Janine Cannick

Keywords #1

English 4960: Keywords

Dr. Field

History

As a child and as an adult, I enjoyed learning about the past, so naturally my favorite subject was **history**. I loved learning about the people that came before me, and the things that they had done to make them noteworthy. Whether it had been amazing like the Neil Armstrong walking on the moon or something horrific like the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, **history** has filled me with wonder, and will continue to. **History** like literature has a way of allowing you live many lives at once, and I believe it is because of this reason why **history** is a problematic subject. **History** should be an “organized knowledge of the past;”[[1]](#footnote-0) however, it is not. If I had learned anything in my college career, it would be that **history** can and will be changed to fit a specific narrative.

It is because of this narration that **history** is susceptible to this alteration. The need for a story, specifically, a good story often trumps the facts and the events leading up a major past events. For example, we are taught in school that in 1492 Christopher Columbus set sail to find a new passage Western passage to India, but instead of India Christopher Columbus found America instead thus we have a day off in October to celebrate the man who found this great land. When we frame Columbus as the brave adventurer, it easy to forget out the atrocities he committed in the name of discovery. It was not until I did my own outside reading about Columbus that I realized that Columbus was not the hero he was made to be, but rather a horrifying figure that we praise for discovering a land that had already been discovered by the people who had lived on it for generations. It is also conveniently omitted that Columbus ended up in the Caribbean and not in what is now the United States of America. **History** is supposed to be an organized knowledge of past, but if Columbus has taught us anything it is not. With elementary school textbooks saying one thing, and books about Columbus in *Barnes & Noble* saying another, it would be hard to discern the truth of the past. The validity of the past is only one issue I have with history, my biggest issue with history is the omission of certain histories all together.

Omission of histories has allowed for there to be a lack of understanding why things are the way they are in present time. Omission of certain histories could happen for different reasons, but the one reason I would like to focus on is philosopher G.W. F. Hegel brought up in his own work. In the *Philosophy of History,* Hegel claimed that Africa had no history and “it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.” [[2]](#footnote-1) By this logic, because Africa does not have the same written records, nor does it have the same technology as Europe, Africa is a place that does not have history so it does not require further study. I would argue the contrary. If I was Hegel, I would want know since there was not the exact same way of life why that is and how these people came to be, but Hegel being the Eurocentric man that he is believed it the European way is the only way to do things. We can see this idea has not died with Hegel. We can see its manifestation in the core course that we are taught at our own university as well as others. For example, every student that attends Clemson University is expected to take a general history course that focuses on Western history. This course is supposed to make students more well rounded, and have a better understanding of the word, but I would argue that the course only reinforces the only real ideas of the world and progress comes from the Western part of the world ignoring the achievements of those people who live outside Europe. The problem with studying only European ideas and past events is we dismiss the greatness of other peoples.

Native American **history** comes to mind when I think of a group of people conveniently left out of the Western canon. Western is word we automatically ascribe to European ideas, but Western could and should also include the native peoples of North and South America. Technically, the native peoples of North and South should be described as “Western” because they are from the Western Hemisphere of the world, but they are not. What we call Western, we actually mean European, but since it has been taught for such a long time that Europe is West and the West is the innovator of ideas and progress that is no going back on the name change as well as most of the real “Western” people are no longer around to lay claim to the name. Hegel would probably use the same argument for the Native Americans if he was given the chance to analyze them in the same manner he did with Africa. He would say that Native Americans did not have **history**, and it was not until Europeans settled the land that **history** was obtainable.

Today, I would argue you that **history** is different from the ways Hegel and Williams believed it to be. Williams saw **history** is a layered concept that is able to explain how a society or group of people have gotten to a certain point. Hegel would argue that **history** can only be achieved only if there was progress in a society or a group of people, and those who did not fall into that criteria were not in the “real theatere of **History**.”[[3]](#footnote-2) **History** is complicated, because there will always be tension about what constitutes **history**, who makes it, and who is allowed to write about it. **History** simply is not the past, and if it was just the past then our school textbooks would have looked a lot different, and I think many children would have grown up extremely jaded. **History** is a combination of retelling of events and the addition of perspective of the author, so by this understanding it is possible to view history as subjective rather than objective retelling of events we are lead to believe as soon as children have entered the school system.

1. Raymond Williams, Keywords: A vocabulary of Culture and Society (Oxford: Oxford

   University Press, 2015), p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, The Philosophy of History (Mineola: Dover Publications, INC. 1956), p. 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, The Philosophy of History (Mineola: Dover Publications, INC. 1956), p. 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)