

UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETING HISTORY: What and How the Learners can learn from the past?

by

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ABSTRACT

The study of History will forever be a contested space. That is because the tools of unlocking historical material and the influences touching on that activity are always evolving and gathering new meanings. And yet, history can also become a harbinger for a variety of contesting ideologies.

In South Africa there is something of a revival of interest in history. That, I find, is at the back of the movement in higher education for transformation. A critique of the use and abuse of history in these circumstances will be presented. Alongside that, the paper will examine defensible ways in which history throws light on the present and shapes the future.

Then paper will draw on the work of literary figures like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, as well as some modern writing on Africa. Tools of engagement with historical material will be examined as well as ways in which assessment can be deepened.

Who controls the past controls the future;
who controls the present controls the past.
- George Orwell, 1984

On 10 September 2015, Wits University's Paleo-anthropology Unit that has been engaged in research into the origins and evolution of the human species, unveiled their latest discovery at a star-studded unveiling at the Cradle of Humankind, Maropeng Visitors' Centre, at Sterkfontein, north-west of Johannesburg. Prof Lee Burger and his team of researchers announced that they had discovered a distinct species, they called *homo naledi*, in an almost inaccessible cave some 100 yards from the opening of the cave nine metres deep.

Prof Lee Burger, research professor in the Evolutionary Studies Institute at Wits, announced the find, reputed to be the largest of the fossils, and called it “practically the best known fossil member of our lineage.” Researchers noticed that there was evidence of ritualized behavior by the community that suggested that that was a burial site, conduct previously associated with humans.

This sparked a furious reaction from, among others, Dr Mathole Motshekga, as it did in the social media and in other platforms. The essence of the objection appeared to me to be more religious than scientific. It was stated that the find could not possibly show evidence that human beings had apes as descendants. It was feared that to do so would lend credence to the science of racism, and undermined the accepted biblical traditions that human beings were created by God “just as we are today.”

This debate got me thinking. It said to me that typical of our country, race and race consciousness was always lurking just below the surface and views about religion are always the substance of our disagreements. More substantially, it confirmed for me what I had always known – that in South Africa we tend to use history in a very selective manner, only to the extent that historical material becomes “facts” that stand alone, or that are self-validating, without any critical, contextual assessment being brought into service. In other words it seems to be the case that some tend to believe that once something is stated as “history” then it brings all argument and contestation to an end. If there is to be any contestation therefore it rather should be about the meaning of history.

A similar development can be detected in the prevailing student activism at our university campuses. Much has been made of the statues and monuments from the history of the European colonial settlements and imperial occupation of South Africa. The ostensible reason given for attacking the statues and monuments is that they are reminders of a painful past that must be obliterated, as if that past will thereby cease to exist. To achieve this task a one-dimensional view of history must be purveyed. It is one that simply sees black people and the indigenous peoples of Africa as mere victims. Very little is made of the history of collusion by Africans in the slave trade for example, in the years of resistance to colonial occupation, or in the acts of heroism and resistance, and in cultural and scientific ingenuity that informed Africa, or in recognizing that the history of Africa cannot be confined merely to the advent of Europeans on the soil of Africa. In other words, there is a deliberate denigration of the African personality in the name of anti-coloniality. It was out of listening to so many of these historical distortions that I came to believe that the teaching of history in our country has become an imperative. It means that

we ought as a nation to reverse our previous notions that history was no longer an essential, and basic to educational attainment.

I came across a petition to the Nigerian Ministry of Education recently (www.change.org) *Keep the Study of History in Nigerian Schools* by Omei Bongos Ikwue. The petition makes a compelling case for making the study of History a compulsory subject in schools. Ikwue states “History completes our existence.” In other words our human existence is defined by our history. We confirm, resist or seek to change our past, or of those who affect us today. It tells of the exploits and struggles of the past, makes us understand heroes and villains of the past whose memory hovers over our present. It shapes our value systems, and helps us to understand how our values evolve or were shaped or influenced. He quotes an editorial in a Nigerian newspaper *Vanguard* that says that “when we obliterate history, we should also destroy artefacts, burn museums, monuments and heritage sites.” While we are at it, says Ikwue, we may as well destroy our grandparents, burn all the biographies and old photographs – because they embody the history that we cannot physically experience – the sacrifices, the labours, the hours of thought and study, or even hours of plotting and scheming, that went to shaping our present lives.”

In his magisterial work, *Why the West Rules – for now* (2010) Ian Morris takes the view that to understand and interpret history is to understand and to trace the shape of history. That “shape” does not arise from isolated and singular events. It takes time and human agency for historical events to find their meaning. That meaning is equally subject to interpretation and social sifting through the lens of human imagination. In other words, he says, “The question requires us to look at the whole sweep of human history as a single story, establishing its overall shape, before discussing why it takes that shape” (2010:22). For that reason, observes Morris, a broad approach was needed “combining the historian’s focus on context, the archeologist’s awareness of the deep past, and the social scientist’s comparative methods” (2010:24). On this understanding therefore history is a multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary activity.

I am always wary of the triumphalism that is often attendant to political history. A history that is put out to bring out the best, or to or to present a sanitized view of human nature. Alternatively, one has to be guarded against views of history that are linear and simplistic. The truth as we all know all human activity is complex, and dubious and inscrutable. History is no different. It is not easy always to understand from hindsight what may have motivated certain kinds of human actions. It then becomes legitimate to interpret and to speculate out of limited factual knowledge at

times. For example – who are the first peoples of South Africa? The first thing to say is that a geo-political construct named as such never existed until 1910. Second, we do well to remember that the idea of nation-states with the boundaries that shape the 55 countries in Africa never existed as such. The reality is that for all time indigenous people roamed around this Continent in search of food, pastures and water, gathering and hunting, trading among themselves, at war and conquering, forming strategic alliances, inter-marrying, forming and re-forming themselves. All this means is that it is no longer easy surely to trace a neat line of development from one point to the other. Ideas, and meanings and interpretation are constantly changing, words derive new meanings all the time, and new philosophies are being discovered afresh constantly. It has become very complicated to speak about “development” any longer, or about morality or values. Progress is a complicated expression, and its meaning depends both on the context as well as on the speaker and listener.

I came to think about this recently when I was trying to understand how it was that Africa appears to have been so easily colonized, her wealth looted by imperialists, her land occupied by colonialists, and the best of her sons seized and transported as slaves, and whatever religion Africans professed was supplanted by Christianity and by Islam, and her languages ceased to carry any influence in science and knowledge development. Somehow, the same cannot be said of the Asian nations, China, India. It interests me that even today it is so easily for foreigners to bribe the political elite, peddle influence and enrich themselves. Just as in the pre-colonial times the African elite were complicit in the designs of the conquerors, and the tribal formations we now boast of were merely instruments of colonial rule.

Why then is history so fundamental for education? Chinua Achebe in his little memoir *Home and Exile* (2000) says that education in his Igbo upbringing in Nigeria was never a word ascribed to Igbo things. Education was about faraway things and places and people. What it was meant to do was to ascribe human consciousness on those faraway people and places: they were more human, more clever and worthy of emulation. Ngugi wa Thiong’o reminds us that it is the duty of African intellectuals to take responsibility as custodians of their memory and to interpret it. In other words, the coloniser’s way of defining the world and of comprehending human relations had to be scrutinized and challenged. The danger, warns Achebe, is that we may be tempted to view history as “mindful and purposeful; and to see the design behind this particular summons and rendezvous as the signal at long last to end Europe’s imposition of a derogatory narrative upon Africa, a narrative to call African humanity into question” (2000:46). Looking back on time does not make it history. The past becomes history only to the extent that it bears significance on the

present. The wrongdoing of the past does not for that reason alone become history. The past does not valorise the present. As Achebe says, the past that is not owned by the present must remain susceptible to challenge and question, no matter how long it takes (2000:48).

What then, does this have to say about teaching history, and how historical knowledge may be assessed? The understanding and teaching of history, in the first instance, takes a great amount of intellectual courage. It means that historical material must be approached with openness, and readiness to be surprised by what one discovers. It also means that we should be wary of imposing either literalism, or linear and simplistic versions of the truth, but to recognise that all truth has many sides. One hopes that the teacher would have confronted her/his own story and journey, interpreted it and derived meaning from it. Must recognize its limitations and the extent to which it intersects with and is affected by the stories of others. The historian is not only a scientist unravelling the truth-claims of a story, but that she/he also tests that story against others and human experience as well. To that extent the historian is an interpreter.

Embedded in the study of history are forms and languages of interpretation, the emerging identities and the changes that they undergo through the wide sweep of history. History, on this understanding, is both local and contemporary. It means that one's historical consciousness must begin with what is familiar, or ordinary and taken-for-granted. It is to undergo what may be an uncomfortable task of dissecting that which one has always assumed that one knew, and it spoke to one's culture or norms, and then to recognize that it is without meaning, may have been distorted over time and serves a purpose for which one no longer wishes to associate. It may also bring about a discovery of the darker and unpleasant side of one's history. The present must confront the past. Historical consciousness compels us to ask the question "Why?" all the time, because nothing provides a total and complete story by itself. The cultivation of a critical and perceptive mind is the task of a historian. The end product may be what late Oxford philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin states so beautifully:

Yet, if presuppositions are not examined, and left to lie fallow, societies may become ossified; beliefs harden into dogma, the imagination warped, the intellect becomes sterile. Societies can decay as a result of going to sleep on some comfortable bed of unquestioned dogma. If the imagination is to be stirred, if the intellect is to work, if mental life is not to sink to a low ebb, and the pursuit of truth (or justice or self-fulfilment) is not to cease, assumptions must be questioned, presuppositions must be challenged – sufficiently, at any rate, to keep society moving (1978:17).

A historian then, on this understanding, is a radical transformative agent.

If that is what should be expected of a teacher of History, what is the knowledge that is being assessed of the learner? I believe that any history student must begin with a readiness to tell her/his own story, understand it and interpret it. All of us are brought up on a rich and colourful tapestry of stories. We take pride in these stories, we take our identity from these stories, we have fond memories of the tellers of the stories, and we get to identify with the stories. They get to speak to our inner being. Learn to tell your story.

Second, the learner must understand the environment where he/she is, understand the evolution of communities and peoples, the histories of migration, connect to the environment and to be inquisitive and curious as to the reasons that things are as they are, language, names and places and the natural environment are rich stores of historical knowledge.

Third, I believe that a student must learn to approach historical material critically, perceptively and with an open mind. In other words one should be open to seeing things differently and to be surprised by what one discovers. One must challenge and interrogate received wisdom.

Fourth, a learner must trace the evolution and the shape of historical knowledge. In other words what we have today was not always the way it is. What contributed to the change and what purpose does it serve?

What then does it all mean? In other words a learner must place himself/herself at the centre of the historical events in real time. They should avoid the temptation of judging the past by the lens of their day. Nonetheless, they must still confront or challenge that history on the basis of the knowledge and experience of their day. What Political Scientist Hannah Arendt had to say is so true is so true that the most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution. Human nature is subject to change. Power changes the way we see the world. However important it is (and it is important) we want to avoid training learners to memorise dates and events by rote.

Why then do we study History? It is to challenge and confront the present with the tools of the past, lay firm foundations for the present and to shape the future. If we understand and are comfortable with the past, as that which we cannot change, but which must not imprison our minds, then we shall not be afraid of the present that is in our hands to make or to break.