaningful connection with the past. But all such efforts fail. Try as one might, one cannot purchase the past through souvenirs and artifacts; one cannot travel into the past like a voyager on an airplane or even a train.

A meaningful connection to the past demands, above all, active engagement. It demands imagination and empathy, so that we can fathom worlds unlike our own, contexts far from those we know, ways of thinking and feeling that are alien to us. We must enter past worlds with curiosity and with respect. When we do this, the rewards are considerable.

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History, a mental construct which extends human life beyond its span, can give meaning to each life and serve as a necessary anchor for us. It gives us a sense of perspective about our own lives and encourages us to transcend the finite span of our life-time by identifying with the generations that came before us and measuring our own actions against the generations that will follow. By perceiving ourselves to be part of history, we can begin to think on a scale larger than the here and now....

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What we do about history matters. The often repeated saying that those who forget the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them has a lot of truth in it. But what are “the lessons of history”? The very attempt at definition furnishes ground for new conflicts. History is not a recipe book; past events are never replicated in the present in quite the same way. Historical events are infinitely variable and their interpretations are a constantly shifting process. There are no certainties to be found in the past.

We can learn from history how past generations thought and acted, how they responded to the demands of their time and how they solved their problems. We can learn by analogy, not by example, for our circumstances will always be different than theirs were. The main thing history can teach us is that human actions have consequences and that certain choices, once made, cannot be undone. They foreclose the possibility of making other choices and thus they determine future events.

Gordon A. Craig, “History as a Humanistic Discipline,” in Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission on the History in the Schools, eds., Historical Literacy: The Case For History in American Education, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989).

Gordon A. Craig is a professor of humanities emeritus at Stanford University. His scholarly expertise is Germany, and the author of numerous books. He is the past president of the American Historical Association.

[B]eginning students of history...will ask insistently why, if there are no specific and tangible benefits in sight, they should study it at all. For anyone who regards history, not as a practical science, but as a humanistic discipline, the answer is clear enough. You should study history because it is good for you. By telling you about how other individuals and societies lived in history, it gives you a vicarious experience and thus makes you a more complete human being. It is a source of reassurance in time of discouragement, for it tells you that other people before you had problems and perplexities and yet managed, because the human spirit is indomitable, to survive them. It is, as the Roman historian Livy once said,

the best medicine for a sick mind, for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see, and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings: fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through to avoid.

Finally, it provides you with an extension of your own life and a connectedness that gives it a greater significance in the stream of history, making you a vital link in the great process that connects the remotest past with the most distant future. In this concept there is a grandeur that transfigures the brevity of human existence....

Gordon S. Wood, The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History, (New York: Penguin Press, 2008). Excerpts from p. 6, 11-16.

Gordon S. Wood is Professor Emeritus at Brown University. His scholarly expertise is on the American Revolution and he is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for The Radicalism of the American Revolution.

If history has nothing to say to us, then it wouldn't make much sense to study to teach it or read about it at all. History is important to us, and knowledge of the past can have a profound effect on our consciousness, on our sense of ourselves. History is a supremely humanistic discipline: it may not teach us particular lessons, but it does tell us how we might live in the world.

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To be able to see the participants of the past in [a] comprehensive way, to see them in the context of their own time, to describe their blindness and folly with sympathy, to recognize the extent to which they were caught up in changing circumstances over which they had little control, and to realize the degree to which they created results they never intended—to know all this about the past and to be able to

relate it without anachronistic distortion to our present is what is meant by having a historical sense.

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Take, for example, our debates over the meaning of the Constitution. Some believe that the Constitution has an absolute original meaning and want us to recover that absolute original meaning in our current interpretation of the Constitution. Others believe that the Constitution means today whatever we want it to mean—that's what they mean by a "living Constitution." Neither of these extreme positions is correct. Historians know that the meaning of the Constitution has changed and will continue to change through time. But they also know that no one is free today to give whatever meaning he or she wants to give to it. In our choice of interpretations we are limited by history: by the conventions, values, and meanings we have inherited from the past. Those who fear that abandoning a timeless absolute standard for interpreting the Constitution will lead to moral and intellectual chaos are wrong. History, experience, and custom are powerful restraints on what we can think and do. We are not as free from the past as we think we are. Knowing this is to have a historical sense.

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....To understand the past in all its complexity is to acquire historical wisdom and humility and indeed a tragic sense of life. A tragic sense does not mean a sad or pessimistic sense of life; it means a sense of the limitations of life.

Unlike sociology, political science, psychology, and the other social sciences, which try to breed confidence in managing the future, history tends to inculcate skepticism about our ability to manipulate and control purposefully our destinies....

History that reveals the utter differentness and discontinuity of the past tends to undermine that crude instrumental and presentist use of the past that we Americans have been prone to. We Americans resist this kind of historical consciousness. We do not want to hear about the unusability and pastness of the past or about the limitations within which people in the past were obliged to act. We do not want to learn about the blindness of people in the past or about the inescapable boundaries of our actions. Such a history has no immediate utility and is apt to remind us of our own powerlessness, of our own inability to control events and predict the future.

I don't want to suggest that this kind of historical or tragic sense is necessarily deterministic or fatalistic.... A sense of the tragedy of the historical process is not necessarily pessimistic, and it does not deny the individual's responsibility for his or her actions; indeed, by making people aware of the circumstances impinging on and limiting them, a historical sense makes true freedom and moral choice—and wisdom—possible....

.... We Americans have such a thin and meager sense of history that we cannot get too much of it. What we need more than anything is a deeper and fuller sense of the historical process, a sense of where we have come from and how we have become what we are. This kind of historical sense will give us the best guide we'll ever have for groping our way into an unpredictable future.