

**ALL PEOPLE ARE LIVING HISTORIES -
WHICH IS WHY
*HISTORY MATTERS***

***A conversation-piece for those who ask:
Why study History?***

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Please note that this text is also available
on the website of Royal Holloway, University of London/History/Penelope Corfield
and on the *Making History* website of
London University's Institute of Historical Research:
www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/why_history_matters.

A companion-piece article about the need for adding long-span courses
into the History curriculum
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Historians are often asked: what is the use or relevance of studying History (the capital letter signalling the academic field of study)? Why on earth does it matter what happened long ago? The answer is that History is inescapable. It studies the past and the legacies of the past in the present. Far from being a 'dead' subject, it connects things through time and encourages its students to take a long view of such connections.

All people and peoples are living histories. To take a few obvious examples: communities speak languages that are inherited from the past. They live in societies with complex cultures, traditions, and religions that have not been created on the spur of the moment. People use technologies

that they have not themselves invented. And each individual is born with a personal variant of an inherited genetic template, known as the genome, which has evolved during the entire life-span of the human species.

So understanding the linkages between past and present is absolutely basic for a good understanding of the condition of being human. That, in a nutshell, is why History matters. It is not just ‘useful’, it is essential.

The study of the past is essential for ‘rooting’ people in time. And why should *that* matter? The answer is that people who feel themselves to be rootless live rootless lives, often causing a lot of damage to themselves and others in the process. Indeed, at the most extreme end of the out-of-history spectrum, those individuals with the distressing experience of complete memory loss cannot manage on their own at all. In fact, all people have a full historical context. But some, generally for reasons that are no fault of their own, grow up with a weak or troubled sense of their own placing, whether within their families or within the wider world. They lack a sense of roots. For others, by contrast, the inherited legacy may even be *too* powerful and outright oppressive.

In all cases, understanding History is integral to a good understanding of the condition of being human. That allows people to build, and, as may well be necessary, also to change, upon a secure foundation. Neither of these options can be undertaken well without understanding the context and starting-points. All living people live in the here-and-now but it took a long unfolding history to get everything to NOW. And that history is located in Time-space, which holds this cosmos together, and which frames both the past and the present.

The discussion is amplified under the following headings:

I - Answering Two Objections to History

II – Noting Two Weak Arguments in Favour of Studying History

III – Celebrating the Strong Case for History

IV – The Repentance of Henry Ford: History is not Bunk

V - Summary

I - Answering Two Objections to History

One common objection that historians encounter is the instant put-down that is derived from Henry Ford I, the impresario of the mass automobile. In 1916 he stated sweepingly: ‘History is bunk’. Actually, Ford’s original comment was not so well phrased and it was a journalist who boiled it down to three unforgettable words. Nonetheless, this is the phrasing that is attributed to Ford and it is this dictum that is often quoted by people wishing to express their scepticism about the subject.

Well, then, what is the use of History, if it is only *bunk*? This rousing old fashioned term, for those who have not come across it before, is derived from the Dutch *bunkum*, meaning rubbish or nonsense.

Inwardly groaning, historians deploy various tactics in response. One obvious reaction is to challenge the terms of the question, in order to make questioners think again about the implications of their terminology. To demand an accountant-style audit of the instant usefulness of every subject smacks of a very crude model of education indeed. It implies that people learn only very specific things, for very specific purposes. For example, a would-be voyager to France, intending to work in that country, can readily identify the utility of learning the French language. However, since no-one can travel back in time to live in an earlier era, it

might appear – following the logic of ‘immediate application’ - that studying anything other than the present-day would be ‘useless’.

But not so. The ‘immediate utility’ formula is a deeply flawed proposition. Humans do not just learn gobbets of information for an immediate task at hand. And, much more fundamentally, the past and the present are not separated off into separate time-ghettos. Thus the would-be travellers who learn the French language are also learning French history, since the language was not invented today but has evolved for centuries into the present. And the same point applies all round. The would-be travellers who learn French have not appeared out of the void but are themselves historical beings. Their own capacity to understand language has been nurtured in the past, and, if they remember and repeat what they are learning, they are helping to transmit (and, if needs be, to adapt) a living language from the past into the future.

Education is not ‘just’ concerned with teaching specific tasks but it entails forming and informing the whole person, for and through the experience of living through time.

Learning the French language is a valuable human enterprise, and not just for people who live in France or who intend to travel to France. Similarly, people learn about astronomy without journeying in space, about marine biology without deep-sea diving, about genetics without cloning an animal, about economics without running a bank, about History without journeying physically into the past, and so forth. The human mind can and does explore much wider terrain than does the human body (though in fact human minds-and-bodies do undoubtedly have an impressive track record in physical exploration too). Huge amounts of what people learn is drawn from the past that has not been forgotten. Furthermore, humans display great ingenuity in trying to recover information about lost languages and departed civilisations, so

that everything possible can be retained within humanity's collective memory-banks.

Very well, the critics then sniff; let's accept that History has a role. But the second criticism levelled at the subject is that it is basic and boring. In other words, if History is not meaningless *bunk*, it is nonetheless poor fare, consisting of soul-sapping *lists of facts and dates*.

Further weary sighs come from historians when they hear this criticism. It often comes from people who don't care much for the subject but who simultaneously complain that schoolchildren don't know key dates, usually drawn from their national history. Perhaps the critics who complain that History-is-so-boring had the misfortune to be taught by uninspired teachers who dictated 'teacher's notes' or who inculcated the subject as a compendium of data to be learned by heart. Such pedagogic styles are best outlawed, although the information that they intended to convey is far from irrelevant.

Facts and dates provide some of the basic building blocks of History as a field of study, but on their own they have limited meaning. Take a specific case. It would be impossible to comprehend twentieth-century world history if given nothing but a list of key dates, supplemented by information about (say) population growth rates, economic resources, and church attendance. And even if further evidence were provided, relating to (say) the size of armies, the cost of oil, and comparative literacy levels, this cornucopia of data would still not furnish nearly enough clues to reconstruct a century's worth of world experience.

On its own, information is not knowledge. That great truth cannot be repeated too often. Having access to abundant information, whether varnished or unvarnished, does not in itself mean that people can make sense of the data.

Charles Dickens long ago satirised the 'facts and nothing but the

facts' school of thought. In his novel *Hard Times* (1854), he invented the hard-nosed businessman, Thomas Gradgrind, who believes that knowledge is sub-divided into nuggets of information. Children should then be given 'Facts' and taught to avoid 'Fancy' – or any form of independent thought and imagination. In the Dickens novel, the Gradgrindian system comes to brief, and so it does in real life, if attempts are ever made to found education upon this theory.

People need mental frameworks that are primed to understand and to assess the available data and - as often happens - to challenge and update both the frameworks and the details too. So the task of educationalists is to help their students to develop adaptable and critical minds, as well as to gain specific expertise in specific subjects.

Returning to the case of someone first trying to understand twentieth-century world history, the notional list of key dates and facts would need to be framed by reading (say) Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (1994) or, better still, by contrasting this study with (say) Mark Mazower's *Dark Continent* (1998) or Bernard Wasserstein's *Barbarism and Civilization* (2007) on twentieth-century Europe, and/or Alexander Woodside's *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea and the Hazards of World History* (2006) or Ramachandra Guha's *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (2007) – to name but a few recent overview studies.

Or, better again, students can examine critically the views and sources that underpin these historians' big arguments, as well as debate all of this material (facts and ideas) with others. Above all, History students expect to study for themselves some of the original sources from the past; and, for their own independent projects, they are asked to find new sources and new arguments or to think of new ways of re-evaluating known sources to generate new arguments.

Such educational processes are a long, long way from memorising lists of facts. It follows therefore that History students' understanding of the subject cannot be properly assessed by asking single questions that require yes/no responses or by offering multiple-choice questions that have to be answered by ticking boxes. Such exercises are memory tests but not ways of evaluating an understanding of History.

II – Noting Two Weak Arguments in Favour of Studying History

Some arguments in favour of studying History also turn out, on close inspection, to be disappointingly weak. These do not need lengthy discussion but may be noted in passing.

For example, some people semi-concede the critic's case by saying things like: *'Well, History is not obviously useful but its study provides a means of learning useful skills'*. But that says absolutely nothing about the content of the subject. Of course, the ability to analyse a diverse array of often discrepant data, to provide a reasoned interpretation of the said data, and to give a reasoned critique of one's own and other people's interpretations are invaluable life- and work-skills. These are abilities that History as a field of study is particularly good at inculcating. Nevertheless, the possession of analytical and interpretative skills is not a quality that is exclusive to historians. The chief point about studying History is to study the subject for the invaluable in-depth analysis *and* the long-term perspective it confers upon the entire human experience - the component skills being an essential ingredient of the process but not the prime justification.

Meanwhile, another variant reply to 'What is the use of History?' is often given in the following form: *'History is not useful but it is still worthwhile as a humane subject of study'*. That response says something but the first phrase is wrong and the conclusion is far too weak. It implies

that understanding the past and the legacies of the past is an optional extra within the educational system, with cultural value for those who are interested but without any general relevance. Such reasoning was behind the recent and highly controversial decision in Britain to remove History from the required curriculum for school-children aged 14-16.

Yet viewing the subject as an optional extra, to add cultural gloss, seriously under-rates the foundational role for human awareness that is derived from understanding the past and its legacies. Dropping History as a universal subject will only increase rootlessness among young people. The decision points entirely in the wrong direction. Instead, educationalists should be planning for more interesting and powerful ways of teaching the subject. Otherwise it risks becoming too fragmented, including too many miscellaneous skills sessions, thereby obscuring the big ‘human story’ and depriving children of a vital collective resource.

III – Celebrating the Strong Case for History

Much more can be said - not just in defence of History but in terms of its positive advocacy. The best response is the simplest, as noted right at the start of this conversation. When asked ‘Why History?’ the answer is that History is inescapable. Here it should be reiterated that the subject is being defined broadly. The word ‘History’ in English usage has many applications. It can refer to ‘the past’; or ‘the study of the past’; and/or sometimes ‘the meaning(s) of the past’. In this discussion, History with a capital H means the academic field of study; and the subject of such study, the past, is huge. In practice, of course, people specialise. The past/present of the globe is studied by geographers and geologists; the biological past/present by biologists and zoologists; the astronomical past/present by astro-physicists; and so forth.

Among professional historians, the prime focus is upon the

past/present of the human species, although there are some who are studying the history of climate and/or the environmental history of the globe. Indeed, the boundaries between the specialist academic subjects are never rigid. So from a historian's point of view, much of what is studied under the rubric of (for example) Anthropology or Politics or Sociology or Law can be regarded as specialist sub-sets of History, which takes as its remit the whole of the human experience, or any section of that experience.

Certainly, studying the past in-depth while simultaneously reviewing the long-term past/present of the human species directs people's attention to the mixture of continuities and different forms of change in human history, including revolution as well as evolution. Legacies from the past are preserved but also adapted, as each generation transmits them to the following one. Sometimes, too, there are mighty upheavals, which also need to be navigated and comprehended. And there is loss. Not every tradition continues unbroken. But humans can and do learn also from information about vanished cultures - and from pathways that were not followed.

Understanding all this helps people to establish a secure footing or 'location' within the unfolding saga of time, which by definition includes both duration and change. The metaphor is not one of fixation, like dropping an anchor or trying to halt the flow of time. Instead, it is the ability to keep a firm footing within history's roller-coaster that is so important. Another way of putting it is to have secure roots that will allow for continuity but also for growth and change.

Nothing, indeed, can be more relevant to successful functioning in the here-and-now. The immediate moment, known as the synchronic, is always located within the long-term unfolding of time: the diachronic. And the converse is also true. The long term of history always contributes

to the immediate moment. Hence my twin maxims, *the synchronic is always in the diachronic*. The present moment is always part of an unfolding long-term, which needs to be understood. And vice versa. *The diachronic is always in the synchronic*: the long-term, the past, always contributes to the immediate moment.

As living creatures, humans have an instinctive *synchro-mesh*, that gears people into the present moment. But, in addition to that, having a perspective upon longitudinal time, and history within that, is one of the strengths of the alert human consciousness. It may be defined as a parallel process of *diachro-mesh*, to coin a new term. On the strength of that experience, societies and individuals assess the long-term passage of events from past to present - and, in many cases, manage to measure time not just in terms of nano-seconds but also in terms of millennia. Humans are exceptional animals for their ability to think ‘long’ as well as ‘immediate’; and those abilities need to be cultivated.

If educational systems do not provide a systematic grounding in the study of History, then people will glean some picture of the past and the role of themselves, their families, and their significant associations (which include everything from nations and religions to local clubs and neighbourhood networks) from a medley of other resources - from cultural traditions, from collective memories, from myths, rumours, songs, sagas, from political and religious teachings and customs, from their families, their friends, and from every form of human communication from gossip to the printing press and on to the web.

People do learn, in other words, from a miscellany of resources that are assimilated both consciously and unconsciously. But what is learned may be patchy or confused, leaving some feeling rootless; or it may be simplified and partisan, leaving others feeling embattled or embittered. A good educational system should help people to study

History more formally, more systematically, more accurately, more critically, and more longitudinally. By that means, people will have access to a great human resource, compiled over many generations, which is the collective set of studies of the past, and the human story within that.

Humans do not learn from the past, people sometimes say. An extraordinary remark! People certainly don't learn from the future. And the present is so fleeting that everything that is learned in the present has already passed into the past by the time it is consolidated. Of course, humans learn from the past – and that is why it is studied. History is thus not just about things 'long ago and far away' – though it includes that – but it is about all that makes humanity human - up close and personal.

IV – The Repentance of Henry Ford: History is not Bunk

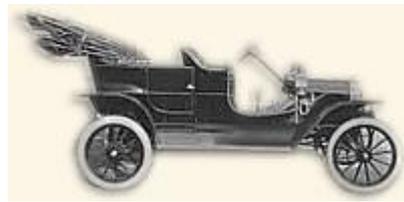
Interestingly, Henry Ford's dictum that 'History is bunk' now itself forms part of human history. It has remained in circulation for ninety years since it was first coined. And it exemplifies a certain no-nonsense approach of the stereotypical go-ahead businessman, unwilling to be hide-bound by old ways. But Ford himself repented. He faced much derision for his apparent endorsement of know-nothingism. 'I did not say it [History] was bunk', he elaborated: 'It was bunk *to me*'. Some business leaders may perhaps affect contempt for what has gone before, but the wisest among them look to the past, to understand the foundations, as well as to the future, in order to build. Indeed, all leaders should reflect that arbitrary changes, imposed willy nilly without any understanding of the historical context, generally fail. There are plenty of recent examples as well as long-ago case-histories to substantiate this observation. Politicians and generals in Iraq today – on all sides – should certainly take heed.

After all, Ford's pioneering Model T motor-car did not arrive out of the blue in 1908. He had spent the previous *fifteen* years testing a variety

of horseless carriages. Furthermore, the Model T relied upon an advanced steel industry to supply the car's novel frame of light steel alloy, as well as the honed skills of the engineers who built the cars, and the savvy of the oil prospectors who refined petroleum for fuel, just as Ford's own novel design for electrical ignition drew upon the systematic study of electricity initiated in the eighteenth century, while the invention of the wheel was a human staple dating back some five thousand years.

It took a lot of human history to create the automobile.

Model-T Ford 1908



Ford Mustang 2007



And the process by no means halted with Henry Ford I. So the next invention that followed upon his innovations provided *synchro-mesh* gearing for these new motorised vehicles – and that change itself occurred within the *diachro-mesh* process of shared adaptations, major and minor, that were being developed, sustained, transmitted, and revolutionised through time.

Later in life, Henry Ford himself became a keen collector of early American antique furniture, as well as of classic automobiles. In this way, he paid tribute both to his cultural ancestry and to the cumulative as well as revolutionary transformations in human transportation to which he had so notably contributed.

Moreover, for the Ford automobile company, there was a further twist in the tale. In his old age, the once-radical Henry Ford I turned into an out-of-touch despot. He failed to adapt with the changing industry and left his pioneering business almost bankrupt, to be saved only by new measures introduced by his grandson Henry Ford II.

Time and history had the last laugh - outlasting even fast cars and scoffers at History.

V - Summary

Because humans are rooted in time, people do by one means or another pick up ideas about the past and its linkages with the present, even if these ideas are sketchy or uninformed or outright mythological. But it is best to gain access to the ideas and evidence of History as an integral part of normal education.

The broad span of human experience, viewed both in-depth and longitudinally over time, is the subject of History as a field of study.

Therefore the true question is not: *'What is the use or relevance of History?'* but rather: *'Given that all people are living histories, how can we all best learn about the long-unfolding human story in which all participate?'*

Penelope J. Corfield expands these arguments in her book *Time and the Shape of History* (Yale University Press, London, 2007). For details of this publication, please see www.timeframes.co.uk.