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Conceptualizing the Growth of Historical Understanding

PETER SEIXAS

It seems to me obvious that we have a connection to the historical past, as ordinary persons, prior to and independently. . . of the investigative frameworks of professional historians. (Carr, 1986, pp. 2-3)

The educational research community has paid substantial attention to the problems of the development of understanding in mathematics and science. The paucity of comparable work in history is remarkable. David Lowenthal (1985, p. xxvi) calls it "astounding" that on a topic of almost universal concern, "how people in general see, value, or understand [the past]," there has been so little research. Within the educational research community, Downey and Levstik noted as recently as 1991 "a disturbing lack of attention to what children do know and to how they came to learn what they know [about history]." While there are hopeful signs of new interest in the field, investigations of historical thinking and learning still lag far behind those in science and math (Leinhardt, Beck, and Stainton, 1994; Carretero and Voss, 1994; Wineburg, 1994, in press). Why is this so?

The answer may well lie somewhere in the tangled but much-traveled paths of "the structures of the disciplines" (Lee, 1983; Shemilt, 1983; Wilson, 1988, pp. 214-253; Hirst, 1965; Bruner, 1960).¹ The structure of a discipline, roughly speaking, constitutes a way of knowing the world. Such a structure not only provides the foundations for academic scholarship in a field but also helps to define the parameters of prior or pretheoretical (in David Carr's terminology) understandings in the same areas (Gardner, 1991; Carr, 1986). But I use the term "structure" with reserve, and what I propose as a "structure" of history is perhaps no more than a set of closely related core issues that must be confronted in order to foster growth in historical knowledge.² Without addressing these core issues, we could not begin to think historically, nor could we become more expert. Conversely, the way we address them shapes our historical thinking. To return to our earlier question, then, is there something that distinguishes the structure of history from the structures of mathematics and the sciences in a way that fundamentally affects the educational research efforts and accomplishments in these respective fields?³

VanSledright and Brophy (1992, p. 841) see a different relationship to "experience" in scientific and mathematical thinking. Their formulation is flawed, but it

may help to explain why researchers have been slow to explore prior understanding in history.

[Children] lack an experiential knowledge base. . . from which to draw information for developing historical constructions and understandings. They learn about the physical world, about plants and animals, and about numbers and quantitative relationships through direct, experiential contact with manipulable aspects of their environment. By contrast, most aspects of historical understanding lack this experiential base. . . .

VanSledright and Brophy's stark contrast between the raw experience (of natural phenomena) and the constructed interpretation (of historical phenomena) is misleading. On the one hand, we should not minimize the degree to which language and cultural legacies shape people's experiences of the natural world, even at a very young age. The forms of their interrogation, the kinds of answers they expect and accept, are never simply the results of "direct" culturally unmediated experience (Driver et al., 1994). On the other hand, people (young and old, novice and expert) do directly encounter two distinct forms of stimuli that generate historical questions and hypothetical answers (again, like scientific questions, culturally mediated in profound ways).

First, we encounter everywhere *traces* of the human past in artifacts and relics, documents, the built environment, landscapes, or, on a more complex level, institutions and languages. In fact, our culture is suffused with the raw materials of historical understanding. As David Lowenthal (1985, p. 185) puts it, "The past surrounds and saturates us; every scene, every statement, every action retains residual content from earlier times. All present awareness is grounded on past perceptions and acts. . . . Centuries of tradition underlie every instant of perception and creation, pervading not only artifacts and culture but the very cells of our bodies."

Second, we experience *accounts* of the human past, in innumerable presentations of the past that we confront outside of formal history-learning through family stories and the media, including television news, film, historical fiction, historical references in advertising, and popular commemoration. Some accounts are so fragmentary that they might better be called "references" to the past. Nevertheless, such cultural references implicitly convey a fuller account. Roger Simon (1993) noted within 18 months of the Columbian quincentenary, for example, the production and marketing of books, films, TV and radio programs, theater performances, and rap songs as well as buttons, decorative and declarative fabrics, calendars, puzzles, and games.

All of the problems addressed by historical thinkers (novice or expert) are rooted, ultimately, either in these pervasive historical traces or in historical accounts. Questions that arise from the traces include: Is this what I think it is? How did this come to be? What was it like before? Is it the first of its kind? Questions suggested by accounts of the past include: Who constructed this account and why? What does it mean for us? What other accounts are there of the same events/lives/phenomena? How and why are they different? Which should we believe?⁴

But if, in one sense, "the past is everywhere," as Lowenthal (1985, p. xv)

asserts, in another sense the past is also irretrievably gone (and Lowenthal explores this too). So what we confront is never the past itself but presentations of the past, both traces that inevitably undergo change over time, and accounts or interpretations of the past addressed to us in the present. Coherently organizing all of this material so that we can understand our own situation in time is a task for each (individually) and all (collectively) of us. How might we go about theorizing the discipline-specific structures of historical understanding that enable us to do this?

Carr (1986, p. 167) argues persuasively that we must organize experience as narrative, that experience without a narrative organization is incoherent to us as humans.

The communal event of the present, in which we participate as subjects of experience or action, gets its sense from the background of comparable events to which it belongs. We participate in them (enjoy or suffer, act in common, and understand what we are doing) to the extent that we place the event in this context. And our placing it there is a function of the overall story we tell, and if necessary retell, to each other about ourselves and what we are doing.

Organizing our collective experience of the past—i.e., the traces and presentations of the past that we encounter in the present—in such a way that they provide a meaningful context for our present experience, is thus the central task of historical understanding. (On narrative as the essential mode for sense-making in time, see Bruner, 1986; Holt, 1990; Levstik and Pappas, 1992; Levstik, 1986, 1992; Mink, 1987; White, 1978.)

The core of this chapter is an exploration of the issues we face as we do this, issues that together constitute the structure of historical understanding. It would be highly ironic, however, if an essay on the elements that help us to build historical meaning in our own time did not also take into account the specificities of our own historical moment. Who should be conscious of the historicity of that moment, if not the author and readers of this essay? Thus I do not attempt to write a transhistorical analysis of the structures of historical understanding. While the structure of the discipline of history as a key to pedagogy has been under active discussion for two or three decades, and related discussions go back to the beginnings of historical scholarship, the current exploration takes place at a particular moment of rapid social, cultural, and economic change. If the entire modern era is one in which "all that is solid melts into air," the past two decades are even more destabilized (Berman, 1982). As the world political-economic order undergoes fundamental restructuring, what Harvey (1989) has called space-time compression has an impact on every aspect of our culture. Answers to the questions that arise from a concern with change through time cannot help but be affected by accelerated change through time. A related aspect of the contemporary moment, which has a direct and substantial impact on the structures of historical understanding, is the heightened awareness of cultural diversity. If history is largely the construction of a story of the origins, analogues, and antecedents of "us," our contemporary community, then who defines "us," and how it is defined are of

great importance (Hollinger, 1993; Appleby, 1992; Tyrrell, 1991; McGerr, 1991). Both the accelerated pace of change and the destabilized, contingent boundaries of our communities contribute to loosening our canons, shaking the certainties of an earlier age (Gates, 1992). In our own era, these difficulties are superimposed upon the perennial problem of the past: the distance between ourselves in the present and all that has gone before. All this is to say that the structures of historical understanding are not only developmental but also cultural and historical.

Recent academic historiography has been shaped by the same cultural conditions that provide the seedbed for contemporary, naive or novice historical thinking (Seixas, 1993a). For that reason, I conjecture, it provides insights into naive historical thinking in our own time, which might be more difficult to uncover with other tools. In the remainder of this essay therefore, I make use of recent historiography to define the issues faced by all historical thinkers. Where relevant research on historical cognition exists, I introduce it as well.

Elements in the Structure of the Discipline of History

Significance

"History," as George Herbert Mead put it, is always an "interpretation of the present" (quoted in Trachtenberg, 1989, xxiii). If our interest in the past is to contextualize the present, then the *significance* of historical events (or people, or dates) is ultimately tied to their relationship to the present. What makes any particular event significant is the richness and complexity of its connections to other events and processes, and ultimately to ourselves. The concern with historical significance links the historian and naive thinker, and distinguishes them both from the antiquarian and the chronicler.

Peter Rogers (1987, p. 6) discusses the process of historical meaning-making as differentiating "between the various members of a mass of crude facts and of showing their significance in relation to some theme or development" (see Lomas, 1990, pp. 41–46; Polkinghorne, 1988). Neither the naive historical thinker nor the historian, in fact, does confront "a mass of crude facts." (Perhaps only the readers of school textbooks face this grim challenge.) But otherwise, in confronting the various fragmentary traces and accounts, a sorting and sifting and drawing-of-relationships (ending ultimately with ourselves) must take place in building an understanding.

In order to examine the paradoxes and problems involved in this process, we turn to an exemplary case from recent historical scholarship. In *A Midwife's Tale: The Diary of Martha Ballard*, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (1990) mines Martha Ballard's account of her own life to shed light on social patterns and gender definitions in a small Maine town in the eighteenth century. While previous historians dismissed Ballard's diary as trivial and insignificant, Ulrich makes it meaningful by constructing a web of interpretation that relates it to contemporary concerns. Women's work, women's lives, once marginalized, now become the locus of significance, in

part because women in the late twentieth century have redefined the "we" to whom historical accounts must relate.

But here is the paradox that Ulrich negotiates so artfully. While good history studiously avoids decontextualizing the past (i.e., anachronistically interpreting the past in the terms of the present), it must demonstrate the importance of the past for the present. Aware of this tension, Ulrich (1990, p. 34) writes of "the complexity and subjectivity of historical reconstruction" and of "the affinity and the distance between history and source." She calls what she does, "open[ing] out Martha's book for the twentieth-century reader."

The connections between historical events and issues of concern in our own time may take the form of a narrative chain, whereby the past is shown to be causally related through a series of events to our present circumstances (Carr, 1986), or through analogy with issues in our own time (Rogers, 1987). But at least two kinds of problems may differentiate the way naive thinkers assign significance to historical events from the way Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and other historians do so. First, naive thinkers simply lack the breadth of information that historians have, so that their choices of what is more or less significant are severely constrained. While historians immerse themselves in traces and accounts of the past (in archives, documents, and their colleagues' writings), students encounter and recognize traces and representations of the past only sporadically (Kunen, Tang, and Ducey, 1991; Frisch, 1990; Sleeper, 1973). As one student responded when asked why she felt that "wars" were the most significant events in history, "that's probably the only thing anybody knows about" (Seixas, 1993d). Second, they may be much more likely than historians to decontextualize the past in the search for meanings for the present. In so doing, they may either miss the significance for their own lives of historical actions and decisions that are inexplicable in their own frame of reference, or they may draw unwarranted "lessons" from the past, by ignoring the historical *mentalité*, the culture in which the historical actors were embedded. Each of these challenges for naive historical thinkers risks a failure to negotiate the tensions between past and present, Ulrich's (1990, p. 34) "affinity and distance" between history and source.

Epistemology and Evidence

In constructing historical knowledge, another cognitive task involves separating warranted belief from that which is not. How should we handle traces in such a way that we can learn about the past? What accounts of the past should we believe? On what grounds? With what reservations?

Again, if either historians or naive thinkers worked with "masses of crude facts" the problem would be radically different from what it is. Historical epistemology would simply involve testing individual claims of fact against the documentary and artifactual evidence. What makes things complex is that historians begin their thinking not in discrete "facts," but in the accounts of other historians, in historical records, and in traces of the past, just as naive thinkers generally ground their

historical thinking in the accounts and traces of the past available in the broader culture. So the first questions in historical thinking are more apt to be formulated as, "What are the problems with these accounts?" and "Shall I take them as is, or do they need revision?" (Levstik and Pappas, 1992, p. 378). And at a more sophisticated level, how does my knowledge of the situation and perspectives of the author(s) of the account or record lead me to revision, to new interpretations, to new meanings buried in the old stories (and thus new stories)? As Peter Novick (1988) has shown, the claim that one historian's revision of another rests simply on the accumulation of more "evidence" to support a new interpretation has become increasingly difficult in recent years.

Denis Shemilt (1987) devised a four-stage hierarchy for analyzing adolescents' ideas about historical evidence. At the lowest level, there is no questioning about the authenticity or reliability of the source, and no question of "using" evidence other than as information. Students at that stage are unable to revise or to discount historical interpretations. They accept what is written. The range of students' use of evidence progresses through questioning the reliability and authenticity of sources (still failing to use a source in the revision of an account it provides), then through understanding evidence as a basis for inference about the past, to understanding the historicity of all sources and accounts (that is, the necessity of revising and discounting all accounts) at the highest stage.⁵

A second basis for historical epistemology—other than traces—lies in expert historical authorities. All of us rely selectively on the knowledge of experts (Haskell, 1984), but young people's choices of which authorities to believe may be more or less warranted. They may rely uncritically on those whom they take to be experts, express general skepticism, or be able to articulate criteria for distinguishing reliable from unreliable authorities. Wineburg (1991) found high school students highly likely to trust historical texts written in an authoritative voice, i.e., a simple narrative, even when the account was inconsistent with primary sources given to the students in the same session. Seixas (1993b) similarly found 16-year-olds generally viewing a popular historical film as if it were a window on the past. When challenged, they resorted to a range of grounds for their belief in the reliability of the filmic depiction including (1) the film's conformity to their understanding of human nature; (2) the familiarity of the depiction of the historical characters; (3) the film's compatibility with school history accounts; (4) the fact that it was a recent film; (5) the technical sophistication of the film; and (6) the emotional impact of the film. Some of these are better grounds for belief than others; all deserve investigation as components of these students' historical epistemology.

As Epstein (1994b) has shown, students' social location is an important factor in their responses to the problem of historical authority. While Epstein compared African-American and white students, she implicitly raised questions about the impact of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Epistemological beliefs (implicit or explicit) provide the basis for historical knowledge. Without such a basis, young people have no reason to believe anything in particular about the past. They generally do have beliefs; investigation into the grounds for those beliefs, as well as the variation in those beliefs, is a worthwhile, but largely unexplored, inquiry (see Shemilt, 1980).

Continuity and Change

The concepts of continuity and change are so fundamental to historical understanding, that the Organization of American Historians identified treatment of "continuity and change" as the fundamental criterion for selecting articles for its expanded journal (Thelen, 1992). Continuity and change are relational. In order to identify historical change, we have to set a phenomenon against an unchanging, or continuous, backdrop. For instance, if we want to study change over time in modes of transportation, we posit a continuous category, "transportation," which is, for the moment, ahistorically conceived. Without such a transhistorical category, it becomes difficult or impossible to understand change within the category. Conversely, the concept of continuity of any phenomenon over time depends upon a backdrop of change elsewhere or in other phenomena. Thus we might speak of the continuity of a political constitution enduring periods of social and economic disruption. We might even look back on a period in which society, economy, and politics were, in a traditional society, apparently relatively unchanging, but only from a time after which there had been a development we regard as fundamental change. If everything were static, then "continuity" would make no more sense than "change."

The interaction between the concepts of change and continuity raises a host of problems for consideration in respect to naive historical thinking. A naive thinker, even when considering profound change in one aspect of social, political, or economic life, may assume much more continuity in other aspects of life than is warranted. For instance, a student looking at the technological development of photography (an example of what the British call "development studies"; see Shemilt, 1980; Lomas, 1990, p. 23) may fail to consider related changes in the purposes of photography, in the availability of photographs and camera equipment, in various people's modes of "reading" photographs, and so on (Douglas, 1992; Trachtenberg, 1989). Highlighting any example of change in the foreground may inadvertently contribute to a set of ahistorical assumptions about the background to the change. Yet the more that is brought into the changing foreground, the more complex the picture becomes.

This pedagogical problem is a recapitulation of the historiographic problem of the past 20 years, as historians have increasingly turned their attention to previously unexamined aspects of human life. The resulting work has historicized, for example, gender, childhood, death, the body, desire, leisure, work, and (most problematically) knowledge itself (e.g., Scott, 1988; Laqueur, 1990; Aries, 1962; Wilson, 1990; Novick, 1988). Acknowledgment of the historicity of knowledge, of course, implies the historicization of history writing. This scholarly development is the analogue to the student's subjecting further aspects of human life to historical scrutiny. Up to a certain point, the picture becomes more richly complex. After that point, the question of what continuous ground provides the foundation for the observation of change becomes pressing (Seixas, 1993c). We return to the image of all that is solid melting into air.

People's own experience with historical change is relevant to their conceptualizing change and continuity. Age is clearly a significant factor in such experience.

Leaving aside any differences in cognitive development, a 60-year-old in twentieth-century North America has simply lived through more historical change than has a ten-year-old, and is likely to have more direct experience with how fundamentally things can change. But age is not the only factor in contributing to such historical experience. One's historical location is also significant. A person who lives through a war or a coup d'état, who experiences the ramifications of a technological innovation, who immigrates to a new country or who sees the impact of demographic change on a neighborhood has a different experience of historical change from one who lives in traditional stability. How much more likely is it that adult or child would be sensitive to the nuances of fundamental historical change, if he or she had lived through a period during which a social order was destabilized?

What is the impact on young people, then, of a pace of historical change demanding that meaning must "be discovered and defined from within the maelstrom of change, a maelstrom that affects the terms of discussion as well as whatever it is that is being discussed" (Harvey, 1989, p. 11). They may experience social and cultural instability much more pervasively than did, for instance, even many of their teachers (or researchers investigating their cognitive processes). Contrary to the suggestion offered in the last paragraph, it may be that younger people growing up in an era of uncertainty and instability have a more profound experience of rapid change than their elders, that they *assume* deep, pervasive, and destabilizing change, rather than assuming continuity and stability (Elder, Modell, and Parke, 1993; Giroux, 1994). Representations of time, which shift with the broader cultural currents, are presently undergoing a critical period of challenge (Kammen, 1992; Gutman, 1987; Cruikshank, 1991; Samuel and Thompson, 1990; Ermarth, 1992; Jameson, 1991). Seen in this way, the historiographic challenge of the past two decades is just one aspect of an epistemological challenge felt in different ways throughout the culture, as historians and nonhistorians as well cope with locating themselves in time in a period of upheaval (Entrikin, 1991).

Progress and Decline

One of the most fundamental ways we organize the past in relation to the present is in terms of the concepts of progress and decline. Though it is often unarticulated by historians, textbook writers, or laypeople, a sense of progress or decline underlies most accounts of the past. Until the recent impact of narrative theory upon historians, there was little critical attention to the role it played in shaping the meaning of historical knowledge (White, 1978). Cronon (1992) raises a host of questions about historical interpretation by juxtaposing accounts of Great Plains history as progress and as decline. He demonstrates how the same historical phenomenon acquires very different meanings in relation to the present and is left somewhat perplexed as to how to deal with contending accounts (see Novick, 1988). The "evidence" is necessary, but not apparently sufficient to be sure that we have the story "right."⁶

Historical revisionism on the occasion of the Columbian quincentenary is a clear example of how popular thought about the past is organized into progress or

decline, or complex combinations of the two (Simon, 1993; Maxwell, 1993). School textbooks have typically told a whig history, conveying an underlying message of the growth of democracy, knowledge, and enlightenment through time. Pointing in a different direction is what Kammen (1989) called the "heritage phenomenon," an attempt to appeal to a nostalgic vision of some lost, better days. Samuel (1990) explains the mass interest in British history in similar terms. The widely held concept of "declinism" may well signal a fundamental shift in popular conceptions of progress and decline (Heilbroner, 1993).

Open-ended questioning can probe young people's sense of progress and decline, providing an opportunity for students to express the sense of the past that they have integrated into their own conceptual structures. Recently in a discussion about historical progress and decline, I asked an eleventh-grade student whether she thought life for most people was getting harder or easier as we approached the end of the twentieth century:

STUDENT: Oh definitely easier.

INTERVIEWER: . . . What makes you say that?

STUDENT: Well. . . I refer back to when I watched "The Little House on the Prairie" shows, how the girls, say, they be around 10, they have to do all the farming and they have to get their eggs and make their own bread and butter and that and now we just go to the store, we buy it, we have instant food and it's a lot less time-consuming it seems. But on the other way it has declined in that there's more crime and all that, but I don't really look at it, that's not my major focus.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any other kind of evidence that you could bring up?

STUDENT: Oh, just two days ago my mom was complaining—the income tax and she says oh I don't imagine how we survived ten years ago without calculators; she was just saying how hard it was and that she can't imagine doing it now without some of these calculators.

This student had assembled her sense of historical progress, as expressed here, from a combination of television watching (*Little House on the Prairie*), daily experience (instant food), news reportage ("more crime. . . but I don't really look at it"), and comments from her mother (the use of calculators). My question was phrased in terms of life being "harder or easier" but other values (security, health, democracy) might be substituted and compared (see Szacka, cited in Lowenthal, 1985, p. 36). Comparison of an internalized, believed account of the past, with perceptions of the present, along these lines is likely one of our most compelling uses of the past, both for individuals and for the culture as a whole. Such accounts might provide the starting point for historical inquiry.

The Confrontation with Difference: Empathy and Moral Judgment

Investigating what life was like in the past involves asking the questions, how was it different and how was it better or worse than today? (see above). People in the

past not only lived in different circumstances (in terms of, e.g., technology, shelter, and political institutions), but also experienced and interpreted the world through different belief systems. When naive thinkers confront the differences of the past, however, they may mistakenly assume that people living in different circumstances nevertheless thought in ways essentially similar to themselves. Here is a failure to realize what they do not know about the past. Two aspects of our intellectual relationship with peoples different from ourselves are empathy and moral judgment.

Of empathy, Peter J. Lee (1983, pp. 34–35) says, “There can be few notions so commonly employed in talking about what children need to be able to do in history, and so little examined.” Upon examination, the notion becomes very problematic. Some have considered empathy as an affective exercise, in which students feel the human commonality between themselves and historical figures. As it is put in the *California History-Social Science Framework* (California State Board of Education, 1987, pp. 12–13),

The study of history involves the imaginative reconstruction of the past. . . . Historical empathy is much like entering into the world of a drama, suspending one’s knowledge of “the ending” in order to gain a sense of another era and living with the hopes and fears of the people of the time.

This formulation of historical empathy specifies no safeguards against thoroughly ahistorical “imaginative reconstructions” based on insufficient evidence from traces of the past. Imagining oneself in very different circumstances—in just this way—provides the core of Jenkins’ (1991, pp. 42–43) comic attack on empathetic understanding in the classroom,

Think here of those imaginative leaps we might well have been asked to make so that we could pretend to be a fox, a snowflake, an angry king; such appeals were (and are) to make pupils feel involved and engaged. . . . where all pupils bring their equally valid/valued opinions to school, then opportunities for their expression must be encouraged: what do they think of the past, what is history for them, what is their explanation—let them try and put themselves into the mind-set of (their) medieval prince.

The examples are ridiculous precisely because students have no data to support their imaginative leaps, and in the absence of any data, any assertion of what anyone feels is equally plausible.

Lee (1983) provides a more substantial conception of historical empathy as “an achievement, not as a special power, or as an activity.” In his account, we understand historical agents through a study of evidence (i.e., traces of the past) and empathy is the product of that study. Ashby and Lee (1987) use the concept of historical empathy to examine students’ understandings of the differences between their own age and that of the historical subject. In their definition of levels of historical empathy, the more students can follow the sometimes radically different thinking of someone from an earlier age, the higher level they have achieved. Downey (1994) pursued this problem in an investigation of fifth-grade students’ ability to adopt the perspectives of historical actors. He found the students “at the threshold of perspective taking,” but concluded that “most of them could not step

across.” He suggests that a rich base of information about “the fundamental structures and processes of everyday life” is necessary for successful historical empathy. Moreover, he advises that “teaching for historical thinking probably should focus more on the differences than on the continuities between past and present” (Downey 1994, p. 18).

Keith Jenkins’ (1991) challenge to historical empathy (a term he dismisses altogether), rests on the argument that, as we reconstruct the world of the past, we inevitably do so from within our own frame of reference. Without our own frame of reference, we have no frame of reference at all. “Given that there is no presuppositionless interpretation of the past, and given that interpretations of the past are constructed in the present, the possibility of the historian being able to slough off his [sic] present to reach somebody else’s past on their terms looks remote” (Jenkins, 1991, p. 40; cf. Jenkins and Brickley, 1989; Harlan, 1989).

In the face of the impossibility of a perfect, “presuppositionless” knowledge of the past (if such a phrase even makes sense), Jenkins appears to give up on historical knowledge altogether, on the part of children and everyone else. But there are various levels of understanding: History teachers correctly see an error when their students ahistorically assume that their own frameworks of assumptions, meanings, purposes, and values were also present in historical people who lived in different circumstances. Thus Ashby and Lee discuss students who interpreted fasting and drinking holy water before the Saxon practice of the ordeal as “a foolish practical mistake.” “That sort of thing,” said one of their subjects, “we wouldn’t be doing nowadays ’cos we’re not that stupid nowadays” (Ashby and Lee, 1987, p. 70). Even if the quest for perfect understanding of historical people “on their own terms” may be epistemologically naive, there still remain more or less sophisticated understandings. Historians strive to provide interpretations that more fully comprehend a foreign climate of opinion, and thus to understand otherwise inexplicable actions and statements. In Jenkins’ all-or-nothing account, naive and sophisticated historical readings of documentary traces become indistinguishable.

The presentism of Ashby and Lee’s student takes a different form among teachers, filmmakers, and historical novelists. These architects of historical accounts may attempt to make their characters “come alive” for their contemporary audiences by writing onto them familiar behaviors, motivations, assumptions, and conventions from their own culture. The resulting anachronisms are pervasive in the popular media. Thus after watching Native Americans discuss how to handle the white intruder in the overwhelmingly popular and successful *Dances with Wolves*, one student said revealingly, “You get a sense that these are real people and they’re trying to deal with a real problem, as opposed to just a ‘bunch of Indians’.” What made the film so “real” for him? “I could see very easily a bunch of white people talking about almost exactly the same thing.” The power of the film comes, then, from rendering the natives of 1863 familiar, like “white people” today (Seixas, 1993b). This student responded “empathetically” to the historical account that presented the “other” as fundamentally like himself. After all, we “understand” someone’s actions if we believe that, facing similar circumstances, we would do the same. The paradox of empathy, then, is that it involves an effort to confront

difference which, at every turn, tempts us to impose our own frameworks of meaning on others. The challenge is, again, one of negotiating between "affinity and distance," understanding human commonality without mistaking the contingent cultural constructions of our own time as transhistorical. In the epistemological confusion of the current moment, the task is particularly difficult.

Moral judgments in history pose similar kinds of problems. We make judgments by understanding historical actors as agents who faced decisions, sometimes individually, sometimes collectively, which had ethical consequences. Moral judgments require empathetic understanding—that is, an understanding of the differences between our moral universe, or ideological surround, and theirs, lest they be anachronistic impositions of our own standards upon the past. That having been said, we want to (and generally do) avoid a relativistic historicism that abjures historical judgments because the past is such a "foreign country." We deal with this exactly as we did with the problem of historical empathy: Our ability to make moral judgments in history requires that we entertain the notion of a historically transcendent human commonality, a recognition of our humanity in the person of historical actors, at the same time that we open every door to the possibility that those actors differ from us in ways so profound that we perpetually risk misunderstanding them.

Kieran Egan (1990, p. 232) uses the paradox of affinity and distance in his prescriptions for history teaching, without, however, acknowledging the potentially contradictory approaches to the past. On the one hand, he says:

We do not just learn about, say Alexander the Great or Florence Nightingale and then admire their courage and energy. Rather, we recognize them as a reflection of our own developing courage and energy.

Here, the struggles of characters of the past become those of students. But on the other hand, he says, "This is also the time for the more exotic features of history. . . . We want to consider the alienness [of the Greeks]. We will explore their curious rites and rituals." Egan, and perhaps all of us, are caught somewhere between the alternatives of affinity as identity (a decontextualized past), and distance as "curious" and strange (an incomprehensible past).

Historical Agency

Historical agency is one aspect of the problem of historical causation. The concept of agency, however, focuses the historian on relationships of power. Who makes historical change and how (Mahoney and Yngvesson, 1992)? Central to the historiography of the past 30 years has been the project of bringing previously marginalized peoples into the purview of the discipline, not as victims or textbook "sidebars," but as active participants. Historians and activists-as-historians have sought a way to understand the historical agency of relatively powerless groups, as they operated within the constraints of their social and historical positions. E. P. Thompson's (1963) seminal *The Making of the English Working Class* generated a school of new working-class history, arguing that, in important ways, the

working class "made itself." But the notion of active agency rooted in a culture of resistance, as a source of explanation of historical change did not go unchallenged (Anderson, 1980; Calhoun, 1982; Fink et al., 1988). Analogous debates arose among feminist historians (e.g., Cott, 1977; Scott, 1988; Gordon, 1988), historians of the African-American experience (e.g., Gutman, 1976; Genovese, 1974) and others (e.g., Goodwyn, 1976).

To what extent do young people have such a democratic sense of historical causation? How do they view their own relationship to social change? Do accounts of the past in which significance is located only among elites have an impact upon their own potentially active role? The most virulent arguments about history curriculum have involved assertions about the psychological impact of national consensus history on marginalized groups. Proponents of women's, ethnic, and working-class history claim, plausibly, that their histories would offer students a chance to see themselves as active forces for historical change; opponents may, of course, fear exactly that (Coulter, 1989; Schlesinger, 1992). How young people in a variety of social and historical situations understand their own life activity as a part of historical change is, then, an important, but heretofore unstudied question.

Toward a New Pedagogy of History

History is the discipline through which we organize the residua (traces and accounts) of the past into a form meaningful to us in the present. Neither simply a "mass of facts," nor a set of fictions, history is a form of knowledge rooted in a set of problematic issues that I have attempted to define in this paper. Young people encounter these issues prior to their first formal experiences of history education, and develop ideas about the past through their partial resolution. Given the current conceptual and empirical research base, it is too early to tell whether such resolutions can be arrayed along a continuum of sophistication, or whether they constitute a set of discrete stages or levels. Researchers are now in a position, however, to ask these questions and others: To what extent does historical thinking undergo development as children get older? Can explicit instruction in the problems of historical knowledge speed that development? What accounts for differences in sophistication in students' historical thinking (cf. Shemilt, 1980; Kuhn, Amsel, and O'Loughlin, 1988)?

In the meantime, much formal history education begins as if students had no prior ideas about the past, nor prior experience of working with the issues that help to define the meaning of the past. Moreover, it proceeds too frequently on the implicit assumption that students learning more historical facts means understanding more history. The identification of a structure of historical understanding, constituted through a series of issues whose resolution remains problematic even for professional historians, provides the basis for a different kind of historical pedagogy. A curriculum based on these issues might promote students' ability to develop meaningful, critical historical understanding on the basis of the traces and

accounts presented in formal schooling, as well as those they encounter in the broader popular culture. Identification and definition of the issues are thus first steps not only in plotting a research agenda for historical thinking, but also more immediately in developing effective strategies for improving history education.

Peter Lee (1983, p. 44) urged the creation of classroom opportunities to expose young people's "misconceptions" in history. What I have discussed in this paper are not "misconceptions," then, but issues, complex tangles that are virtually unavoidable in thinking about our place in time. Historians, no less than novice thinkers about the past, must confront them in dealing with the distances between past and present. Both start from traces and accounts in the present to draw more or less integrated, more or less warranted conclusions about what has happened and what it means.

Without temporal bearings, we cannot make sense of our lives. In gaining these bearings, we assign significance, assess traces and accounts, conceptualize change, judge progress and decline, and employ empathy, moral judgment, and ideas of human agency. These intellectual processes are, as I have attempted to demonstrate, epistemological minefields through which there is no one simple, well-beaten path. And however difficult the dangers may be for professional historians, the most naive historical thinkers also confront them at every turn. Today the explosives are perhaps closer to the surface than ever. Our job as researchers into historical understanding is to dust them off and expose them, for each other, for teachers, and for students, without getting injured in the process.

Notes

1. Of course, the difference may inhere in institutional or historical factors, rather than in differences in the nature of these forms of knowledge, but investigation of such differences would constitute a different subject than the one I wish to address here.
2. Rejecting lists of substantive historical concepts, as well as catalogs of historical "skills," Peter Lee explores what he calls "structural second order concepts," including evidence, cause, empathy, change, and time as "the usual choices" (Lee, 1983, p. 25). Lomas (1990), in a similar list, includes significance but omits empathy.
3. Prior historical understanding is a problematic term in that it implicitly asks the question, prior to what? Nevertheless, I use it throughout this chapter because it links this exploration to work on prior understandings or prior knowledge in other disciplines. I also use the term "naive" to connote nonexperts in the field, though I realize there is some risk in this term. Other candidates are Carr's (1986) "pretheoretical" history, which he has explicated fully, but whose meaning without full explication is not immediately apparent, and "intuitive understanding" (Gardner, 1991) which seems somewhat more appropriate for science and math than history.
4. Kuhn, Amsel, and O'Loughlin (1988) identify *theories* and *evidence* at the core of scientific thinking, and their research program aims to provide a developmental framework for the relations between the two as scientific thinking develops. *Accounts* and *traces* in historical thinking may correspond to theories and evidence in scientific thinking. Traces

provide the evidence with which the historical thinker assembles an account (theory) of what happened, while our selection and reading of traces (evidence) are informed by the accounts (theories) that we bring to the question. There may be differences, however, in the degree to which a narrative structure is fundamental to historical accounts and less so to scientific theories. Furthermore, while Kuhn, Amsel, and O'Loughlin refer to "correct theories," the notion that historians are working toward a "correct" account is highly problematic.

5. Recent work by Terrie Epstein (1994a) and Marcy Singer Gabella (1995) offers promising insights on the arts as historical evidence. The use of evidence has been built into the National History Curriculum of the United Kingdom (National Curriculum History Working Group, 1990). Booth (1993, see also 1987) has criticized the National Curriculum's use of stages, arguing that, separated from specific content, such stages are meaningless as generic measures of students' historical abilities.
6. Historians' new interest in the problem of decline is evident in the program of the Eighteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences (1995), one of whose themes is "Decline as an Historical Concept."

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