

Studying History

Years ago, as a freshman in college, someone once asked me at a party why I chose to study history. My rather unsophisticated response was: “Because I love it.” The questioner was unimpressed and seemed to think that I could be doing something more productive or lucrative with my life. In my heart, my love for history remains the primary reason why I have committed my life to studying humanity’s past. Yet over the years, I have come to realize that such simple explanations simply do not cut it in our fast-paced, goals- and profit-oriented society. If you decide to study history, you too will be faced inevitably with the question “Why study history?” And as much as our love for the topic and the pursuit of knowledge should be enough to satisfy the critics, it rarely is. Fortunately, there exist numerous reasons why the study of history is not only worthwhile but also indispensable both to you, as an individual, and to our society as a whole.

When asked why you study history, I would strongly urge you to avoid answering with that tired old retort: “Those who do not learn about the past are doomed to repeat it.” While one of the chief benefits of studying history is that we can draw invaluable lessons from the past, if history has shown one thing, it is that humanity routinely repeats many of its mistakes. A better response would be that you study history, in part, because you want to understand what it is about human society that enables people to continually make the same mistakes. History, as a record of humanity’s past, provides us with the necessary framework to understand who we are and why we behave as we do.

Recognizing the influence of history on contemporary thought and behavior also helps you situate yourself in an often chaotic and confusing world. When you study history, you begin to recognize some of the powerful intellectual and structural forces that guide our lives, often without our ever noticing them. On the one hand, the realization that much of how we think or behave is shaped by social forces centuries old (or even millennia old!) can be overwhelming. On the other hand, such a realization can be liberating. You begin to comprehend the vast and complex puzzle that is life. You recognize patterns others have missed. You begin to see where change and progress are possible, and how to go about effecting such changes in society as well as in your own personal life. You begin a lifelong journey to self-betterment.

Above all, you gain an important level of independence. You begin to see through half-truths and lies, and you learn to recognize specious reasoning. Concerning the power of history, George Orwell wrote in his dystopian novel *1984*: “He who controls the present controls the past. He who controls the past controls the future.” Although incredibly dark and perhaps a bit too simplistic, Orwell makes a sobering point. Modern society is based not merely on what has come before, but more importantly, on how we *interpret* and *understand* the past. The totalitarian dictatorships of the modern era demonstrated with dismaying brutality how easily the past could be abused and misinterpreted to suit a regime’s ideological goals. Although studying history does not free you from its influence, it does grant you the independence of mind and spirit to decide for yourself what life means and where you fit in, as opposed to

relying on others to do it for you. To my mind, that is a truly empowering and liberating thought.

Studying history also serves a valuable function by demonstrating how our views on various historical topics have changed, and thus how those changes reflect our evolution as a society. All historical writing is a direct response to questions posed by everyday society. All too often, I encounter people who ask me pointedly: “Oh? You write about that topic? Don’t we already know everything there is to know?” I cheerfully reply that no, we do not know everything about the topic, because society’s views on the topic and the questions we ask about it are forever changing. History is not a static field of study. The facts might remain constant but how we interpret them is in constant flux. Consider if you will the American Civil War. Fifty years ago, we might have claimed that we already knew everything that happened during that bloody conflict. However, back then, society was little concerned with the experiences of women and black people, and thus their experiences were left out of histories of the Civil War. However, the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the women’s rights movement of the 1970s prompted new questions from society, and historians responded by going back and revisiting what they thought they already knew about the Civil War. The fluid relationship between solid historical facts and shifting social interpretation means that history will always have something relevant to say.

Despite these excellent recommendations, perhaps you are still thinking: “Yes, yes, that is all very noble and high minded, but I need to make a living. I want to be famous. I want to be wealthy. All I can do with history is teach.” Although many a historian might pretend to be scandalized by the mention of anything so nonintellectual as fame and fortune, the fact remains that many people feel hesitant to pursue a field that, with the exception of teaching or the academy, has no direct professional corollary out in the “real world.”

I must admit, as a college history instructor, I have encountered many students who have told me that they wish they could major in history, but they want to make money one day. Or else, they want to major in history, but their parents are footing the bill for college, and they feel that business or economics or pre-law would be a more sensible major. No matter how often I hear these explanations, they never cease to sadden me. History is one of the most comprehensive fields of study, and a sound grasp of history and historical method can take you anywhere you wish to go in life.

Every element of our society and every facet of your life is the product of history. Whatever your intended career may be—art, business, law, finance, politics, philosophy, nonprofit work—history is an ideal place to begin pursuing it. Understanding the history behind your professional interests deepens your own knowledge and allows you to recognize nuances that might escape many of your peers. For example, the current debates in American society surrounding how to interpret the United States Constitution are not new. Much of American history has been influenced by the same debates, in one variation or another. An understanding of *The Federalist Papers* and the political debates in the decades immediately following the end of the American Revolution gives you an advantage in the world of law and politics. Or perhaps you wish to go into international nonprofit work. Your knowledge of world history and cultural traditions will stand you in good stead as you work to build bridges

and change the world. The context that history provides enables you to adjust nimbly to the always-changing nature of contemporary life, while recognizing that nothing in our world develops in a vacuum: everything has a past.

In other cases, though, the value of studying history is much more subtle, and lies in the development of your critical and analytical thinking skills. You learn how to write clearly, succinctly, and cogently—universally useful skills. You learn to look at a collection of seemingly disparate ideas or patterns and tie them together. History is more than learning dates and names. Studying history is about learning to think creatively. It is prism through which to view life, giving you concrete events through which to examine more intangible and pressing philosophical problems. Studying history allows you to approach any problem, whether in business or in your personal life, with greater confidence and maturity, because you are prepared to examine the problem with greater subtlety of mind. Many of the world's most successful lawyers, businesspeople, and politicians have studied history, and it has served them well in their careers. Indeed, President Woodrow Wilson earned his PhD in history and political science. History teaches you to think creatively, and a creative mind is usually well prepared to successfully handle life's challenges.

I hopefully have allayed any nagging doubts you might have had about why history is important. Ultimately, however, explaining the importance of studying history is not the same thing as explaining why *you* should study history. I still believe, as I did as a college freshman, that the real reason to study history is because it speaks to you, because it inspires you to be a better person, and, above all, because you love it. If you decide to study history, you will always encounter the occasional naysayer, the one who thinks you are wasting your time on an esoteric pursuit. In those cases, think about what I have written above, and take heart. Studying history is central to who we are as people, and understanding history can take you anywhere you want to go in life, whether it be in medicine, law, landscaping, watchmaking, or the avant-garde art world. As long as you love it and understand everything it can do for you and for others, you will succeed in life and thrive in your chosen career path.