

What is History? – An Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

When I say “prejudice” or “bias”, it is immediately offensive. If I say “opinion”, it raises the small hairs on your arms and you are suspicious. But if I say “perspective” or “viewpoint”, that is bland and acceptable. Yet all these words mean the same thing.

Historians, ordinary citizens, the media and political leaders – human beings – use perspective and either advertently or inadvertently commit errors of commission or omission. In this way their bias is revealed for ill or good.

HISTORY DEFINED

In my first freshman American history course my professor stated that we were to turn in an extra paper at the end of the semester entitled *What is History?*¹. He asked that we think about the meaning of that and turn in the paper. And so I did.

At the end of the semester, the professor changed his mind and said the assignment was cancelled. But I had written it, so he accepted it to read for no credit. That was fine by me since I needed to contemplate it and write on the subject.

At the beginning of the second semester, the professor made the same request. This time he meant it. I had more thoughts on the subject and was happy to write a second paper on this subject. And so I did. This one I titled *What is History? – revisited*² and turned it in for extra credit, even though he knew it was a second unrequired effort in my case.

By then I couldn't stop obsessing about this topic and so I wrote two more unsolicited essay papers – *An American Historiography*³ and *The Significance of Historiography*⁴. He graciously accepted them and promised to read them one day when he had time which was at a premium. He must have begun to wonder about me at that point.

Why was I compelled to keep thinking and writing about this subject?

When I learned that the college was changing the author for its American history 2-semester course text (secondary source overview for survey level history), I grew concerned that the new author held a reputed bias for his approach – that he held certain personal views and had an agenda. It was disconcerting since the text I first used seemed even-handed and objective, honest historiography with intellectual integrity.

With special permission from the college director and the professor, I was permitted to audit the first course again with the same professor facing this new text for the first time. I did a six-

month independent study of comparing these two history texts on my own for no credit. It made my professor a little uncomfortable but by then we had built a friendship based on mutual respect.

What did I learn from all this unrequired effort? When I started to compare just these two modern history-text authors, I knew both were renowned men from Columbia University coming out with their PhDs at about the same time under their graduate advisor Robert Hofstadter in the 60's.

The first had written an honest one balancing the traditional political, military and economic histories with the newer social histories about common people. He further proved his sincerity by unselfishly including inserts of historiographies contrasting what other historians had thought about the subject at hand in the past.

The second one presented a biased history in my opinion. He glossed over, and treated superficially, much of the tradition information and emphasized the social history including his own insights and perspectives. He left out the historiographies, seeming to not care what other historians currently or before him thought. This is appropriate in some specific, narrowly focused history books but inappropriate for a survey course overview.

My professor reluctantly agreed. He was a bit disappointed in the new text selection, not of his choice, but wanted to stay out of trouble. He was an incredible inspirational history instructor.

Before this extra semester and my six-month special study was over, I had expanded the goals, delved into and read survey level complete history texts from the 1970's, 1980's and 2000. I noticed a trend away from traditional views of political, military and economic histories toward specialty studies of social issues with increasing agendas for social justice and equality for minorities and diminishment of the greatness of our founders – the dead white men.

I wrote a summarizing essay – *Themes of Democracy: freedom, liberty, equality*⁵ and turned it in to my professor to read over when he found time for this unessential effort. He was gracious and did that after some time.

CONCLUSION

The presentation of history texts has become darker and more negative of our country's founders' goodness and greatness. No good could be found in our American history, in its major figures and great men of the past. No forgiveness is offered for their human frailties. No credit is given for their lofty ideals that necessitated time for fulfillment. The academic intelligentsia had shifted to a negative view of our greatness and refuted our exceptionalism.

Globalism became a focus as Western Civilization courses became optional and World History courses became mandatory.

This was not subtle if you took time to look at the whole sweep of it over several decades, starting in the 1970's. It began, I believe with the tumultuous times of the 1960's and history would never be taught the same way ever again. It would go the way of unbiased, honest journalism. It is a frightful concern for the succeeding generations of Americans.

This concern has proven to be genuine in our 21st century. I don't see any way or likelihood this nearly 50-year trend will reverse.

Notes

1. David Claire Jennings, *Collected Essays on Americanism* (Liverpool: Southern Heart Publishing, second edition 2017), (page ?).
2. Ibid, (page ?)
3. Ibid, (page ?)
4. Ibid, (page ?)
5. Ibid, (page ?)

