

# The History of History

It would be interesting, though very difficult, to study how history changes.

I don't mean how the sequence of human events changes from the present into the future, I mean how the past changes. Since it exists only in memory from our present perspective, the stories we believe about the past are the past. But those stories aren't fixed. They change all the time.

I've seen some books and studies that look at a few historical events and document the ways in which history textbooks dealt with them in, say, the 1950s vs today. The changes are often dramatic, but presented in a deadpan Orwellian fashion as if it has always been this way, nevermind what we used to say.

And it is of course true that history is mostly written by those on reasonably favorable terms with the dominant political powers. When those change, histories also change.

Imagine if the German army had won World War II, or the Soviet Union had won a nuclear showdown with the United States. Do you think the dominant historical narrative would be the same? Not only would the telling of those conflicts be different, but the story of all previous history would be different. There is little reason to believe our current historical story is any less biased.

And in most cases, you can't easily go to the evidence to prove which version is true. Evidence is scant. Most of history, especially ancient history, is based on one or two fragments or artifacts that get translated by one or two people who then get referenced by others who get referenced. If you wanted to find out whether a particular ancient figure was real, you might find the best you could get was someone who wrote a story about them, and it's unclear whether the story was intended as fiction. There is no harder evidence for many things in history.

This does not make history a scandal or conspiracy, but it ought to cause humility. It needn't cause paranoia about being lied to. In fact, I find it thrilling. It means the world is full of so much more mystery than we assume if we simply accept dominant narratives as provably true.

It is useful to think probabilistically about history (and everything else). If you experience something firsthand, you can be certain it happened. If a trusted friend relays a story, you might be slightly less certain. By the time you're hearing fifteenth-hand someone referencing an nineteenth century scholar's belief about when the Sumerians built the Ziggurats based on one type of textual analysis, the probability is it totally accurate should be a lot lower.

In Orwell's dystopia, history gets changed by the politically powerful at moments notice by changing the official story. While I do think it's easier than most of us assume to change the dominant historical narrative, it takes a lot more than changing some government documents or publicly funded textbooks. Academics and professional historians are the easier part. Artists and novelists are the more important part.

When you think about the American West, or Ancient Egypt, or Medieval Europe, you have a lot of ideas that are pretty coherent and consistent with other people's ideas about these things. While most are not contradicted by history books, they didn't originate there. It's not the source material that causes us to believe historical narratives as much as it is the fictional narratives built on top of it. Even though we know *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is a fictional narrative (built on top of another at least mostly fictional narrative of Arthur), the historical setting becomes a little more real in our brain every time a fictional story uses it as a backdrop.

A handful of movies like *Jurassic Park* that portray dinosaurs as predecessors to birds probably do more to make that part of the historical narrative than whatever studies or researchers they are referencing.

On the one hand, the power of art and fiction to shape our beliefs about the past is a bit troubling. I takes very little evidence from very few sources for a bunch of stories to spin up and make us believe things with higher probability than warranted, simply because it is repeated in so many stories on top of stories.

On the other hand, it's cause for comfort. It's empowering. I means an Orwellian regime is going to have a harder time controlling the past. Sure, they can handle the subsidy-sucking professoratti, but to control the narratives of all the artists and story-tellers? A Herculean task. In fact, the inability to control rebel creatives has brought down many a dictatorship.

History is not a fixed thing. Our knowledge is so slim. This makes probabalistic thinking important. It makes the stories we tell important. It makes the lenses through which we view the past important.

History has a history. The way it's presented today might not be better than it once was or could be. It's useful to think about ways it might better be told and understood.

(Bonus: Here's a great video on ways of seeing the past.)