



History Politicized

Those on the conventional right incessantly lament the ignorance of history from which younger generations of Americans suffer. While it is true that Americans appear to know frighteningly little about their country's past, perhaps this has something to do with the abuse to which the concept of history has been subjected.

[The very concept of "history" is in an abysmal condition of neglect.](#) For this, partisans from across the political spectrum are to blame. Much more frequently than not, when those on both the right and the left advocate the teaching of "history," it isn't a distinct, autonomous line of inquiry or discipline to which they want people exposed; rather, what they champion is the promotion of their respective political-moral visions under the guise of "history." That this is so is readily born out by the titles of some of the more popular contemporary "history" books: [A People's History of America](#); [The Last Best Hope](#); [The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History](#); [A Patriot's History of The United States](#), etc.



In other words, "history" has been reduced to morality. Those on the left exploit the name of "history" in order to impress upon audiences their notion of an America conceived in corruption. Thus, "history" texts authored by leftists invariably accentuate those passages of our national life that fit most readily into the template of "racism" and "sexism" that they seek to impose upon them. In contrast, those authored by rightists, while not devoid of all references to some of America's more oppressive chapters, tend to romanticize our country. Among the most salient ways in which they seek to obtain this end is by stressing what is commonly called "[American Exceptionalism](#)," the concept that the United States stands alone among the nations of the world in being the only country that has ever been founded upon, not "the accidents of history," but a *universal, self-evident* moral truth: the truth that *all* human beings are possessed of God-given "unalienable rights."

But if history is a distinct discipline, then it is as illegitimate to import *moral* judgments into it as it is illegitimate to import aesthetic judgments into, say, the study of biology. Just as the marine biologist looks upon the ocean, not as God's creation or an artwork, but as the environment that nurtures the organisms on which he sets his sights, so the genuine historian is concerned with informing us of *what* happened in the past — not what *should have* happened. For example, it is proper for the moralist to characterize slavery as "reprehensible" or "evil"; the mode of the historian, on the other hand, is devoid of all such normative terms.



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on July 11, 2011

Biographies of, say, [Abraham Lincoln](#), that heap either praise or scorn upon our sixteenth president, although they may be truthful, are not *historical*. Lincoln may very well have been among the wisest of men as [Harry Jaffa](#) and legions of others insist, or he may have been a deceitful tyrant, as [Thomas DiLorenzo](#) and a not insignificant minority of scholars contend. What we must grasp is that this is a debate that lies outside the province of the historian.

If we are in the right in regarding history as a distinct field of inquiry, then it is improper for us at the same time to enlist it in the service of either present or future moral ends. Most “historians” today actually *exploit* the past for the sake of advancing a moral or political agenda of one sort or another. Now, there is nothing illicit about the activity of drawing upon the past in order to illuminate present circumstances; indeed, it is both necessary and desirable that we do as much. The point, however, is that whatever else we may say of this engagement of mining the past for present reward, we must *not* say that it is historical.

Because a person’s very identity is constituted by the events that he’s experienced, it is inevitable that we shall be forever recalling episodes from our pasts. Yet only if we are determined to divest the concept of history of all meaning will we then conclude from this that each of us is a historian. If everyone is a historian, then no one is. Similarly, the examples of virtuous characters from our civilization’s past promise to impart much in the way of moral instruction. Unless, though, we want to regard “history” texts along exactly the same lines as we tend to regard children’s stories — as sources of moral education and entertainment — we must grant that searching the past for even noble present purposes like the inculcation of excellence is most definitely *not* an *historical* enterprise.

No, as [Michael Oakeshott observed](#), it isn’t the historian’s interest in the past that distinguishes him as the figure that he is; it is his interest in the past *for its own sake* that makes him a historian.

The nineteenth century philosopher [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) thought that objectivity was a fiction. Every living organism, he argued, was fundamentally motivated by what he called “the will to power,” the impulse to satiate its needs and desires by dominating its surroundings. The human being differs from all other living things only insofar as his intelligence is concerned, for humans seek to exploit and subjugate one another not just through brute force, but through what we may call rational *coercion*. No person will come right out and tell others that he *needs* for them to believe as he does; this simply would go no distance toward attaining the sought after objective. Rather, he will do what, according to Nietzsche, philosophers have been doing for as long as they have been around: he will avoid all self-references and appeal only to such “objective” criteria as Reason, Truth, Natural Law, God, and so forth.

Now, there is much over which to quarrel with Nietzsche. But his thought is not without its share of insights. There can be no denying that far too frequently the beliefs that we profess are informed by motives that haven’t anything to do with the search for truth. Neither can we deny that just as frequently we attempt to hide these motives, from both ourselves and others, by cloaking them with the language of objectivity.

The appeal to “history,” I hope the reader now recognizes, is but another way that ideologues of one sort or another have done this.



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