

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Santayana

Areas of Knowledge: History

History and Historiography

- **History** is the **study of the past**.
- How is history different from other fields of knowledge?
- **Historiography** is the study of the **writings of historians**.
- What is known about history may be incomplete, inaccurate, or even completely wrong. Knowing for sure is often very difficult.

Definition of History

- What is history? Is it the study of the past or the study of records of the past?
- To what extent is the very nature of this Area of Knowledge affected by being about the past? In what ways do other Areas of Knowledge also concern themselves with the past? Is all knowledge, in a sense, historical knowledge?

Definition

- What are the implications of Henry Miller's claim that "The history of the world is the history of a privileged few"?
- What might George Orwell have meant when he wrote that "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."

History: Methods of Gaining Knowledge

- Can one talk meaningfully of a historical fact?
How far can we speak with certainty about anything in the past?

Gaining Knowledge

- In what ways has technology affected the study of history? How have the methods of gaining evidence and the means of communicating historical interpretation, for example, been affected by technological development? Can we now observe the past more directly?

Gaining Knowledge

- What are the implications of the following claim?
 - “It is impossible to write ancient history because we lack source materials, and impossible to write modern history because we have far too many.”
Charles Peguy

Gaining Knowledge

- Which is more important attribute of the historian the ability to analyze evidence scientifically (and so risk reducing it to its dry fundamentals), or the ability to expand it with creative imagination (and bring the past to life)?

Gaining Knowledge

- What might be the influence on historical interpretation of the context within which historians write? To what extent might the position of historians within their own epoch and culture undermine the value of the interpretation, and to what extent might it increase its value in making it relevant to a contemporary audience?

Gaining Knowledge

- What is a historical explanation? How are causal connections between events established in history? According to what criteria can such explanations be critically evaluated?

History and Knowledge Claims

- Why study history?
- Is it possible to know who we are without a knowledge of the past?
- Is there any other way of describing and assessing the process of change in human societies?

Knowledge Claims

- Can history provide a guide to understanding contemporary affairs?
- Can it provide a guide to the future? What might be the “lessons of History? For future generations?

Knowledge Claims

- If truth is difficult to prove in history, does it follow that all versions are equally acceptable?

Knowledge Claims

- What knowledge of history might be gained by focusing attention on each of the following: the historian, the historical documents and written history, the readership and the social, cultural and historical context?

History and Values

- About whom is history written?
- Are the lives of some groups of people more historically significant than the lives of others?
- Why do selected past events appear in books as historically important while others are ignored?
- To what extent is history dependent on who kept or preserved a written record?
- To what extent is history about those who held power, and to what extent is it about ordinary people?

Values

- Are value judgements a fault in the writing of history?
- Should value-laden terms such as *atrocious*, *regime*, *hero*, or *freedom* always be avoided, or does exclusion of value judgements deprive history of meaning?

Values

- To what extent can distinctions be made between factual report, biased interpretation and calculated distortion?
- Can history be used for propaganda? If so, how?

Homework

- Read and journal
 - “Is History a Guide to the Future?” Barbara Tuchman
 - Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road?”
 - “Is History a Science” Arthur Marwick

Definition

- Which of the following is the most persuasive description of history: an account of great individuals, an account of a decline from greatness of the past, or an account of progress towards the future, or a cycle of recurring events? What other descriptions might be appropriate? Is it possible to portray different visions of history in a diagrammatic form?