

ΦΑΘ NEWS

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A MESSAGE FROM COUNCIL MEMBER NALMPANTIS



One of the joys of teaching an introductory survey course in history is the opportunity it affords the instructor to take a step back and contemplate what the study of history is all about. Why do we still bother with teaching and learning about history? What exactly is the academic discipline of history? Does learning about history have any sort of practical

utility? Should it? Often, and in order to impress upon the students that there is at least one practical concern that arises from the study of history, I justify the discussion by couching it thusly: “if my job were to be axed tomorrow, could you all give me an argument that I could present to the administration or to the trustees that would help me stave off unemployment?”

Naturally, the first order of business involves defining what the discipline of history actually is. Obviously, it’s about the past, but what past? There’s quite a bit of past out there, from the Big Bang to Tyrannosaurus Rex and beyond, so where does academic history fit into all that? Eventually, someone makes the point that history is about the human past and that certainly narrows things down considerably. But the truth is that there’s a lot of human past out there that history is not really all that concerned with, otherwise we would not have coined the word “prehistory.” The moment of truth arrives when one student exclaims, “history is about the recorded past!” Correct and accurate, of course, but even here there are disclaimers. Archaeological records might come in the form of pyramids, temples, mausoleums, and palaces, but if there are no written records (or even if, somehow, there are written records, but we curious contemporaries can’t read that writing), the history of that place will remain forever closed to us.

So, there must be writing. And since writing was invented by the very first civilization on earth, Sumer (located in what is today southern Iraq), the study of history begins there – a fact which incidentally makes the title of most introductory world history courses (i.e., “The History of Civilization”) vaguely oxymoronic, given that there can be no history apart from civilization (although there are a number of sophisticated civilizations of the past that had no known writing system...guess what though?...we know less about them than the ones that left behind accessible written records!). The discipline of history is therefore the academic study of the recorded, human past. Finally, a working definition that covers all the bases, right?

Not really, at least not totally. As everyone can understand if given a moment to think about it, not everything that occurs over the course of a given day, even in our own age of mass instantaneous communication, is recorded. There is no appointed tribal chronicler inhabiting every densely (and not so densely) populated area of human habitation recording all manner of sundry bits of information just for the antiquarian joy of it.

Doubtlessly, huge reams of information, much of it quite humdrum and mundane, do get recorded on a daily basis, but how much of that is worthy of intensive academic study and debate? Probably not much of it. It’s precisely this glut of information that makes me take issue with the common refrain “historians should just write about the facts.” Which facts? It is a fact that my birthday is on a particular day, but is that fact of relevance to anyone outside of my immediate circle? Historical monographs have focused on key dates (like December 7, 1941, for example) but I highly doubt my birthday merits that same level of attention (until I figure out cold fusion, of course). Yet my birthday is still, in all ways that matter, a historical fact.

History is, therefore, much more than a mere chronicle of the written past. It is, in essence, an interpretive act of will and of imagination. Historians choose a time and place worthy of their attention and then choose those facts that they believe will illuminate those corners of that dark and murky glass called “the past,” their ultimate purpose being to draw some meaningful and substantive conclusions about that time and place. The “worthiness” of a particular topic and the facts one chooses to “illuminate” that topic are all highly idiosyncratic choices and are shaped by that particular historian’s imagination, which is, in turn, formed by that historian’s political biases, personal predilections, patterns of thought, and even life experiences. What is the final goal of all of it? To come a bit closer to understanding something about the human condition, about the human species. Often, that insight, that illumination, does not come from just one work of history, but emerges from that eternal, back-and-forth conversation of countless historians talking to each other across time and space, a conversation without end. The word “history” comes from the Greek for inquiry and that is right and proper since, in the writing of history, it is the questions that matter more than the answers.

But how does this eternal dialogue provide illumination? Does the study of history, as the philosopher George Santayana implied (who is not familiar with his famous aphorism, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it?”) provide straightforward and incontrovertible lessons that one cannot afford to ignore? Certainly, my students seem to think so. The problem I have with Santayana is that the past is replete with “lessons.” Each individual who reads a history chooses which lessons to learn and which to ignore. Even more importantly, one person’s cautionary tale is another person’s call to action. Just like no two people can read the same book and come up with an identical interpretation of that book, no two people can look at the past in exactly the same way. Many of us might be able to agree in very general terms about the meaning of a particular past event, but we will never reach a point where that agreement will be either universal or axiomatic.

What form then does historical wisdom take? How exactly does this ceaseless dialogue provide insight into the human condition? By teaching us that all truths about ourselves are hard-won and bafflingly mutable. That the path to understanding will never reach its final destination but that in no way means it should be abandoned, for it is the journey on that narrow and winding path that provides the true rewards. My greatest satisfaction as a historian has come from understanding how profoundly complex and intricate humans are. One cannot “solve” that puzzle with simplistic dictums and trite aphorisms. In fact, it is invariably the case that those who attempt to simplify history are often humanity’s greatest enemies. As the great historian of the Renaissance Jacob Burckhardt wrote, “the essence of tyranny is the denial of complexity.” In other words, if you think you know everything there is to know about a particular historical or political topic, to the point where you are no longer even willing to listen to a dissenting viewpoint or opinion, and where the topic itself has, in your mind, morphed into a morality play where the lines between what is good and what is evil have been drawn indelibly and starkly, I’m here to tell you, as a historian, “you’re doing it wrong.”

Kyriakos Nalmpantis

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