

Intelligent engagement w/ the subjects.  
Examples needed everywhere - see comments.

Whitaker 1

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### Assignment II - The Uses of History

Following the lead of several other southern states in recent years, Texas altered the highschool graduation requirements during the last legislative term in an attempt at "harmonizing" the curriculum with the practical needs of the modern workforce. Depending upon the graduation path selected, teens may now virtually eliminate the study of higher English and History courses in favor of classes promoting technical skills. The backlash against this change has been muted, to say the least. In his The Pursuit of History, John Tosh asserts that prior to Ranke, it would have been inconceivable that the study of the past could be dethroned by "typing skills" in so cavalier a fashion. Educated people simply "took it for granted that history furnished the basis for a rational analysis of politics" (Tosh 45). This begs the question: are we past history? Does the academic pursuit of the past still have any relevance in the era of Google and reality television? Tosh argues that the three core principles of historicism - difference, context, and process - shape not only a means of reviving the past, but also form the bones of a defense of history itself. Once this structure is formed, a brief foray into the major themes and theories currently informing the historical discourse will deliver not only a robust defense of the discipline's relevance, but will also highlight the fact that without a balanced study of the humanities it may well be impossible to exist as a responsible human being in a pluralistic, modern democracy.

see the book  
The End of  
History  
(since  
refuted)

Questions about the value of history have been asked in many ways and at many times, and it should not come as a surprise to anyone that time has given us many different answers. These range from those who, like Henry Ford, saw no

value in the discipline whatsoever, to those who subscribe to a particular version of metahistory. Tosh points out correctly that this ultimately boils down to a philosophical debate regarding free will verses determinism (31). Those who completely ignore the power of one's society and culture to intrude upon one's choices are more likely to see the study of the Roman invasion of Britain as an indulgence prohibited to those who want to "make a real difference" in the world. Those who see history as one long unfolding story with an embedded telos which guides people and nations will prescribe to the adventures of Tacitus et al. an almost religious significance. There is certainly still room for dialogue and debate on these matters; indeed, the tension between free will and the power of the context may be irreducible past a certain point. What is certain is that no credible historian subscribes to either of these extremes. Tosh asserts that a majority of historians would tilt the balance slightly towards the side of free will, due to the fact that "determinism sits uncomfortably with the contingencies and rough edges that loom so large in the historical record" (31). Putting aside the argument that perhaps these "rough edges" are merely variables in the equation of human nature which are still unknown or unexplained properly, he is clearly correct that this dialectic is one which is both unsettled and of great interest to anyone who desires to approach questions on the meaning of ethics and human existence.

*also, a theological question.*

To begin with, Tosh sees history as having value due to the difference between what one experiences today and what has happened in past eras. This difference is a cultural resource in that it allows us to observe events which are simply impossible to experience in our own lives (33). This is useful in a didactic sense because it presents us with opportunities to hypothesize about our own actions in similar events, an important step in the attaining of critical thinking skills as well as in ethical training for how (and how not) to behave within the social matrix. Events in the historical record may not be totally foreign to our experience to be useful, however. Often it is

events which are similar to our own lives which are most instructive. One need not touch the stove's burner in order to learn that it is not advisable to do so, because there is sufficient evidence from past incidents to be certain of the outcome. Because we are in many ways programmed by our culture to see events in certain ways, access to the historical record can show us new ways of seeing; this process also produces awareness of this very programming, allowing one to see oneself and one's culture in a more critical and analytical manner. Tosh notes this when he quotes Quentin Skinner's comment that the ability to distinguish "between what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own contingent arrangements" offers important practical dividends (35).

Historical difference is also practically useful when it forces us to view recent events which our cultural memory may wish to erase for the sake of convenience or politics. This means of forcing oneself to see past the mystifying tendencies of politics extends forward into the present, meaning that the study of history can be seen as one way of training the mind to be a responsible citizen. Indeed, without the instruction provided by the humanities in general and history in particular, the present author is skeptical that any human being could be capable of piercing the veils created by the modern media machine. One may acquire many interesting skillsets in a vocational education setting. Learning to ask penetrating questions of one's elected officials or perceiving the methods of social control used by them is not generally a skill one learns in a machining class, however. A cynic might be forgiven for thinking that this was precisely the point....

Tosh also asserts that historical training is relevant today by using the second principle of historicism, context. By this, he means that one's "sense of the whole must always inform our understanding of the parts" (36). This is massively important at a time when it is increasingly popular to believe that it is more important to know how to find the answers to questions than to know the solution by memory. In an era when a few keystrokes can instantly produce an immense body of erudition, there is some sense to this way of thinking. Still, the ability

to find research solutions to problem Y almost never inform you about problem X or Z, which may be vital to an overall understanding of the matter at hand. Tosh notes that specialist and technical approaches to problems tend to compartmentalize solutions (37), which may be necessary in some aspects but which is actually detrimental in many others. The lateral links between how facts connect and influence one another is important for nearly every issue, but in particular to notions of responsibility and morality. Historians are masters at researching and exploring such lateral links, so historical training can be shown to be very useful in guiding the development of critical contextual thinking skills in modern students.

One way in which historical context can be said to be practically useful is in dispelling the notion that history in some manner repeats itself. Attempting to reference precedent in order to solve modern problems seldom proves effective (though it would be unwise to state such a view while attending the RNC). An understanding of context shows us that situations which appear on their surface to be similar are in fact radically different when viewed in their overall setting. Grasping this allows modern men to save time and effort in problem solving. Inherent to this is an acknowledgement that history is less predictive than many would assert. If even the relatively recent past cannot be viewed through the lens of the present without making adjustments for context, then one cannot pretend that the discipline possesses any infallible oracular powers. Understanding context injects the necessary skepticism into claims of the future inevitability of certain events, which is both practically useful as well as simple being good public policy.

This very issue of movement makes up the third principle developed by the historicists, an understanding of process. Understanding the trajectory of past events can lead directly to an understanding of present ones. While history has not proven to be particularly efficient at predicting specific future events, it can sometimes make general hypotheses about the direction a society is heading. Tosh highlights both the necessity for grounding such predictions in

historical reality as well as establishing the difference between sequential predictions and the infinitely less reliable repetitive or recurrent types (41). The type of processual thinking required in this discipline is highly valuable in all manner of modern scenarios, and highlights the attention to detail necessary to historical work. Tosh believes that the most important aspect of processual thinking deals with the ability to dissect the assumptions of permanence and timelessness that underpin the social identities nations create for themselves. Nation-states are not organic, and essentialist views usually serve to cover up a great deal of nasty business that should be a part of the memory of a state. This is true of nearly all traditional beliefs which claim that some behavior or policy is "natural." Historical training helps one to see that all traditions are built out of competing interests and powers, and that what is deemed to be normal is really just a social fiction projected on the masses from above. Ignoring this reality is to fall into George Orwell's "memory hole," a place few good people or societies come out of.

Of course, no one who loves reading about history requires practical reasons to explain why they selected certain texts at a bookstore. Even if these practical aspects did not exist, history would still enjoy a robust following. Any experience which causes us to step outside of ourselves strengthens our ability to empathize with others, so this popularity is ultimately a good thing for society. It may be that some of the skills acquired in historical research are not as marketable as learning to program in C++ in some quarters, but in an age of vastly increasing populations and social contact, learning how to be a good human being has become more vital than ever. It could even be seen to be key to the very survival of the species.

One way to drive home history's practical uses is to survey the scope of the discipline, so we can see just how deep the discipline's tendrils go. Tosh notes that virtually "no aspect of human thought and activity is excluded from the scope of historical study" (58), so one can immediately see that practical

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this is

courses of application abound. Given the immensity of the field of study, historians generally specialize in certain eras, localities, or themes. This last category is particularly important to Tosh, who believes that studying history by theme gives one a clearer picture of the actual content of the inquiry (59).

*Example?*

The elder statesman of the discipline is political history. This is the study of the past that deals with the "formal organization of power in society, which for the majority of human societies in recorded history means the state" (59). This umbrella covers how the state is governed and the institutions used to organize this governance, political policy, and the relationships that the state has with others (59). Given that for the vast majority of the history of our species it was the powerful who wrote the history books, it is not surprising that political history should have held a position of dominance over the discipline. Since those in power desire to stay in power, it has always been in their best interest to disseminate writings which cast their positions in a positive light. As a consequence, we are left with an immense volume of primary sources dealing with the subject. Politics ultimately deals with the tension between competing interests, so a certain amount of drama is often inherent to the study of governments, guaranteeing a wide degree of lay readership. Practically speaking, the study of political history is one of the best ways to critically examine our own government in action. Our systems of political control may be drastically different than those used by the power elite in some past locale, but by studying the structure of their methods we will ultimately learn to see the form of political power today.

Within the last one hundred years the focus of history has expanded beyond the study of political power. This process began with the explosion of new social thought in the nineteenth century and accelerated when the Annales school began to incorporate the methods and protocols of economics, sociology, social psychology, and geography (66). History thus quickly slipped its moorings and invaded new territory, including everything from the history of the worker to the history of the environment. What the new social history disciplines all had in common

was that they dealt with society itself and were relatively indifferent towards the individual.

Initially, social history dealt with social problems like poverty or disease and not directly on those who were afflicted by these conditions (70). Later, the discipline expanded to include "the history of everyday life in the home, the workplace, and the community" (70). In other words, social history initially dealt with those who had zero political power, the exact opposite of political history. Labor history was a natural offshoot of the study of the common folk, and was initially an attempt to raise the consciousness of the working class and forge a common workers' identity; this field would quickly sync up with Marxism.

In the 1960s and 1970s social history grew to prominence as its goals increased in ambition. Tosh notes that this expansion dealt with social history's attempt to offer an explanation of social structure, which amounts to the "sum of the social relationships <sup>among</sup> ~~between~~ the many different groups in society" (72). Though this technically includes the study of subjects like race and gender, the study of class has dominated the field. For Keith Wrightson, this meant that

Society is a process. It is never static. Even its most apparently stable structures are the expression of an equilibrium between dynamic forces. For the social historian the most challenging of tasks is that of recapturing that process, while at the same time discerning long-term shifts in social organizations, in social relations and in the meanings and evaluations which social relationships are infused (Wrightson 12, quoted in Tosh 72).

It should be noted that social history does not exist in a vacuum and oftentimes the historiography of political history must be consulted in order to understand issues of social structure. The same convergence of issues can be said of economic history, another major historical theme. Economic history, as the name suggests, reconstructs production, exchange, and consumption (74). This field is, in most circumstances, a far more quantitative field than other historical sub-fields. Little empathy is necessary to break down tariff figures or inflation, for instance, and when compared to other types of historical research, economic history can seem to be a bit dry. Nevertheless, the state of the economy has immense effects

on the well-being of both individuals and society in general. The study of the history of the dynamics of growth and decline are immensely important today to the happiness of billions of people, and it is difficult to imagine how Henry Ford would repeat his denial of the practical uses of history given the knowledge this field has produced in just the last fifty years.

*Examples?*

In contrast to the quantitative nature of economic history are the subfields which study intellectual, emotional, and psychological states such as the history of religion (76). These sub-disciplines attempt to analyze what people felt - what their attitudes and beliefs were - rather than where they sat in the socioeconomic ladder or what their political views were. As with all subfields of historical study, there are no demarcation lines between these disciplines; those who study the history of religion may share a great deal of primary sources with those researching philosophical or social history.

*Example?*

One historical theme which flies directly in the face of social history's focus on large groups is biography. There are various reasons for the survival of this field, not all of them noble. Tosh notes that biographies have often been used to praise certain leaders by eliminating all of the unpleasant truths of their reigns, to instill political views in those who read them, or in the case of the Renaissance, to sell a form of personal conduct (67). When a true historian writes a biography the goal is to understand the person being studied in the proper historical context. Those who support the use of biographies note that oftentimes one cannot understand the politics of a nation-state during a certain era without analyzing the men and women who were steering the ship. Also, biographies can illuminate obscure facts about a period when they focus on "normal" people. Most important, Tosh states that it is sometimes impossible to understand motive and intention without biography (69). Despite these reasons, there are still some historians who believe that biography has no place in the serious study of history.

Given the immense complexity of the historical record and the primary task



of all researchers to avoid imprinting their own interpretations onto the evidence, many historians form hypotheses in an attempt to explain past events. These hypotheses are often so complex that they amount to the development of theories, which are laid over the historical themes discussed previously. In the sciences, theories are abstract generalizations made from a body of research which attempt to explain physical laws of the universe. Tosh states that historians do not use the word in this sense; rather, they use the term "theory" to describe a method of interpretation "that gives impetus to an enquiry and influences its outcome" (214). This approach of moving from the particular to the general via theoretical means is not looked at kindly by some historians, who argue that connecting such disparate events in the record in this manner is a purely speculative exercise. There truly is a danger in cherry-picking events from the record in order to fit one's theoretical preferences, a sort of "confirmation bias" which spans the entirety of the past. There is also the view that if history is to be understood from the historicist's point of view, system-making is entirely out of the question because those being resurrected from the past had no knowledge of the workings of a theory only noticeable from a great remove.

That said, every historian of necessity makes generalizations from the record. Those who favor the development of theory correctly make the point that making explicit what is already implicit gives one advantages in clarity of thought (222). According to Tosh, the discipline of history is currently influenced by two distinct bodies of theory. The first is concerned with societies: how they are structured, how they change, and the agencies which promote this change. The best of such theories bring into clarity the ways in which action and structure relate, and to this end Tosh believes that Marxism is admirably suited. Living in the social matrix ultimately restricts an individual's array of choices, and without understanding this mechanism, history appears as nothing but one huge, unending sequence of chaotic acts (223). Marxism works as a theoretical construct by explaining the limitations inherent to a society structured by class. Class is ultimately a

example?

result of material conditions: the forces of production and the divisions of labor by which this production is sustained. This is the economic structure of society, upon which is built the superstructure consisting of political and legal institutions, and the ideologies created by these institutions. This relationship is bi-directional: the base influences the ways in which the superstructure is built, and the superstructure enables and also modifies the base.

Using this theoretical framework, Marx divides history into separate epochs, depending upon progressively more advanced modes of production. He begins with the classical societies of Greece and Rome, and moves through feudal systems and capitalism to arrive at socialism (229), wherein the material needs of all men will be satisfied. The means by which this process takes place is the dialectic, which he borrowed from Hegel. Through the tension created by the mode and means of production, new ways of production come about. The most visible way to see this process in action deals with the conflicts between class. This is a structural term dealing with the position of each worker in the process of producing goods. One class dominates another, and the tension between them grows until a revolution bursts forth and realigns the power structure.

Marx's conception of the dialectic is a remarkably useful way of looking at society. Many social theories view equilibrium as the natural state, and therefore must seek to explain periods of drastic change as aberrations. Marxist historians, on the other hand, see tension and conflict as the normal state of existence, and this explains, in particular, popular movements with a great deal of accuracy. Even if this theory proves to be ultimately unsatisfying to some, it is undeniable that Marxist historical analysis has produced a wealth of hypotheses about history which have acted as catalysts to new avenues of research. As a heuristic device, theory is an incredibly powerful tool.

The second great body of theory operating in the historical discipline today deals not with the structure of societies or how they operate and change, but rather with meaning and representation. These theories usually go under the heading

of cultural history. By culture, Tosh prefers the definition given by Peter Burke in his Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe: "a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances, artefacts) in which they are expressed or embodied" (Burke 270, as quoted in Tosh 247). Thus, cultural history aims to explain the interior states of past eras, the "mental, emotional, and conceptual world of the past" (248). This turn towards cultural history has dominated the discipline in recent years, because "shared meanings" can pretty much encompass everything in history, from politics to environmental history to the history of the coffee mug (if such a thing exists, that is). This shift has created a tension with social historians, which, if the Marxists are correct, will continue to produce new theories and avenues for research.

Given the staggering expanse of cultural history, it should come as no surprise that a treatment of the field should be far-reaching. Tosh himself ranges across a varied list of sub-fields, beginning with art history before passing on to pre-literate and modern cultural artefacts, photography, and finally touching on film. What all of these fields have in common is an analysis of symbols and meaning in the life of a society. Unlike in past eras, sources are not studied for interpretations as a means to the end of telling a true story about the past, but rather to analyze meaning itself as the end (258). When a historical researcher a century ago would study a document for textual meaning, he was looking only at what that specific person believed. The cultural turn, on the other hand, is attempting to home in on collective meanings from that era. The former depended upon being able to empathize with the individual and see the world through his eyes; the latter depends upon a variety of sophisticated theories.

Three of these are briefly mentioned by Tosh: psychology, literary theory, and anthropology. The first to attempt "a history of mentalities" were the members of the Annales school, wherein areas such as emotional and instinctual thought were analyzed. Today, the advances made in psychotherapy are informing historians on a wide degree of cultural patterns - everything from a study of identity and

and nurturing to "the play of the unconscious in collective mentality" (260).

The explosive growth in literary theory in the last thirty years has also contributed greatly to the cultural analysis. Thanks to the works of Derrida and the other deconstructionists, researchers recognize the indeterminacy of language. Texts no longer act as gateways to some objective event in the life of the author, but rather stand only as evidence of the perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes of those who write them. They are, in effect, a semiotic code which can highlight the systems of meaning in operation at the time of writing. This linguistic code not only helps determine consciousness, but also acts as a major force in designing the structures of a society.

*If one  
can  
de-code  
them.  
Who can?*

Cultural anthropology is the last of the sub-disciplines listed by Tosh. He finds anthropology useful to the historian by giving to researchers a window into the minutiae of details behind beliefs and behaviors who are still vulnerable to the same vagaries of the natural world as early man. By directly monitoring such peoples in the present, researchers can step inside their worldview and begin to ask questions which may not have occurred to them otherwise. Ritual behavior may be filled with hints of meaning, but these meanings may have been impossible to understand at the remove of a few thousand years without direct experience acting as catalyst.

By demanding that history reconstruct the mental state of those in the past, the cultural turn has devastated the concept of referential notions of representation, causing words like "class" and "nature" to be converted from objective concepts to mere discourses (268). "Experience" could no longer be relied on, since language existed prior to this, and language was just another construction, not reality. Tosh notes that what is left is not the study of what happened in the past, but rather the study of representation and how meanings come to be constructed (268). Taken to extremes, this sort of postmodernist view leaves the discipline of history in shambles, and Tosh says that most historians acknowledge the positive ways

in which cultural history has expanded the field of history but ignore its "destructive epistemology" (269).

Given the complexity and reach of historical inquiry, it is apparent that the discipline has a great many things to teach us about who we are, where we came from, and even makes suggestions about how to live in the present. Beyond this, by training the mind in the methods of history, a student will broaden their ability to empathize with others, sharpen their critical thinking skills, and learn how to analyze the world and society structurally. These are useful skills in most any enterprise, and it is baffling to watch as state educational boards move to deprive future workers of these vital abilities.

Works Cited

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