

A plurality of history

This essay seeks to explore the plurality of history. This plurality is in two ways: firstly, that of different lenses one can take toward viewing the past, and secondly, that of the necessarily distinct past that each individual and community observes due to his or her private knowledge. The layman or even the common History student is often oblivious to both types of pluralities inherent in the field of History. In the case of the latter, this is particularly alarming as the ignorance is in spite of the rigorous training that a History student receives. The implications of these pluralities are explored in the final section.

The History subject commonly taught in Singaporean secondary schools has perpetuated the myth that History is first and foremost political history, and that other historical narratives are subjugate to the service of political history. The subject is designed with a practical purpose in mind: to train students well-versed in the history of politics and economics so that they become leaders of the country in the future. Such an instrumentalist approach to History unsurprisingly suppresses the other genres of History that should receive equal academic and epistemological standing.

These other genres crudely differ from each other in terms of scope of study, methodology, perspective adopted, and purpose. For instance, microhistory can focus on one particular day of an event, a village, a person, or a place – historical subjects that are often blurred and subsumed in larger labels in the other historical approaches. At the other end of the spectrum we see new disciplines such as Big History emerging, where the historical time frame stretches all the way to the Big Bang and investigates the history of the Universe and the human history as a whole. This also necessitates a different, interdisciplinary methodology where Science, Geography, Economics, Anthropology, and virtually all other empirical disciplines studying the spatio-temporal realm come together as applicable. History manifests in different narratives with the adoption of different perspectives as well. For instance, feminist history seeks to offer a balanced reading of history where the female perspective, too, is taken into account. The negative characterization or the exclusion of women from the historical tradition is a major theme in feminist history. In addition to challenging existing historiography such as realism, where history is understood through masculine concepts such as power, feminist history also serves a different function – to empower and uplift the female gender both in the historical narrative and in the present world. These different genres of history should not be trivialized. They should be understood as parallel and equally legitimate historical approaches that inspire the History student to explore beyond the school syllabus.

A more fundamental reason to the first plurality of history outlined above, also History's second plurality, is how each individual and community has private knowledge and a particular conception of the world and history. Dewey provides an "epistemological defense of democracy" that argues in the same vein. According to Putnam, Dewey argues that "the most ordinary of individuals has at least one field of expertise – if only the knowledge of where his or her 'shoe pinches'... without the participation of the public in the formation of such policy, it could not reflect the common needs and interests of the society because those needs and interests were known only to the public." Here the different world that each individual sees lends legitimacy to democracy as a political system, but it also supports the idea that differing historical narratives

must necessarily exist. Not only because each reader is essentially living in a different world that centres around his or her POV, but also because the very constituent of most histories – living beings – each has a private world that often goes uncaptured in any attempt of abstraction and generalization. It is therefore implausible that one historical narrative, capable of only adopting few, if not one perspective, can fully capture all that the past has to offer.

What are the implications of these? Firstly, that political history should be the dominant historical narrative is a myth that needs to be debunked. Secondly, one who is concerned with the discipline of History can afford to pay more attention to each individual stories around us. Every person and place around you is a legitimate subject to be studied, and the job of a Historian, perhaps, is to duly record and commemorate.