

Foundations of World Civilization: Notes 23
Truth and other concluding thoughts
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- Paper thesis advice
 - for those who are writing the optional third paper...
 - but also for anyone who might write a history or social science paper in the future
 - a history paper's thesis should be *historical*: it should deal with events of the past, rather than opinions of today
 - No: "The cultural and scientific achievements of the *dar al-Islam* are an inspiration for Muslims."
 - this cannot be supported with primary sources from the past, because it is really a comment about today
 - Yes: "The religious tolerance of the Abbasid *dar al-Islam* contributed to its prosperity."
 - this could be supported with primary sources that document this religious tolerance, and that show how people of other religions contributed to the economy or in other ways
 - a history paper's thesis should be *specific*, not just a value judgment
 - No: "Greek sculpture was advanced and important."
 - this is basically a matter of personal taste, and what people of our artistic tradition think is good and important
 - although if "advanced" and "important" were more specifically defined, it might be possible to support this with a lot of detailed comparative evidence about sculptures from Greek and other traditions
 - showing that Greek sculptors did specific things better, making their work "advanced"
 - and then had an influence on others, making their work "important"
 - but this goes far beyond a brief history paper
 - Yes: "Greeks used the belief in oracles as a way to resolve political disagreements in a legitimate way, so that everyone could support a decision"
 - this could be supported by looking at a number of cases (by different authors) in which Greeks sent for advice from an oracle after a period of disagreement and debate, then took unified action afterwards
 - a good thesis does not have to be huge and significant
 - the best papers are usually about small, specific theses
 - because those can be strongly defended
 - the reader would rather be convinced of something small
 - than left unimpressed about something big
 - No: "The Republican 'democratic' system of government is what allowed Rome to become a successful empire."
 - this is an important claim, but a huge one that even a long book would have trouble supporting conclusively
 - Yes: "Some Roman slaves were entrusted with financial matters."
 - this could easily be supported with several examples, and it suggests a different view of slavery than we usually think of

- how to come up with a thesis:
 - find three or four sources about one general theme
 - read them carefully and see where they overlap, agree, contradict each other, etc.
 - think about what they imply about the subject
 - whatever finding they lead you to will probably be a good thesis that you can support with those sources
 - that is, let the facts that you have in hand lead you to a conclusion
 - then use your paper to take your reader on that same journey, convincing them that the conclusion is correct
- Arnold’s thoughts on history and truth
 - nice example with two versions of Sojourner Truth’s famous “a’r’nt I a woman?” speech
 - clever choice in that her adopted name was “Truth”
 - which is “true”? what is “truth” in history?
 - we can’t actually know
 - we can use some methods to suggest which is more likely to be closer to the words she actually said
 - one was written almost immediately after the speech, the other 12 years later
 - one was written by someone who knew her and was there, the other by someone who didn’t and wasn’t
 - one was written by a reporter, the other by an activist with a cause
 - etc.
 - we can look at other documents about similar people and figure out a “mentalité”, or typical way of thinking and speaking for such people at this time
 - then pick which fits that best
 - but this assumes that this particular speaker was typical, and fit the “mentalité” we have reconstructed
 - it also assumes that the “mentalité” is correct
 - but consider that it is based on written sources which themselves have biases
 - so maybe the “mentalité” based on these biased sources reflects exactly the wrong ideas that someone like Sojourner Truth would have been arguing against!
 - but *both* versions clearly have biases, neither is likely to be exactly what she said
 - we should recognize that there is probably some value to both of them, even though they disagree
 - the false dichotomy of “history as science” (or history as “objective”) versus “history as art” (or history as “subjective”)
 - history as art: tries to capture the essence, and convey the meaning of what occurred
 - this is necessarily subjective
 - but like a good novel, it may be more “true” about life than the bare “objective” facts would be
 - history as science: tries to avoid such interpretation, but to get the specifics as right as possible
 - this, too, is inevitably subjective
 - obviously necessary

- but also obviously limited
 - reading Sojourner Truth’s actual words on paper might not be much like hearing her speak in that context
 - and might miss out on what people took away from what she said, that is, the impact of the speech
- history has to be both
- all history is necessarily subjective
 - both because the sources were written by people with their own viewpoints, assumptions, etc.
 - and because all historians necessarily have their own viewpoints, assumptions, etc., no matter how hard they try for “objectivity”
 - just as there is no such thing as “fair and balanced” or “unbiased” journalism
 - it is all written by people who have assumptions and make judgments
- but we obviously have to strive to stick to what the sources actually support
- alternative truths
 - classical political history (still the focus of textbooks like ours and classes like this one) provides one “truth” about what happened in the past
 - kicked off by Thucydides, with his dry, politics-based approach
 - history of gender relations provides a different narrative
 - at some points, the very same people, events, “facts” will seem different from this point of view
 - example: Joan of Arc
 - for some, a story about women’s roles, rights, and treatment
 - for others, a story about a political and military conflict
 - for others, a story about religious zealotry in conflict with an institutional church
 - we can’t really say that one point of view or the other is any better or more correct
 - so we have to accept these multiple points of view as each instructive in some way
 - and just live with the ambiguity
 - history of race relations, still another
 - history of class relations, a related but still different narrative
 - history of science and technology, a very different one yet again
 - it is not that one is more right than the other, but that all are views of a complex whole that we can’t really comprehend all at once
- so, why study history?
 - poor reasons
 - to guide decisions in the present
 - no one ever seems to really do this
 - and history cannot, in fact, predict the future
 - to establish and maintain identity
 - true, but risky
 - because it tends to lock us in to the patterns of the past
 - denying the possibility of change
 - 1. enjoyment: it is interesting and enriching to learn about the past

- 2. informs our thinking: comparisons with past experience can help us draw conclusions and think about what to do
 - looking at the past throws the present into relief by contrast
 - we can see what is different, and maybe important, about the present
 - which we might not have recognized without knowing about the past
 - this is amazingly like one of the justifications for anthropology:
 - looking at other cultures helps us understand our own culture by contrast
- 3. shows us alternatives: things have been different in the past, so they don't have to remain the same as they are now
 - "History provides us with the tools to dissent."
 - proves that other ways of doing things have worked in the past
 - allowing us to be more confident in pushing for change in the present
 - again, amazingly like a justification for anthropology:
 - other cultures show us that many things about our own are not permanent, natural parts of being human, but are just one way of doing things out of the many that people have tried
 - G.W. Bush's claim that marriage between a man and a woman is the only, ancient, immutable way
 - history and anthropology both show that that is simply not true
 - whatever you think of the alternatives, you can't argue that there are none
 - nor that our current way is particularly special, ancient, natural, etc.
 - because there *have* been lots of alternatives tried in the past (or in other cultures)
- So, we can learn from the past
 - history repeats itself in some ways
 - gives us examples and comparisons
 - should give us more material to work with when thinking about what to do now, and whether and how to change...
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