

The Importance of Studying History

“He who cannot draw on three thousand years is living hand to mouth”, the German philosopher Goethe reputedly stated in the 19th century.¹ While one can hardly agree with the foolish and uninformed Goethe’s implicit suggestion that Western civilization possesses but three thousand years of history, it is difficult not to sympathize with the sentiment behind his words. The reason why is because without a knowledge of our own—indeed, our own society’s—past, we are but flesh-based automatons drifting from one intersection to the next without any idea about how we beat the paths along which we and our fellows stroll. Why might we prefer a simple repast of fruit over a lavish dessert of dark chocolate, friendly discussion over heated argument, mountain climbing over watching movies, etc.? Why is my country open or opposed to absorbing new ideologies, and how might this situation change over time? Why am I disgusted by the thought of men dressing as women but welcome marriage between homosexuals with open arms? These and other questions can be answered (albeit if only partially) through an exploration of history.

Studying history can provide us a rich perspective from which to understand the present. To an Iranian politician familiar with the legacy of tension between Islam and Christianity since even before the Crusades, it may seem that the reluctance of representatives from many countries to accept largely Muslim Turkey into the historically Christian European Union reflects a continued enmity between adherents to two ideologies instead of mature and rational decision-making. Conversely, a Filipino student ill-versed in the isolationist history of Korea might take the Seoul locals’ cold reception of foreigners too personally, causing him unnecessary stress during his 3 semesters abroad in the statistics department of the Yonsei University. In each of these cases an understanding of history can at least grant us a roughly factual angle from which to evaluate situations which may otherwise seem senseless or disconcerting, even if it (indeed, if anything)! cannot offer us a full assessment of their causes and influences on our lives.

¹ Goethe. 19th century. <http://www.pithypedia.com/?author=Johann+Wolfgang+von+Goethe>.

Studying history can also enable us to improve the future. An examination of the failures of the American response to the Great Depression, for instance, might help analysts and policymakers today decide how best to divert the course of our current economic crisis without recourse to another world war. “The Fed's classic mistake that led to the Great Depression was that it tightened monetary policy when it should have eased. Mr. Bernanke didn't repeat that error. And Congress moved more swiftly to approve fiscal stimulus than most Washington veterans thought possible”, reports *The Wall Street Journal*,² suggesting that the leaders of the world is indeed taking advantage of their historical knowledge to overcome this difficulty as smoothly as possible. Similarly, understanding how violent revolutions came about may help today's citizens make more informed and effective decisions about how to avoid them now.

Finally, studying history can make us look more appealing to potential mating partners. When we're chilling next to the vegetable plate at a cocktail party looking to make some friends, what is cooler than dropping a few lines of Platonius or striking up a conversation about the marginalization of yeoman farmers in the historiography of the premodern Russia? For males, such a tactic is a surefire method for making friends with beautiful women. For females, there is no better way to scare off creepy guys whom you don't particularly want to talk to, leaving yourself clear for the handsome gentlemen, friendly male neighbors and dashing Peking University graduates who do manage to catch your eye. As English scholar Sir Francis Bacon said in his *Religious Meditations*, “Knowledge is power,” and I agree.

The clear importance of studying history reveals in the examples mentioned above. Thanks for listening!

Bibliography:

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<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122169431617549947.html>

² <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122169431617549947.html>.