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History in an Age of Fake News

*By Patrick Iber* | JULY 22, 2018

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We work and live in a time when historical knowledge has become intensely politicized. That knowledge is political is hardly new, but the rise of Donald Trump has heightened the polarization. His administration governs with a

torrent of disorienting dishonesty, and his cry of "fake news" seems to mean less that the news in question is false than that it tells a story about him that he finds discordant with his self-image. Journalists — writers of the first draft of history, as the cliché goes — have struggled to balance their responsibility to reporting discovered facts with reporting the views of those who reject those facts.

In this political climate, scholars — and historians in particular — face analogous challenges. On the one hand, our work is increasingly in demand by those seeking perspective on an uneasy present. On the other, our work can meet with outright disbelief and ideologically driven skepticism. It is sometimes dismissed, in effect, as "fake history," in an analogy to "fake news." Is there anything that can be done to prevent basic historical facts from going the way of climate science, seen essentially as politically motivated rather than the result of serious professional study?

One possible response to this charge is to insist on the neutrality of the empiricism of historical methods. It is a tempting argument, but unlikely to be a fruitful one. Much of the resistance to the basic facts of American history comes not from complex disputes about interpretation but essentially from a politically motivated confidence game. Dinesh D'Souza's books and films, for example, are cynically inept, but no amount of correction

from careful historians like Kevin M. Kruse and Heather Cox Richardson will cause him to admit a mistake. The Confederate and neo-Confederate monuments that dot the American landscape do not stand as interventions in historiographical disputes; they are there as assertions of white supremacy. The problem is not that there is honest disagreement among historians — the problem is that there is a market for pseudo-historical grift.

That is because, however committed to a neutral empiricism in method, the work of history is inevitably political. It is political precisely because politics requires myth-building: Politics makes use of powerful stories that guide our understanding of the world. These might come in the form of myths of the legitimacy of power, or myths of a national, regional, or racial past. As these myths are made out of the raw material of historical events, they depend on remembering, but also on forgetting.

Yet, as Eric Hobsbawm wrote, the historian's business "is to remember what others forget." Perhaps this is one reason they can be unpopular. It may be a normal human tendency to want to have pride in our university, our town, our state, our country. Historians can be bothersome, remembering past practices that no longer meet changing moral standards, or never did. We know the kinds of stories that people tell to make themselves powerful, and we see through them. The modern origins of the historical profession lie in court recorders' describing the glory of the king and burying unpleasantness. But now we often do the opposite. The job cannot help being political, as long as storytelling and mythmaking are part of politics.

Yet to acknowledge that history is political is not to say that it necessarily favors any particular politics, nor that historians are propagandists. To the contrary, while many historians are politically active and committed, they are less frequently strident. Historians usually see historical outcomes as contingent and often unexpected. People intend one thing and produce another. America's so-called founding fathers hated political parties yet created a country that soon produced a rigid party system. People with righteous goals can become oppressors in the name of those values. The French Jacobins cried "liberty, equality, fraternity" and created a bloody dictatorship. Those who seek to end injustice are themselves flawed people. And many whom our

society now chooses to honor suffered in their own time. Martin Luther King Jr., the closest thing to a secular saint that the United States has, was profoundly unpopular at the time of his death, and the FBI apparently tried to goad him to commit suicide.

To think historically is also to see things from multiple perspectives; it is a necessary skill to think through the actions of others. When we look into the past, we see that people held views that were compatible with the way they lived. We see that their outlook on the world was a product of their time, their position within society, and their character. What seemed right and what seemed wrong to them had a great deal to do with their time in history, the society in which they lived, and the kind of power they had, or did not have. Historical thinking demands that we recognize that the same is surely true of us. Our present will soon become someone else's past, and nothing puts us outside the influence of the social forces of our own time. We too will one day be judged as flawed, and as products of our own time, just as we now see those who lived in past decades, centuries, and millennia.

The study of history often imparts a kind of humility about what actions will produce the kinds of social changes that might be judged desirable. That humility, along with the ability to grasp the logic used by even those we find disagreeable, is why historical thinking, as the scholar Nils Gilman put it, tends to "sand off the rough edges of ideology."

These professional commitments and habits do make a kind of soft liberalism the modal politics of the profession, even as a range of views, from right to left, can be found in most departments. Seeing oneself as a part of history tends to be equalizing: It exposes the radical contingency of your own existence, which usually results in taking the humanity of others as seriously as your own.

As historians, we have seen the way politics can dehumanize disadvantaged groups, and most of us reject that sort of reasoning. Assertions of group superiority, like racism, are viewed with great suspicion, for we see how these categories are created and declared to be natural, when in fact they are created and transformed as parts of shifting strategies to maintain social hierarchy. The fundamental equality of human beings, though not their

sameness, is both a professional value and one that comes from a reading of the past. Not all historians think this way, but most do, and I doubt that it is something we can or should change.

Nevertheless, we can't allow politicized attacks on the profession to define our posture when we speak in public. Sometimes journalists are pressured to report "both sides" of a conflict, without trying to sift their way to the truth. That is not how historians can, or should, act. Truths can be complex, but we cannot descend to the point at which "describing things as they occurred, with evidence" is considered politically biased. We have a professional obligation to portray, as best as we are able, things as they are or were.

Sometimes this will have political implications, and that can't be avoided. Nor do we have an obligation to be "balanced" by the standards of today's political divisions, because history was not in any way determined by today's political divisions (the opposite is closer to the case). Some mythologies about the past are more accurate than others.

In classrooms, we have a slightly different set of responsibilities. We will have students who span the political spectrum, and those who are apolitical or undecided. It is our job and our responsibility to teach them all, at a time when they may have trouble agreeing with one another or even conversing across these lines of difference. One way to breach these walls is to explain that we see ideas and ideologies as historically produced.

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We might draw up an overly schematic, probably ahistorical, but still helpful division: that conservative/liberal/radical arguments are often based on moral intuitions about who deserves power. The conservative impulse typically aligns with the claim that social elites deserve their position; liberals tend to say that that power ought to be held by those who can use it best; and radicals usually say that those who currently lack power ought to have it, and that the system must be uprooted to make that possible. We can acknowledge that each of these ideas might contain some piece of wisdom at certain moments, and that each of them might be supported by selective readings of the past. We can promise our students that, wherever they stand politically, they will be challenged by what they learn. We can insist that, should a political disagreement emerge, they should argue from considered evidence, not from ideological priors, and that we will strive to do the same. Then we must grant students their autonomy: We must strive for a common set of facts; students are free to do with those facts what they please.

To demonstrate that historical methods are frequently counterpropagandistic, we should present the documents that have led us to our conclusions. Classes should become more like labs, with students constructing knowledge out of the raw materials of primary documents. But we can't imagine that brute empiricism will always be persuasive, because the historical record may provide challenges to personal and political identities that will be hard to overcome. As best as we can, we should strive to be clearer than ever about the ways that remembering (and forgetting) are put in the service of contemporary politics. We need to show how the misuse of history — whether the history of Reconstruction, the New Deal, or even the Middle Ages — buttresses political work in our own time. Historians may be devalued, but people who despise them often take what they imagine to be the lessons of history quite seriously.

Learning about history, and learning to reason historically, may indeed affect the politics of our readers and students. We needn't apologize for this. Part of the value of our discipline should be that it produces the foundations of better social understanding. It should not only be a burden: Better historical understanding may tear down political myths, but it can also offer the possibility of restorative justice. We should insist that historical knowledge is an important ingredient of democratic citizenship. If others tell us that this has no value, then at least we know where they stand.

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