

126 Introduction-How do we know what we know?- Historiography of the Americas

This lecture is all about asking questions. So if you walk away from this with more questions than answers, don't worry- that's the point of this particular lecture.

From your syllabus, the quotes that you've been thinking about:

- 1) "Until lions have their own historians, the hunter will always be glorified" Ethiopian proverb
- 2) "Our past is only a little less uncertain than our future, and like the future, it is always changing, always revealing and concealing." Daniel Boorstin, Hidden History
- 3) "Our only duty to history is to rewrite it." Oscar Wilde
- 4) "The past is never dead. It's not even past." William Faulkner Requiem for a Nun (Act I, Scene III) (referring to, for example, the legacy of slavery [something from the past] into modern times)
- 5) "Getting History wrong is part of being a nation" Ernest Renan
- 6) "The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it"
Flannery O'Connor
- 7) Benedict Anderson argues that part of being a nation is "organized remembering and deliberate forgetting." What do you make of his view of a nation (and as a consequence, nationalism)?
- 8) "The truth shall set you free, but first it'll piss you off." Gloria Steinem

Our Intellectual Approach to the study of history:

- Motivated by intellectual curiosity with subject
- Not placing value judgments regarding outcome of events, regardless of how unpalatable the conclusions.
- Follow the thread to wherever it leads you
- To **understand** history, **not** to **justify** it

QUESTION: How do we know what we know?

What we "know" is conditioned, shaped, limited by:

- 1) the **SOURCES** we look at, or do not look at (intentionally, or not intentionally)

Ex: Columbus for generations seen as an adventurer, a hero, with countries naming cities, rivers, countries after him. Colombia is named after him and the U.S. has a national holiday "Columbus Day". With explosion of social histories written in the 1960's- paying attention to native language sources- asking questions about the consequences of the Conquest on native peoples- Columbus seen in a different light, a

more **complex** light. Natives in Honduras (the Misquito) even trying him (in absentia, obviously) for crimes against humanity.

- Archives hold documents for at least 30 years, (holds letters, directives, memos)
 - protect national security,
 - to protect the actors involved
 - for reasons of image

What happens when information comes to light that contradicts what we previously thought?

- **The power of government cultivated patriotism** is not something to take lightly.
 - think also about all of the ways that we “internalize” a nation’s history... the process of **molding public opinion**, from songs, to holidays, statues, school plays...

2) PREVAILING ATTITUDES/ VALUES OF THE TIME/ POLITICAL CLIMATE

- “When everyone is thinking alike no one is thinking much” Walter Lippman
- Which questions are “right” to ask? Which questions are “wrong” to ask? Who should be asked? Who is it ok to ignore?
- In times of political polarization such as the Cold War, anyone who questions U.S. foreign policy for example are labeled “sympathizers”, “commie pinkos”, etc... Must critical analysis of U.S. institutions or policy be “un-patriotic”?
- How about how nations view other people from other parts of the world? In Schoultz’ “Beneath the United States” there is a quote by Pres. Bush (senior) who called Daniel Ortega, the Nicaraguan President, “that unwanted animal at a garden party.” Indeed Schoultz, will dig even further back in time and present us with a quote by John Quincy Adams (albeit at age 12) where he says about Latin Americans “They are lazy, dirty, nasty and in short, I can compare them to nothing but a parcel of hogs.”
- We’ll see examples in the middle of the 19th century, the Mexican-American “War” for example, where policymakers will **justify** territorial conquest because “they [in this case, the Mexicans, from the point of view of U.S. policymakers] are inferior and need our uplifting”.

3) **PATRIOTISM/ NATIONALISM**- love of, and zealously defending of a country. How might this affect the story that a country tells about itself?

- How many times have we heard the statement: “Our country right or wrong”.
- Myth-making in history (simplifying and idealizing a nation’s narrative). (quick definition of a **myth**: a simplified and idealized truth to make a complex world meaningful and reassuring)
 - Policy makers often seek to create an official memory in order to legitimize the existing political order

- Might this lead to **emotional manipulation**?
- Consider the following cartoons on patriotism and free speech:



- “Manifest Destiny”, for example, that a nation has a “God-given right” to expand from sea to shining sea... This clearly affects a nation’s actions. Might it also affect the way a nation’s history is told over time?
- Do news programs and those passing for news programs (talk shows, for example) fall into this? What difference does it make in terms of the construction of “what we know” about a country, or about events?
- How about **media concentration** where the major networks are owned by multinational corporations [NBC being owned by General Electric; ABC being owned by Disney...] that have a vested interest in policy? Might this affect “what we know” about a country, or about events?
- Benedict Anderson argues part of being a nation “is organized remembering and deliberate forgetting”. What do you think?
- What do you think of Ernest Renan’s quote: “Getting history wrong is part of being a nation”?
- How about **Albert Camus**: “I love my country too much to be nationalist”?

4) POWER DISPARITIES (“Victors/Vanquished”; “winners” write their version, this version can become “common knowledge” or “conventional wisdom”)

- Need to keep in mind that historically, the more powerful have favored certain memories and myths over others and have sought to create a dominant (national, official) memory in order to legitimize the existing political authority.
 - Certain stories are “privileged” over others and they become part of the nation’s historical narrative
- 1960’s and 1970’s historians and social critics begin questioning the status quo (the way things are, “the system” if you will), US power, privilege of whiteness.... Previously marginalized groups began to demand a seat at the table (politically, and in history books)...Civil Rights movements, Chicano movements, Native American groups- Red Power, Brown Power, Black Power...Push for women’s rights.
- Historians also begin to ask new questions about their role and contributions. **Questioning the historical status quo** (the way things are)
- The National History Standards in the U.S., were re-written in mid 1990’s (as they are periodically) to reflect recent scholarship. Like the recent scholarship, they incorporated previously disenfranchised groups, for example: Slaves, Native people, poor folks, women...

Traditionally, these had been left out of the writing of history because as non-members of the elite, they had had little influence on events as recorded and reflected on traditional sources. (Court, church, government records, newspapers seldom included the voice of the “underdogs”)

Lynne Cheney at the NEH launched an all out attack against the “revisionists” ... “who are turning our national history on its head”.¹ During her chairmanship of the NEH from 1986 through 1992, Lynne Cheney was known for killing research projects deemed offensive to conservative orthodoxy, scribbling “not for me!” on proposals dealing with race, gender discrimination or the legacy of slavery. She considered the endowment so irredeemably left-wing that she campaigned to abolish it. She said in an interview on CNN in 2004 that she preferred an “American history that’s taught in as positive and upbeat a way as our national story deserves.”

-So, should we “deliberately forget” that which makes us uncomfortable?

¹ See "[Booklet that Upset Mrs. Cheney is History](#)" LA Times 10/8/04 (about Cheney’s role in excising any reference to the National History Standards from US Dept. of Education booklet for parents). On the debate about the National History Standards and the backlash by those who preferred a more uplifting view of history, see Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

What do you make of Flannery O'Connor's quote?

"The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it"

Or Gloria Steinem's "The truth shall set you free, but first it'll piss you off"?

These conflicts occur in every nation, we're not picking on any one. A major point here is that we need to be critical of every bit of information that comes before you.

Being critical does not mean negative criticism at all. It simply means only that one thinks about assumptions, arguments, and evidence, before internalizing them. To think critically about the assumptions behind historical interpretations, how they came to be...

A brief chronology of the history of the history of the region

1st "wave" **chronicles** – Contemporary Accounts

- Cortes' letters (Conqueror of Mexico)
- Bernal Diaz (he was present with Cortes in the conquest of Mexico)
- Lopez de Gomara – Cortes' official chaplain wrote about the conquest of Mexico, though he never even visited Mexico.
- In a sense, the 1st "historians"
- All had an axe to grind

Need to be careful, not take them at face value

1st wave of Professional historians – 1800's onward

-William Prescott, one of the first U.S. historians of Latin America, fell into the trap of taking those eyewitness accounts at face value.

-Those accounts stressed "I did this, I did that", often exaggerating their own contributions. (If you read only Cortés' narratives only, you might conclude that he single-handedly conquered the Aztecs)

-Prescott then concluded:

-that only daring spirits like Hernando Cortes (the conqueror of Mexico) could conceive of capturing Moctezuma (called Montezuma in the U.S.)... or Francisco Pizarro's capture of Atahualpa

-Thus, we see the rise of “**Great Men**” histories. Histories where certain individuals thoroughly dominate the historical landscape, bringing such things as “civilization” to others.

-Accounts that emphasized individual heroism and at the same time denigrated native culture. Characterizing native cultures as brutal and savage.

-Gives rise to the “**Great Men**” view of history, bringing civilization to backwards peoples.

Then 1930’s – 40’s began looking at **Institutional history**

- Robert Ricard writing on the history of the Church. Looking at letters to and from priests, bishops, and higher Church officials, one of his conclusions was that the Church was everywhere and that the Spiritual Conquest was all encompassing. It is not until the 1960’s when we begin to look in a systematic fashion at native language sources that our conclusions become more complex. Finding for example the ways that native peoples “nativized” the new Christian faith.

Lewis Hanke writing on the history of the Crown and its legal system came up with similar conclusions. He was paying attention to documents to and from government officials. Of course, like the Church officials, the Crown saw itself at the center of everything. Similarly we find later after historians have fanned out and sought sources from the Americas, particularly away from the capital cities, that there was much more give and take and negotiation of power. That the Crown indeed could not “dictate” legislation in the ways that the Crown made it seem.

-Again need to be critical of **the ways our conclusions can be conditioned by looking at certain types of sources only.**

Underlying all is the notion of “**History as Mining**”. In its simplest sense, when one mines and finds the “mother load” of gold, there is still wealth to be derived by continuing the more laborious and time consuming process of digging deeper to find veins of gold and even panning for gold. Though much more laborious and time consuming, ounce per ounce it is still just as valuable. “Doing” history is very similar. Historians have gone to the most obvious sources

such as those contemporary accounts mentioned above first. Then, they've consulted the documents on the church and the crown that were kept in archives in the capitals. Next, historians have fanned out beyond the archives in the capitals in search of documents in the provinces, and villages and so forth. Thus, like mining, though the process is much more laborious, the new findings are equally valuable.

Expanding to Quantitative and Economic histories in the 1950's

-moving away from official sources

-looking at tribute records, maize prices, sales of estate to get at population trends for example.

-We found out, for example that the native population in Mesoamerica (Central Mexico down to Central America) was much larger than we had previously thought.

-We used to think that about 15 million native people existed in that area (Aztecs, Mayas, etc...) and that by 1650 there were only about 1.5 million left. Most had died as a result of the diseases that Europeans brought and that natives did not have resistances to.

-Cook and Borah at UC Berkeley combed through tribute records from village to village and found that the Mesoamerican on the eve of the conquest was more like 25 million native people! So the decline to 1.5 million by 1650 was a much more cataclysmic drop than we had ever imagined.

-Similar studies on slavery uncovered information that was again shocking. On the basis of ship registers and records we found that six million Africans were brought to the Spanish and Portuguese speaking colonies.

Explosion of Social History in the 1960's

By this time, historians are fanning out all over the countryside looking at documents such as notarial records, letters in native languages, wills, testimonies, among others. Because of a number of different reasons, historians are also during this period, beginning to ask different questions from those that had been asked before. The 1960's is a time when previous **power relationships are being questioned**. The women's rights movements is gaining speed, African-Americans are stepping up the Civil Rights struggle, the American Indian Movement (AIM) is struggling for the rights of native peoples here, Chicanos in the Southwest are stepping up their demands for equality in terms of education and the like. In short, previously "marginalized"

folks are demanding political inclusion. At the same time that they are questioning the “status quo”, they are also **questioning the “historical status quo”**. That is, they are beginning to ask questions that had previously been largely ignored by historians before them. Thus, we have new generations of historians who are re-weaving, or **re-writing previously disenfranchised folks into the historical narrative**. We have then, scholars paying new attention to the voices, roles and contributions of women, native people, African Americans. As these new works are published, they **add new layers of complexity** to the versions of history that we had become familiar with. As a result, a History textbook from the 1930’s will look very different from one in the 21st century. (think about the potential clashes here).

Oftentimes, previous interpretations are being turned on their heads. By looking systematically at native language sources in Central Mexico for example, we find that the conquest was a cataclysmic event which signaled vast changes for native peoples, but their “native” world did not cease to exist. The “**Black legend**” had held that the native world had come to an end, stressing destruction and displacement. The new scholarship did not deny the destruction and displacement, but also pointed to a tremendous amount of continuity in the native world. Languages continued being spoken much longer than we had previously thought. Ways of organizing society from the choosing of political officers to marketplaces continued for centuries longer. Native religious practices continued much longer as well, albeit in new syncretic forms (incorporated into Christian beliefs, “nativizing” them in a sense).

As is clear from scholarship from the 60’s forward, **the democratic impulses of society led to, in many senses, a “democratization of history.”** In other words, new generations of historians began to “re-weave” previously ignored folks into the historical narrative and demanding space for them in the history textbooks. Has this been a seamless process? Absolutely not, this issue is always a contentious process. In fact there was a spirited debate about this process as late as 1994, when Lynne Cheney as head of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the early 90’s launched an attack on the National History Standards which were revised to incorporate this new scholarship. The attack took the form of branding the group of teachers and scholars who had revised the new standards as “revisionists who are turning our nation’s history on its head”. The full debate is narrated in “Culture Wars”, edited by Nash and Crabtree.

An example in **Mexico** in terms of the manipulation of certain images of history is instructive as well. The Text book controversy of 1992. A long story made short.

President Salinas (1988-94) wanted to be known as the “Great Modernizer”. He engaged the U.S. in talks that led to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) To this end, he “rehabilitated” the image of Porfirio Diaz (Pres. 1876-1910) who had saddled with a legacy of among other things, selling Mexico out to foreigners because of the enormous control that foreign capitalists came to have of Mexico’s resources (petroleum, copper, land, etc...). Salinas, wanted to refashion Mexican nationalism so that foreign investment would be palatable to this and future generations. He thus recruited historians to rewrite the textbooks for Mexican schoolchildren. Porfirio Diaz in this new textbook is “promoted” to a modernizer, that is, a president who laid the foundations for Mexican capitalism from railroads to port facilities and one who initiated the process of inviting to the nation established capitalists from abroad. Salinas (who we’ll talk much more about later) was also trying to bring in investors to the countryside and to do this, he took steps to solidify notions of private property. To this end, he argued he needed to “end” land reform because it was leading to the pulverization of the land into smaller and smaller parcels which would not be nearly as economically efficient as larger landholdings. In the new textbooks then, Emiliano Zapata goes from “Great Revolutionary”, a symbol of *agrarian reform* (the state taking lands and redistributing them out to the dispossessed) and defender of social justice to a “rebel without a cause.” A national hero was in effect, “demoted”. Can nations, which after all really do “promote” national heroes, “demote” them as well? The Mexican case illustrates the difficulties in this. The short answer is, in the Mexican case, nationalism was much too powerful and there was an enormous backlash against this new textbook. Led mainly by teachers, the manifestations and protests were too great and the government had to recall the books and leave Zapata in the pantheon of heroes and Diaz in the pantheon of antiheroes. The power of government cultivated nationalism is not something to take lightly. Ironically, this manufactured nationalism prevents Mexico now from privatizing PEMEX, Mexico’s oil monopoly that it expropriated from foreign interests in 1938. Thus nationalism is preventing economic efficiency.

To conclude:

In light of all of this discussion then, we need to:

- be aware that **history is forever being re-written in light of new sources that come to light, the shifting attitudes, nationalist attachments and sensibilities and shifting power disparities.**
- **be critical of interpretations, assumptions, “truths” which can become dogma** (that is, an interpretation that is so “true”, that it becomes untouchable) (to “be critical” does not mean to “bash” or “trash”, it means simply to think critically about the assumptions behind those interpretations, how they came to be...)
- to see **beyond bipolarity** (good vs. bad)- not just soul-less “winners” and obliterated “losers”, but need to see **ambivalence, nuance, negotiation, complexity.**
- To be aware of **multiple points of view.**

Some final thoughts to consider:

- Consider Howard Gardner’s view on human intuition as it relates to conflict: Gardner, a renowned educator, describes how intuitive the **good-guy/bad-guy** view of conflict is, and how difficult it is to overcome:

“Most five-year-olds have developed a *Star Wars* script. Life consists of a struggle between Good and Bad forces, with the Good generally triumphant. Many movies and television programs, and a few events in real life, can adequately be described in terms of such a script. Most historical events or works of literature, however, prove far more complex; to understand the causes of World War I or the U.S. Civil War, or to grasp the thrust of a novel by Hawthorne or Austen, one must weigh and integrate multiple factors and nuances. Students learn in class to give more complex explanations for such historical or literary events. Yet, when they are confronted with new and unfamiliar materials-- say, a story from another culture, or a war in an unfamiliar part of the world--even capable students lapse to an elemental way of thinking. The *Star Wars* "good guy-bad guy" script is often invoked in such situations, even when it is manifestly inappropriate.” Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind*

“A mark of a healthy culture is one that studies its mistakes.”

- Consider the Psychological principle of **Cognitive Dissonance**:
 - People abhor inconsistency. They don’t like conflicting beliefs in their lives.
 - When presented with information that conflicts with what we believe, we *iron out the wrinkles of dissonance.*

-We can either:

- 1) change our minds
- 2) recognize inconsistency, or
- 3) take the easy path and deny the information that is inconsistent with what we believe

“Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.” Santayana

Lastly, a warning:

With deeper learning, it can feel like one’s neat and cozy view of the world crumbles... to seeming disorder. Sometimes it is more reassuring to hark back and cling to one’s views rather than stare at the abyss of chaos/ gray/ seeming confusion. It is more reassuring to see one’s country like a Spiderman.

Happy thinking!

For further reading:

Mann, Charles. *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

“Chief Justice” LA Times 8-5-05 on NCAA banning teams from using Native American names in post-season play.

“[A Monument to Denial](#)” LA Times (about Belgium coming to grips with its history of exploitation in The Congo)

Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997)

Wineburg. *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*. Chicago: Temple University Press, 2001.

Camilla Townsend “Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico” in *The American Historical Review* 108 (3), June 2003.

Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003, c1951)

George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Plume-Harcourt Brace, 1983, c1949)

Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988)

Film: *Orwell Rolls in His Grave*