

Dumbing Down History Pajaronian
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Human beings are the only species capable of contemplating and preserving memories of past events. All human cultures revere some form of history, initially by story-telling, and later through sculpture and visual arts, along with writing. Of course, when it is by memory only, as in pre-literate societies, each generation tends to edit the memory. People get a word wrong, an idea flipped, and lose an entire history when a society suffers plague or invasion.

The best record of past events is writing, augmented by sculpture and engraved monuments. Today, fortunately, historians have much better sources, letters, diaries, and reliable eye-witness reports. We expect today's serious historians to let us know where they got their information (footnotes and citations). Narratives without such source information are more often than not propaganda and deliberate disinformation, lies fed to unsophisticated or naive consumers. Such disinformation is a danger in a democracy that depends on informed, thoughtful citizens.

History, then, has two faces: one, the connection to our past and continuity of culture, or a weapon employed by cynics and demagogues.

Looking back in history, we see how fraught history can be for those tyrants afraid of it. Greece and Rome had a long-time rival, Phoenicia, a culture of great merchants and seamen. Trade competition grew so poisonous and warfare so endless that both ancient Greece and Rome determined that genocide was the only solution. They began laying siege to Phoenician cities (Carthage being the most famous) and when they won, they slaughtered every male from infant to grandfather. The women and girls were carried off as slaves, and all written documents were destroyed. History was written by the victors, so that until modern times and investigative historians, Phoenician history was mostly lost.

When Islam emerged as a new religion in the 7th century AD, tradition has it that Mohammad banned all history before his Arabs received his revelations. Documents, ancient libraries (Roman and Greek) and remnants of great imperial Persian history were expunged from Arab history. The past was thus "cancelled."

The early Christians, converts from Rome, contemplated cancelling Roman culture, building churches atop old temples. However, Roman culture was so overwhelming and the practical need to grow the new church so pressing that absorption replaced cancelling. Statues of Roman divinities became Christian martyrs overnight, with colorful histories invented that were believed until the 20th century, under newer serious historiography.

Colonialism that followed the discovery of the New World led to official policies of wiping out indigenous languages, history, and culture. The Catholic world achieved this through unremitting conversions, punishments for "heresy," and "inquisitions" to protect "purity" of belief.

Protestant colonists in North America and Australia kidnapped native children, educated them in strict boarding schools where they were punished for speaking their native languages or practicing their religious rituals. Wipe out the history and you wipe out organized rebellion.

The institution of enslaving Black Africans had an organized protocol. The slaves who survived the horrors of trans-Atlantic slave ships were immediately separated from family members and tribal ties, deprived of their languages and rites, and histories cancelled.

We should know better now, but supposedly educated Boards of Education, such as the one in San Francisco, should be cited for "abuse of history." It is a reasonable request remove memorials of defenders of slavery, Confederates, who were traitors to the United States. However, to extend this removal to all national heroes, such as our brave founding fathers, because they lived when slavery was a legal system, is malpractice!

Good historians know that great men and women of the past, people we honor for important acts of courage, did not choose the time in which they lived nor the predominant values of those times. Human beings have nuanced histories. It is bad history to judge honorees only by their flaws, not for their gifts. Renaming schools by cancelling out Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and others because they lived in slave times is malpractice of history.

Shall we be even more stupid and rename streets, cities (San Francisco), rivers, and everything named for explorers who happened to be 17th century Spanish? Where does such stupidity end?

688 words

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