

History: Bread of the World

History is seldom a topic of conversation in my school, as it is not a required course. When history does come up, most of my peers only remember a few “outstanding events” that they talk about with flippant simplification. In view of the gravity of social, economic, political, and any other kind of problem faced today, the pursuit of historical knowledge appears to be an elitist luxury. There is the impression that historical scholarship is caviar or truffle to the exquisite intellectual appetite. While it is nutritious and delicious, studying history, especially world history, does not seem essential; what is essential is what is necessarily practical, whereas there is no visible utility for historical knowledge.

Yet, anyone who lives in the present is a recipient of history and contributor to future history. In actuality, history cannot be untangled from our lives, and world history cannot be untangled from nations’ identities. History is bread—steamed mantou or fried puri or baked brioche—that is present across cultures and that nourishes nations. Moreover, history is bread with an ever-evolving recipe. With re-examination and re-evaluation, history is constantly changing because history is not the past itself but perceptions of the past and analyses of the past. In Eric Hobsbawm’s words, “historians are the people who produce history”. Therefore, history must not only be accessible to everyone, but must be practiced by everyone to prevent authoritarian power over a nation’s identity and even the world’s identity. Studying history is analogous to critically thinking, which is not a luxury but a right that must be exercised.

An entitlement to free thought is an entitlement to learn history. A significant value

of history is its power to develop reasoning and foster critical judgment. As José Martí said, “a man’s first duty is to think for himself”. History requires exploration and evaluation based on evidence, analysis, and perspective. High school essay prompts often read as: Examine how and why the Reformation succeeded in one country, and failed in another. Analyze the political and economic incentive of fascist Italy in the Spanish Civil War. Evaluate the justifications of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, history ables us to question philosophically about common human concern. Historical implications can lead to questions of the role of a "great man" (is, as Thomas Carlyle says, history shaped by those in power? would the French Revolution have resulted in a dictatorship without Napoleon?), the function of governments (is a state necessary? According to Marxist theory, is communism possible?), the unchangeability of human nature (to what extent was World War I predictable?), and the social results of technological development (how did women’s societal role in Europe change after the industrial revolution?).

Hence, someone who studies history recognizes and acknowledges the complexities of human affairs. Someone who studies history knows that his or her perspective and judgment is valid if it has ample evidence, and anyone else’s perspective and judgment is valid as well if it has ample evidence. Someone who studies history will not be inclined to look for simple solutions to complex problems, because examining past societies has shown that social problems cannot be simplified. Someone who studies history will not expect society to achieve utopia, because studying history has made him aware of man's limitations. On the other hand, someone who studies history knows that the present crisis is unprecedented in its dimensions, yet will not give up in despair, because history proves that humans are capable of considerable moral and social progress.

Like staple bread, the past of the world is the thread that connects the world today. World history shows possibilities for global issues. World history is a looking glass that provides a nuanced perspective into present-day issues. Gandhi demonstrated that military violence is not the only answer. The era of the Silk Road showed that it is possible for different peoples to coexist and thrive; peoples of the Roman Empire, Tang Dynasty China, India, and the Ottoman Empire—peoples of various ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic communities—dealt with one another on a regular basis and prospered because of it. World history that different perspectives lead to different actions. Regarding America's unilateral power, Marxist-revisionist historian Howard Zinn would criticize America's exploitative actions and argue that a socialist agenda should be employed in global affairs, and therefore the world should have no hegemonic power. Niall Ferguson, however, argues a hegemon is necessary to provide stability to the world. These different viewpoints enriches the discussion and consideration of China or Russia's challenge to America's unilateral influence, and what effects are to be anticipated.

The privilege to acquire historical knowledge and have academic discussions about history is rather pristine in the sense that it is unused. George Orwell warned about the consequences of lacking history and critical thinking in *1984* in his horrific illustration of a totalitarian regime. As George Orwell wrote, "Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing." Without exercising the right to history and hence critical thinking, humanity will spoil and rot. Humanity will be without identity. People will only enjoy the sugary foods and static lifestyles that is provided to them. Of course, while history will inevitably change with constant revision, it is in the power of those who practice history to direct this

change. Historians knead the dough of history, yet under scrutiny, historical discourse can be organic and academic rather than political. Scrutiny is best provided by the public, and the public is everyone. Taking advantage of the privilege of access to history rather than taking it for granted is necessary to steer the world in the opposite direction of *1984*.

While history does not have obvious utility, it provides wisdom that is fundamental to make use of anything. It is the nourishment that provides us strength to wield a plow or write long essays. It is the staple bread in every household across the world that is changing for the nutrition of the world if we require it be so.