

What is History?

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- Discuss Assignment #1: Abstracts and citations
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 - click on the link. If you only see the first page or the abstract and bibliographic info, copy the article's title, note which database it is, log into the database through the library webpage, and search for the title
 - library.Sonoma.edu
 - databases
 - history
 - JSTOR or Academic Search Premier(EBSCO)
 - paste the title into the search area
 - search for it
- What is history?
 - first, some semantics
 - the term *history* can refer to several things
 - all the events that actually happened in the past
 - as in “The history of China was long and complex”
 - Ibn Khaldun uses this definition on p. 35 of the reading
 - “...history, in matter of fact, is information about human social organization...”
 - the discipline or field of study of these events
 - as in “History will judge the success of the last president.”
 - Ibn Khaldun uses this definition on p 5 of the reading
 - “History is a discipline widely cultivated among nations...”
 - a written account of what happened: the product of a historian's work
 - as in “I read the History of the Peloponnesian War”
 - in this sense, history is always a selected and interpreted version of what actually happened
 - and the philosophical or literary among you could probably split out one or two other senses of the term
 - some ideas from Arnold 2000, chapter 1
 - historiography has two meanings (p 5)
 - the process of writing history
 - the study of the process of writing history
 - ‘history’: a true story...retold in the present (p 3-5)
 - that is, a narrative [a key word for history theorists]
 - but the past is chaos, not stories (p 6)
 - historians pull out parts that make satisfying narratives, but this is a literary, emotional, arbitrary imposition on the evidence
 - history is based on a biased subset of all possible documents (p 6)

- that happen to have been made, for specific reasons
- that happen to have survived, usually for specific reasons
- and that have been SELECTED by historians as being of interest (p 8)
- that is, the facts are not just “out there”; what counts as evidence is determined by what interests a historian, fits his/her ideas, etc.
 - that, in turn depends on the historian’s culture
 - and the intellectual fashions, interests, issues, etc. of the time in which the historian lives and works
 - both change over time
 - so the history of a period written at one time, by a historian of one culture, will be different by the history of that same time written at a different time, or by a historian of a different culture
 - we will see an example of this with early history of India later in this class
- So history is subject not only to gaps in the documentary evidence, but also to culture, interests, beliefs, schools of thought of historians
 - even though historians never (we hope!) fabricate or lie
 - they always try to find out “what actually happened”
- the past is interesting for the light it can cast on our own present by comparison, because much of it is so strange or different from our present (p 6-7)
 - “the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there”
 - this is very much the same as what cultural anthropologists do when studying foreign cultures
 - and what archaeologists do when studying past cultures
 - note that this is exactly the opposite of what Toynbee said in our previous reading:
 - that civilizations, wars, etc. are all “contemporary”, essentially comparable attempts at the same kinds of things
 - he emphasizes not the strangeness or difference, but the similarity of past and present
 - of 20th-century Europe and 5th-century BC Greece
 - which view do you agree with?
 - the past is like the present and shows us what might happen to us now
 - or the past is strange and foreign, and highlights features of the present by contrast?
 - can both be true?
- Modern historians must “interpret the past, not simply present it” (p 8)
 - How do we “interpret” the past?
 - we *use* the past to derive some *meaning* from it
 - Place it in a larger context, so that it can answer more general questions
 - take a specific historical case, and draw a general conclusion from it
 - in this example: secrets will come out
 - or: if you are going to betray someone, be careful who you talk to!
 - take a specific historical case, compare it to others, and make general conclusions
 - maybe compare this case to some other cases of spying, or of heretical religious movements, in order to figure out some general patterns about them
 - take a specific historical case and use it to fill in parts of a larger subject (p 10-11)

- like using the Déjean murder story for its information about the inquisition
- or the history of crime
- or the political history of the Languedoc region of southern France
- mine the specific case for small fragments of information not necessarily important to the story, but useful in other contexts (p 11)
 - about who was literate, where bridges were located, storage structures for grain, how people kept track of dates... (p 11)
 - these build up a picture of a world that was taken for granted by the people whose words we are reading
- if the past came to us clearly, without questions about what actually happened and why, there would be no need for historians
 - the same has been said about archaeologists!
- “History is above all else an argument” (p 13)
 - historians are always trying to convince you of something
 - that their version of what actually happened is correct
 - that some other version is wrong
 - that their explanation is correct
 - of what it “means”
- “The past itself is not a narrative... it is as chaotic, uncoordinated, and complex as life. History is about making sense of that mess, finding or creating patterns and meanings and stories from the maelstrom.” (p 13)
- History is a process (p 5, 14)
 - what does Arnold mean by this?
 - it is never finished
 - history is an ongoing debate about facts and meanings
- Arnold will address in a later section:
 - what is history for?
 - who is history for?
- some ideas from Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah*, written in 1377
 - suggestion:
 - last time I suggested reading with Google handy, to check what unknown words mean
 - also good to check place names and find maps
 - Tunis, Fez, Maghrib, etc.
 - also good for unfamiliar historical references
 - Hafsid rulers to whom Ibn Khaldun’s family was attached (Hafsid dynasty)
 - Merinid dynasty (Ibn Khaldun’s next patron, at Fez)
 - and other background
 - Hadith (commentary on the Qur’an, which is said to be the exact words of God as relayed by the prophet Muhammad; comparable to the Jewish Talmud teachings about the holy book, the Torah)
- background on Ibn Khaldun (reading by Dawood 1958)
 - born 1332 to an old, aristocratic family in Tunis (central coast of North Africa)

- note that this was slightly after the murder of Guilhem Dejean in 1301... the Arabic speaking Muslim world was a totally different one...
- very well educated in
 - Qur'an, Hadith
 - Muslim law (a practical as well as scholarly skill)
 - poetry and grammar (essential to be fully literate)
 - later in Sufism (mystical subset of Islam), buried in a Sufi cemetery
 - see the film *Monsieur Ibrahim* for some nice glimpses of modern Islam and Sufism
- hops from kingdom to kingdom in the Arab world, various places between Tunis and Gibraltar, and Granada (Spain); later goes to Cairo, and after writing the *Muqaddimah*, to Damascus, Jerusalem, etc.
- involved in wars, diplomacy, captured, released...
- all this clearly predisposed him to the theory of history he proposed in the *Muqaddimah* and the rest of his history
- ideas from Ibn Khaldun
 - What is history, according to Ibn Khaldun?
 - as we saw, on p 5 he calls it a discipline
 - and on p 35 he calls it “information about human social organization”, that is, facts about the social world
 - to Ibn Khaldun, these facts include “conditions affecting civilization” (social organization), such as
 - savagery and sociability (?)
 - group feelings
 - solidarity, ethnic identity, nationalism, patriotism, loyalty to a religious group, etc.
 - “the different ways by which one group of human beings achieves superiority over another”
 - “royal authority, ...dynasties..., and the various ranks that exist within them”
 - that is, political organization and power
 - “different ways of making a living”
 - that is, economic organization
 - “sciences and crafts”
 - other institutions
 - sounds like sociology, anthropology, political science, economics...
 - on the surface, history is just facts about political events, etc. (p 5), of the kinds listed on p 35
 - these are elegantly presented, entertaining, informative
 - but history also has an “inner meaning”
 - it involves speculation, explanation, seeking causes and origins, the hows and whys of events
 - Ibn Khaldun promises to point out lessons to be learned from history
 - Ibn Khaldun complains that it takes insight to seek out the truth of facts and the explanations of them, and many scholars have not been doing this
 - “...the pasture of stupidity is unwholesome for mankind” !

- the first pages of the reading emphasize how important it is to seek explanations, the “inner meaning”
 - complaining that other historians have not been doing this
- briefly mentions the theory he will propose
 - based on two races, the Arabs and the Berbers, and the urban, civilized groups versus the powerful, nomadic ones
 - this will explain the rise of cities, civilization, social complexity
- by studying this “inner meaning” the student will learn about the past... and “that [which] will obtain thereafter”: the future! (p 8)
- promises “an exhaustive history of the world”, but really focuses on the Maghrib (Maghreb)
 - the part of the Dar al-Islam that he knows, thought was important, and both inspired and fit his theory of history
 - a bit of ego on this guy!
 - Dar al-Islam: the Islamic world or realm
 - Maghrib: Muslim, Arabic-speaking northwest Africa and adjacent parts of Spain (in Ibn Khaldun’s time)
- Ibn Khaldun points out that history is “afflicted” by untruth
 - implication is that we must detect and avoid it
 - just as modern historians emphasize the critical assessment of sources
 - reasons:
 - 1. partisanship, favoring certain ideas or schools of thought
 - people who are partisan tend to uncritically accept “facts” that agree with their point of view
 - so we may accept things that are untrue
 - the Democratic view vs. the Republican view, for example
 - 2. “reliance on transmitters” without using “personality criticism”
 - that is, uncritically accepting what a source says as true
 - what does he mean by “personality criticism”?
 - evaluating how reliable a given source is
 - is he/she biased, lying, not fully informed, etc.?
 - 3. unawareness of an event’s purpose or significance, so attributing a false purpose or significance to it
 - as in jumping to the wrong conclusion about why someone did something
 - or proposing an incorrect theory about why something happened
 - 4. unfounded assumption as to the truth of a thing
 - assuming a fact without actually having evidence for it
 - often caused by “relying on transmitters”, that is, not being careful and critical in evaluating sources
 - 5. “ignorance of how conditions conform with reality. Conditions are affected by ambiguities and artificial distortions”
 - again, uncritical belief in transmitters’ testimony
 - overlooking that the transmitter’s impression might be distorted by conditions affecting what he/she saw

- that is, transmitters may be honestly misled by incomplete information, illusions, things seen in the darkness or the distance and misunderstood, lies told to them, etc., and so be incorrect about the facts
- 6. falsehood is introduced when people naturally try to flatter the powerful, portray them in the best possible light, etc.
- 7. the most powerful reason: “ignorance of the nature of the various conditions arising in civilization”
 - what does this mean?
 - failure to evaluate whether things make sense, are logical, plausible, realistic
 - one has to know how the world works; with that knowledge, one can sift out the claims that cannot be true because they could not happen
 - example: students often accept and pass on an absurd story about Alexander vanquishing sea monsters to build Alexandria
 - it cannot be true because no ruler would risk this himself
 - our extract omits additional reasons, like how diving in such a glass box would be fatal, how sea monsters are not really like that, etc.
- finally (p 9), he implicitly agrees with Arnold 2000 about history being an ongoing process
 - he asks readers to be forgiving but critical
 - to correct his errors (but silently!)
 - that is, he does not see his history as being done, even though he obviously considers it “exhaustive” and the best thing ever
- in general, Ibn Khaldun is noted for being the first historian to attempt to find a pattern or explanation for historical events in general: an explanatory model or theory, or a philosophy of history
 - based on long-term conflict between town and desert (settled, civilized urbanites versus nomadic relative barbarians)
 - in small groups such as desert nomads, group solidarity naturally arises
 - religion can augment this solidarity
 - this makes them strong and aggressive in war
 - in cities, civilization and refined culture arise, but with less group solidarity
 - civilizations rise, peak, and decline
 - a civilized town, especially one in declining strength, gets conquered by a group of strong barbarians (often a dynasty, like those of Ibn Khaldun’s various patrons)
 - but the barbarians adopt civilized ways, and grow weak
 - in addition, their group solidarity has within itself the seeds of its own social, economic, political, and psychological decline
 - so the new dynasty peaks, then weakens, and gets conquered by the next strong group from the desert
 - and this cycle just keeps repeating itself
- some ideas about what history is that are in general circulation among historians, abstracted by yours truly
 - notice that these are basically boiled-down versions of some of the ideas from Arnold 2000 and Ibn Khaldun 1377

- that should be something less than surprising
- history, as practiced today:
 - 1. attempts to discover and retell what actually happened in the past
 - that is, history is
 - A. true; what really happened (as well as we can tell)
 - in contrast to literature, fiction, art
 - B. based on a narrative form: stories with a beginning, plot, and end
 - acknowledging that narratives are somewhat arbitrary selections and simplifications of the real, complex past
 - 2. is concerned with critical assessment of sources
 - for biases, gaps, lies, fraud, errors, etc.
 - in order to establish “truth” as best as possible
 - this is Ibn Khaldun’s emphasis on weeding out untruth by “personality criticism”, evaluating stories for logical plausibility, etc.
 - 3. is concerned with interpreting the past
 - A. explaining what happened
 - Historians have done this since the first one, Herodotus
 - who said that the purpose of history was to explain why events happened
 - B. drawing larger conclusions
 - about what it means
 - implications for today or other cases, etc.
 - developing a general theory about how some kind of events happen
 - persuading the reader of the correctness of an argument
 - making a point and defending it
 - this is what Ibn Khaldun was the first historian to do:
 - proposed a general theory about political power cycles
 - then defending it with historical evidence
- Next time we pursue this notion of explaining or attributing meaning to the past
 - by looking at some “grand theories” of history
 - a lot of items to read
 - but most of the items are short
 - when you read this chapter of Arnold 2000, I suggest you take notes on the names and ideas of the theories he mentions