

History as the Red Pill

It's a meme now to call any radical mind-changing moment or idea a "red pill," hearkening back to the red pill which awakens Neo to the nature of his machine slavery in *The Matrix*. Everybody has their own version of the red pill, and their own idea of what is being revealed when it is taken.

I think studying history - and particularly studying the history of thought - is one such red pill.

Until you study history, you have no frame of reference for what is "normal." You'll likely assume your expectations of normalcy from your expectations of the lives of your contemporary peers. Then you learn about hunter-gatherers, and the dawn of agriculture, and the industrial revolution, and - if you are paying attention - you realize that how you live isn't necessarily "normal" at all. You realize that the way you live and how you think about it is shaped by thinkers who died long ago, of whom you have never heard.

There was a debate between agrarians and industrialists once upon a time. There was a debate between progressives and conservatives. There was a debate between loyalists and Whigs, even. None of the outcomes were unstoppable or inevitable. And how you think of the victorious outcome may be lopsided in favor of the victor.

When you realize this, you can finally stop separating yourself from your historical subjects in an important sense: you, like them, are a product of the past and a resident of history. Beyond this, you might also make up your mind about whether what you received is right or not.

Originally published at JamesWalpole.com.