

From myth to history and back again

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Abstract

References to the past have taken one or another of two general forms, which we call mythic and historical, or a mix of the two. We tend to think of mythic accounts of the past as belonging to oral cultures and historical forms to be one of the “consequences of literacy.” Mythic accounts have tended to refer to an original beginning whose events are seen to determine, rather directly, current conditions. The intervening events, represented in a causal sequence, and secured by rational inquiry, are generally seen as a product of the development of historical thinking. But the difference between the two is not so clear. Increasingly it is recognized that our imaginations play a constructive role in the kind of meaning we compose from past events. This leaves us with some discomfort, or at least challenges, in considering the kind of thinking we are encouraging in our pupils as we teach them history.

Introduction

Most human societies have referred to the past in what we in this society call a "mythic" mode. That is, references to the past in oral cultures seem generally unconcerned about establishing as accurately as possible the series of particular events that precede and, in some complicated way, explain the present. They are societies that explain their present by myth. In this paper I want to explore, too briefly, what we might be able to learn about how better to teach history by considering what has been one of its greatest competitors for explaining the present by references to the past. And also to consider the degree to which, under the guise of historical study, we continue to deploy mythic thinking ourselves, or at least fail in some degree to counter its influence over our students' minds. This leads us to reflect on how far we deploy modes of thinking more commonly associated with creativity than with rationally explaining the past when constructing historical accounts from the past's traces in the present.

There are similarities and differences between myth's and history's uses of the past. Among the similarities is their provision of a kind of explanation and justification for current social institutions, their establishment of psychological security among changing social conditions, their use of narrative and its techniques for engaging affective responses from readers and hearers, and their establishing meaning in the relationship between past and present. Among differences are history's assertion of constant change and myth's assertion of relative stability "from the beginning", history's concerns with rational modes of

establishing the truth of its claims and myth's concern with present conditions supporting the truth of its claims, history's insistence on the contingency of present conditions and myth's assertion of their inevitability, history's secularizing the past, and myth's sacralizing it.

These differences, too, influence the teaching about the past, whether about the fire in ancient times, or in the classroom today. It is not obvious, the closer we get to examining these different modes of representing the past, that they are as unlike as may at first appear to be the case from an educational point of view. Maybe also we need to reflect on how far the chronological sequence in their development is also perhaps measured by some developmental sequence in students understanding of different modes of making meaning from past events.

I will begin with a very brief account of some of the salient characteristics of common mythic references to the past, then consider how myth yielded place to history in some people's minds, and finally discuss the ways in which the boundary between myth and history is permeable. I will conclude with some observations and speculations about myth's continuing influence in our society, in our teaching of history, and for enlarging the role for flexibility and creativity in our thinking about human events.

Myth and its past

With the development of rational modes of inquiry in ancient Greece, new criteria were used to evaluate assertions about the world. In the light of these new criteria, traditional references to the Greeks' past, as embodied in myth-stories, were judged harshly. So Hecateus of Miletus introduced his history with the

words: "What I write here is the accounts which I consider to be true: for the stories of the Greeks are numerous and ridiculous." Nor did the stories of people in oral cultures encountered by nineteenth and early twentieth-century anthropologists fare much better. Myths about heroic ancestors and gods were discounted as products of a mental "disease" (Muller, 1866, p. 12), to be cured only by the development of rationality.

It is clear that we will not learn much about mythic references to the past if we judge them by criteria appropriate to judging rational propositions about the world. That they are not attempts to provide a linguistic copy of the past is now clear, as is the belief that they do embody, in some way, some claims about the past and their users understanding of that past. When we look at oral cultural references to the past, we cannot but be struck by what seems to us the oddity that they seem to go out of their way to obliterate or disguise particular events that preceded the present.

Consider King Pepi II of Egypt's Old Kingdom. In this time between a more purely mythic past and before the kind of systematic rational inquiries of later times, Pepi seems to have gone to considerable trouble to leave a detailed record of his victory in battle over the Lybians. The reliefs in his temple show him gigantic in his war chariot, scattering his minute Lybian foes in all directions. We may also see pictures of rows of Lybian chiefs who were captured in battle, their individual names inscribed by their heads. Here we seem to see an impulse towards history: a record of the particular. But then we discover that Pepi's ancestor by some 200 years, King Sahure, left a record of his victory over the Lybians. It too depicts rows of captured Lybian chiefs with their names carefully

inscribed near their heads—the same names as those of Pepi's prisoners. Ramses III of the New Kingdom left a list of the towns he over-ran in Asia. Again, we might find an identical list which records the victorious conquests of Rameses II—which in turn had been copied from a still earlier list of the Asian conquests of Tuthmosis III (cf. Frankfort, 1961).

This might seem a regrettably casual attitude towards historical accuracy. For whatever reason, it seems Pepi and his chums considered the names of particular chiefs defeated or of towns over-run to be of no significance. What these accounts do, as Frankfort has pointed out (1961), is reaffirm an archetypal pattern. The King of Egypt was rehearsing the victories of the god Ra in the beginning. He had cleared the land and set Egypt up, and then got tired, ascended to the skies and gave over the detailed job to Horus, who is reincarnated in each pharaoh. What we see recorded on the temple walls, then, is not so much history but a reaffirmation that the state of affairs now is as it has been from the beginning, and would exist for ever and ever, amen. The impulse is to deny history rather than to record it.

Even more vividly we may see myth's denial of historical change in the life of more purely oral cultures than the ancient Egyptians'. Malinowski was interested in Trobrian islanders' references to the past. He retells their account of the emergence of the totem animals of the four main clans from the underground world. After the emergence, the Pig of the Malasi clan said to the Dog of the Lukuba clan, as the latter began eating the fruit of the noku plant: You are eating noku: you're eating dirt. You are lowbred and common, and, in future, I'll be the chief. "Ever since" this mythological event the highest subclan of the Malasi have

in fact provided the chiefs. Where the historian would seek to account for this dominance in terms of particular events, the myth provides an account in terms of a conversation between a pig and a dog. It is this conversation that the islanders referred to in accounting for why the Malasi are superior in rank and privileges to the Lukuba. We may suspect that the myth preserves in a usable form a transmuted memory of the real events by which the Malasi won its dominance.

In such Trobriand island villages one will also, of course, find many other references to the past. Gossip, heroic stories, tales of recent ancestors told with a moral message, legends, hearsay, and so on. As Malinowski notes, "Immediate history, semi-historical legends, and unmixed myth flow into one another, form a continuous sequence, and fulfil really the same sociological function" (1954, p. 126). It seems fair to add, however, that after flowing together in the way he describes, as time passes they flow in the direction of myth, and the myths contain whatever memory of the past is retained. And it is a memory that gradually erodes particulars. Only the permanent and unchanging constitutes reality, or as Eliade puts it: "Reality is a function of the imitation of celestial archetypes." (1959. P. 5).

From myth to history

Then there was that battle fought around the middle or early thirteenth century B.C.E., in which a Greek army destroyed the city of Troy. We can now be fairly sure that some of the names of the people involved in that battle are

preserved in Homer's account of it. So, there was a war and the names of combatant preserved. But, of course, the impulse of the story-teller is so great that we cannot with any confidence assume any of the more detailed parts of the account are what we would mean by historical.

Then, quite suddenly in the first half of the 5th. century BCE we have records of a whole series of logographoi--people who wrote unadorned prose accounts of what they thought was the truth about the past. They didn't discount the gods, so much as push back the time of the gods and insert in the temporal space provided a past whose rules were much as those that operated in the world around them. This was sometimes a weak impulse. So, instead of claiming descent from the gods in three or four or fewer generations, as did the Achaean heroes, the apparently noble Hecateus of Miletus was modest enough to insert sixteen mortal generations between himself and a god. (This may have been a result of agreeing with the earlier Achaeans about how long it had been since the gods went around routinely begatting mortals, or it may have been a joke.)

The best known of the logographoi was Herodotus of Halicarnassus. Here we begin to see something that looks very like historiography. We see genuine "inquiry" (historia), and, as Oscar Wilde put it, "Speculation invading the domain of revealed truth" (1905, p.9). Herodotus's recent predecessors collected all kinds of stories and, mainly, genealogies, augmented with what scraps of information they could locate or someone could recall (Pearson, 1939). But Herodotus is properly called "the parent of history" because, with a rather un-Greek interest in the particular and with enormous originality of mind, he came to see the past "not simply as a mass of events and genealogies, but as a process whose meaning

he made a sustained attempt to understand" (Lloyd-Jones, 1971, p. 59).

But Herodotus is unlike a modern historian, perhaps most evidently, in his manner of explaining events. Where we are persuaded to account for events by searching out their most fundamental causes, Herodotus tends instead to tell an interesting story. This makes his Histories one of the most entertaining works to have survived from the ancient world. Most commonly, events are products of the will or envy or lust or greed of an individual. He still knows how to grab an audience, as he was intent on grabbing the Athenian audience who used to listen to his readings. He shapes the historical account to one of a noble, courageous, free, and small Athens fighting the tyrannous, brutal, and vast Persian Empire. His story structure still tends to dominate people's response to those historical events.

Herodotus's successor, Thucydides, had only contempt for this romantic story-telling about the past. Historiography that showed events shaped by individuals' wills was simple-minded; people rarely controlled events, more commonly they were controlled by them. Thucydides wanted to expose those underlying laws whereby history proceeded. If Herodotus was a kind of literate entertainer, Thucydides saw himself as a kind of scientist. People, in his scientific account, are not so much the causes or agents of events, but rather their actions are seen as determined by some process of which they are mere parts.

To expose the laws underlying history, however, required the most careful attention to all the details of what actually happened. Thucydides was a meticulous inquirer. He seems to have thought of history as on the model of medicine. As one must attend closely to symptoms to be able to describe the

course of a disease, and be able to account for what disease it was, so the historian must gather the symptoms of change in societies, and account for what kind of change was occurring.

In the modern world, the one advance from these ancient parents of history came with the recognition that history is not adequately seen as a process of selecting from the complexity of the changing past that set of events that will create an exciting and entertaining ego-boosting story for one's readers or hearers. Nor do we now think it makes sense to see history as adhering to sets of discernable laws. Instead, we value the particular, but recognize that particulars by themselves have no meaning. They gain meaning by fitting into some larger form or context. Our main dilemma with history as a form of knowledge concerns the fact that our chosen form itself shapes the meaning of the particulars that are fitted to it. On the one hand we have forms, contexts, narrative structures, which are not accessible to truth tests, and on the other we have particulars that are accessible to truth tests but by themselves are insignificant or meaningless.

So we recognize that historians and, even more so, you and me tend to use our imaginations in making sense of events, but then are left a bit uncomfortable about how far the sense we make is a product of the events or a product of our imagining. Lewis Namier wrote: "One would expect people to remember the past and to imagine the future. In fact when discoursing about history they imagine in terms of their own experience, and when trying to gauge the future they cite supposed analogies from the past: till by a double process of repetition, they imagine the past and remember the future" (1942, p. 70).

The narrative form serves as what Aristotle called, for profound reasons,

the mythos of the work, the plot. We have to emplot our events into a narrative, and in doing so we carry into our most refined modern historiography whispers and ghosts of myth.

Myth and history teaching today

So we have myths, which are characterized by a reluctance to maintain over time memory of particulars. We have also a variety of forms of historical understanding—from something that is almost myth-like which is generally unconcerned with the accuracy of particulars except in as far as they provide intellectual security, to a romantic story-shaped form that selects events that are engaging and entertaining, and a proto-scientific form that sees particulars as symptoms of underlying processes which are the proper object of historical inquiry.

What history are we to teach to pupils today, and what kind of thinking are we engaging them in? Well, I think we begin with the richer kinds of myth-like narratives—the struggle for freedom from oppression, for civilization against barbarism—and present these as the great stories of our life as people. None of it is false; it is simply a form that selects the particulars to embody a particular, engaging, plot (mythos). We can then move on to the Herodotus kind of history, and then engage the "philosophic" pursuits of Thucydides. All along we can be introducing aspects of a more sophisticated form of historical understanding. But we should not be so eager to introduce that more sophisticated kind of understanding that we forget that it sits on top of layers of other kinds of

understanding, and that we can bring the student to accumulate these layers in a kind of sequence evident in the history of historiography itself. And I should emphasize that when I refer to more sophisticated understanding, I don't mean simply more detail and complexity. I mean, rather, that accumulated set of kinds of understanding that are hinted at in the earlier part of this paper (and described a tedious length in Egan, 1997.)

While this might lead in the direction of a pedagogical theory of history teaching, does it help us to understand the kinds of pressures our students are under when it comes to making sense of the past? The images of history they get from movies seem commonly of a romantic (Herodotean) kind—more interested in telling a story, though happier to use actual events and people rather than inventions, because that increases the significance and pleasure. Those movies usually have all the qualities of a romantic kind of understanding—they deal with the exotic, with extremes of human suffering or achievement, they tell an ego-boosting story in what Aristotle calls a "comic" narrative form. (Consider the excoriating (and, I think, rather unjust) criticism of the recent film Troy, starring a surprisingly plausible—to me, anyway—Brad Pitt as Achilles.) And does this do any harm? Given that I seem to have concluded that this kind of historical understanding is prerequisite to more sophisticated forms, by itself such movies shouldn't present a problem, indeed they should move the pupils' thinking from a more "mythic" to a more "historical" form of thinking about the past.

Frequently, though, one encounters movies which are supposedly based on historical events, and they change known particulars in the service of what the

movie-makers assume is a "better" story. Does this cause us problems? Well, we call behavior in which what is known to be the case is suppressed in favor of something we know not to be the case as lying. And this is different from that willing suspension of disbelief we call "fiction". And it is hard to see how lying can be justified, when a little more imagination could do the honest Herodotean job of selecting true events to body forth the best story.

The overall story which students are told about history today seems to have a powerful ideological component. History is commonly seen as a principal agent of socialization and, not to be too mealy-mouthed about it, of indoctrination. This varies from place to place, of course, but it is hard to chat for any length of time with high school students and not conclude that, while their knowledge of nearly all human history is meager in the extreme, they remain generally convinced of their own nation's special place in the world—for good or villainy—that looks very like the images of the past generated in oral cultures. This ideologized, knowledge-slender, image is generated by a process that was well described some decades ago for the case of American students in Frances Fitzgerald's *America Revised* (1979).

My main concern is that the mythic paradigm and the narrative story, which are necessary elements in the construction of historical meaning, very easily displace what should be the stubborn particulars from which our historical understanding is built. It seemed as though we had escaped from myth as the dominant mode in which people made sense of the past. But it seems in some sense inescapable, if only in its subterranean life as the mythos of our narratives.

The degree to which our narratives are shaped by something other than the particulars, is the degree to which we resist and are made anxious by change. History is a product of radical changes—in particular the invention of the alphabet—and also our best psychological defense against the distressing results of social change. Myth is more engaging and seductive, but makes us provincial and unable adequately to deal with change.

Conclusion

The argument of the paper seems to be in the direction of a contradiction: On the one hand, the greater degree of myth we allow, the less able we become to handle change. History is the conceptual tool we have invented to allow us to make sense of changing conditions, and to recognize the conditions that surround us at any time as the result of endless contingency. Myth denies contingency, asserting that the conditions that exist around us are inevitable and "natural". Myth today leads to intellectual provincialism and to conflict between those with competing views of what social conditions are "natural".

On the other hand, Robert Bringhurst notes that "the boundary between the historical and the mythical, the domestic and the wild, is a flexible and permeable boundary, risky but not difficult to cross, and that the wild, because it is not under human control, is not only a dangerous realm but also a source of rebirth: a place to renew and increase one's share of knowledge and power" (2000, p. 25). Crossing that permeable boundary in teaching history is doubly risky, of course, because it can be so difficult to get back again.

Claude Lévi-Stauss named his most famous book La Pensée Sauvage

(1962). “Pensée” was intended to echo Hamlet’s lament on the dead Ophelia: “And there is pansies, that’s for thought.” The English translation of the book, “The savage mind” lost the French associations of “suavage” with the kind of wildness and generative freedom Bringham identifies as one of the gifts of myth to the human mind. It is a freedom that has a romantic appeal for us, largely because it is a kind of freedom that was at the heart of the Romantic revolt against the classical, rational mind, and that Enlightenment project that seemed to give too little place to the wildness within us. But the contradiction in my conclusions is only a reflection of a conflict within us, generated in its turn by the creativity that carried the human mind from its mythic origins to the strange rationality we exploit. That rationality seems often to be constraining. While it can deliver the goods—or many of the goods people have longed for from the beginning of our species, such as control over our material circumstances—it seems to do so at a cost to the freedom and wildness of thought that delivers other goods. This might seem a long stratospheric way from the history class in that school down the street and the provisions of the Treaty of Augsburg, but to understand what function knowledge of those provisions is to play in the minds of our pupils requires us to sort out better the troubled permeable boundary between myth and critical history.

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