

Unnatural and essential:

the nature of historical thinking

Sam Wineburg's work, in particular his groundbreaking *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (2001), has a great deal to teach us about the discipline of history, the nature of historical education, and the specific cognitive framework that such an education cultivates. In this article, Wineburg revisits key themes and, through a detailed consideration of a particular historical document, provides a powerful demonstration of the priority which a rigorous historical education must take if we are to equip students with the tools to effectively navigate cultural complexities.

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Natural and unnatural

Perhaps the most misunderstood statement I've ever made was the claim that historical thinking was 'unnatural.' The title of my book, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, had quite the ring, I thought—and would certainly stimulate more interest than *Historical Epistemology and Other Abstruse Investigations*.¹

The barrage came fast and furious. 'What do you mean, *unnatural*?' my critics fumed. 'Why, thinking about the past is the *most* natural inclination known to humans!' they claimed. 'All children are interested in origins—their grandparents' stories, old photographs in the attic, and so forth.' If historical thinking is so 'unnatural,' they went on, how can we explain the millions glued nightly to the History Channel, mesmerized by 'Mysteries of the Past,' 'The Search for Atlantis,' and in need of their daily dose of black and white: the Blitz, the Luftwaffe, and the assault on Iwo Jima? Does not this appetite attest to something primal about *homo historias*? (Confession: arriving at a hotel in a strange city, I find nothing more soothing than watching—for the ninety-seventh time—Field Marshall Rommel receive a good pummeling at the hands of Monty).

Yes, we humans yearn to connect to the traditions and stories that have brought us to the present. Inborn or acquired early, the 'desire to know what happened before one was born,' as Cicero put it famously, is so basic that we can find no society that does not harbour it. Whether by placing stones on graves or charting genealogies on Google, the impulse to honour the dead is so basic that it is, well ... *natural*.

Yet, as suffused with meaning as are all these activities, they do not constitute 'historical thinking'. Historical thinking requires an orientation to the past informed by disciplinary canons of evidence and rules of argument. It may be natural indeed to sit at our grandparents' feet, charmed by the notion that we form part of tradition's grand chain. On the other hand, it is quite odd—verily, *unnatural*—to do what Stanford historian Richard White did to the stories he heard as a child.² White's mother immigrated to the United States from her native Ireland in her early twenties, and he grew up listening to tales about her native Ahanagran. White then did to these stories what historians do: he sought verification. Using the tools of the professional historian, he unearthed

documentary evidence—immigration forms, police records, tax rolls, old letters—that exposed a fault line between his family’s ‘history’ and the blurry and partial narrative hinted at by the documentary record. The former, transmitted from generation to generation, conferred legitimacy on his family’s hoary past. The latter, knitted together by checking sources, corroborating evidence and verifying facts to arrive at a tentative narrative, was self-conscious about its weaknesses and seized upon (sometimes even celebrated) opportunities to qualify. Indeed, the tension between these two orientations—one that reveres the chain of transmission, committed to passing it on intact; the other that investigates, questions and, sometimes, undermines this same transmission—led White’s mother to tell him that she wished to hear no more about his researches. We are supposed to safeguard family jewels, not footnote them. ‘History destroys without malice,’ the historian ruefully noted.³

White’s aphorism is correct—almost. It is not history, per se, that destroys, but a particular *kind* of history. *Disciplinary* history is a relatively new player in the academic pantheon, not emerging as a distinct discipline until the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁴ Unlike our other engagements with the past, disciplinary history carries its own characteristic

alights on surface similarities between past and present, welding the two in a ‘timeless past’ that blithely ignores nettlesome issues of context, circumstance, contiguity, and chronology.⁸ Doing something different requires effort and must be cultivated. Humans have developed many stances toward historical sources. We preserve them; commit them to memory; and sometimes revere them as holy. But interrogating sources, putting them on the stand and demanding that they yield their truths or falsehoods, is hardly universal. It is a peculiarly Western stance, very much our Enlightenment legacy—however unfashionable at the present moment it may be to admit it.

What does the eye see?

To illustrate how historical thinking differs from normal, garden variety thinking, let me draw on two notions that psychologists have used to describe features of everyday cognition: the ‘Spread of Activation’ effect and the ‘Availability Heuristic.’⁹

Spread of activation refers to the way semantic information is organized in memory in associative networks. These

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forms of inquiry, its own unique way of engaging the world.⁵ History as practiced in the contemporary academy is suspicious, secular, public, qualified, and, to use Sir Karl Popper’s lapidary term, ‘falsifiable.’ Unlike religion, in which faith cements belief, history requires evidence—tangible, verifiable, and open to scrutiny. As a species, we need both forms of history—the personal and revered, as well as the critical and detached—to lead connected, thoughtful, and intellectually rigorous lives.⁶ Indeed, knowing how and when to alternate among the different ways of engaging the past allows us to participate in the full range of human experience. Conversely, applying one mode when the other is demanded—say, interrupting a family gathering to ask grandmother to produce evidence for her assertions—can make for one chilly evening.

When I first claimed that historical thinking was unnatural, I went on to note that such thinking runs counter to the normal thought processes that allow us to get through the day. ‘Historical thinking,’ I wrote, ‘is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development . . . it actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think.’⁷

Reading these words years later I feel no compunction to emend. On the contrary, recent events convince me that thinking *ahistorically* may well be our psychological condition at rest, a kind of blissful state in which the complexities of disciplinary history needn’t get in the way of our snap judgements and facile analogies. The self-assured layperson

networks are composed of nodes, and once a node is ‘activated,’ related nodes are more likely to be activated as well, hence the notion of ‘spread.’ For example, flashing the word ‘car’ on a screen would likely lead someone to respond quicker to ‘what’s a type of German import’ than a question, asked without a prior prompt, such as ‘What’s a kind of German food?’ Once a particular part of a semantic network is activated, we are much more likely to think about associated concepts and ideas.

Related to the spread of activation effect is Kahneman and Tversky’s ‘availability heuristic,’ in which thinkers privilege information easily available and salient in memory over more pallid (but often more probative) information when forming judgements and making decisions. For example, presented with statistical data on the morbidity rates for smokers, a person will often appeal to more ‘available’ data, such as a grandfather who smoked three packs of cigarettes a day but who lived to the ripe old age of 95. In other words, we are biased in the way we process evidence, making use of information that jumps out with the greatest vividness. Countless studies attest that everyday thinking elects the path of least resistance, often choosing what is most available over what is most trustworthy.

Consider how both of these ways of thinking are implicated in our everyday reading of the historical document reproduced in Figure 1. In 1892, American President Benjamin Harrison issued a declaration in honour of the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the New World.

DISCOVERY DAY

21 OCTOBER PROCLAIMED A NATIONAL HOLIDAY BY THE PRESIDENT

(Washington, July 21)

The following proclamation was issued this afternoon by the President:

I Benjamin Harrison, President of the United States of America . . . do hereby appoint Friday, Oct. 21, 1892, the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus, as a general holiday for the people of the United States. On that day let the people so far as possible cease from toil and devote themselves to such exercises as may best express honour to the discoverer and their appreciation of the great achievements of the four completed centuries of American life.

Columbus stood in his age as the pioneer of progress and enlightenment. The system of universal education is in our age the most prominent and salutary feature of the spirit of enlightenment, and it is peculiarly appropriate that the schools be made by the people the centre of the day's demonstration.

Let the national flag float over every school house in the country, and the exercises be such as shall impress upon our youth the patriotic duties of American citizenship.

In the churches and in the other places of assembly of the people, let there be expressions of gratitude to Divine Providence for the devout faith of the discoverer, and for the Divine care and guidance which has directed our history and so abundantly blessed our people.

New York Times, July 22, 1892, p. 8

Seventeen-year-old Jacob Curfman, a talented and articulate student in a high school history classroom, was interviewed about this document and what he thought it disclosed about history. Jacob's response to the document is reproduced in Figure 2.

Jacob's response was fairly typical among the group of secondary school students we interviewed as part of a research study conducted from 1998-2000.¹⁰ Students had vivid memories of the Columbus Quincentenary in 1992, when celebrations devolved into mock trials for genocide, and cities like Cleveland and Berkeley adopted proclamations to rename the holiday 'Indigenous People Day.'

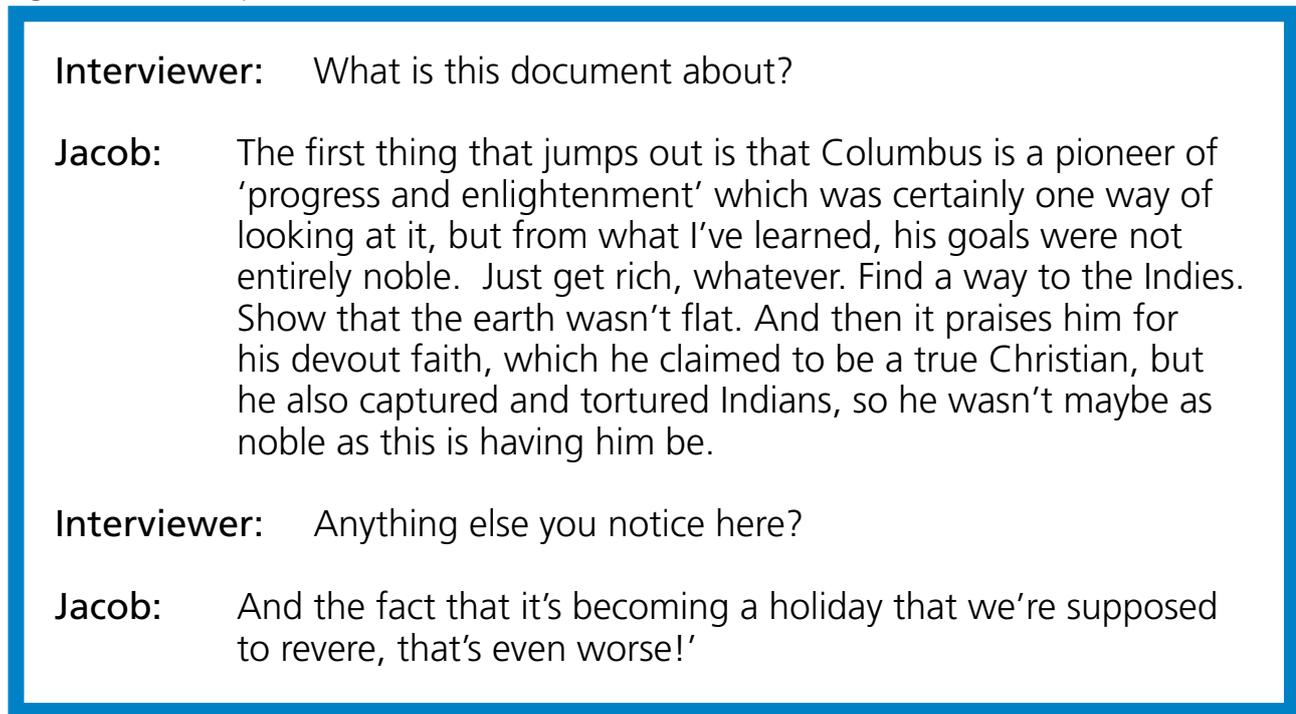
To be sure, Jacob and his peers were 'critical' of Columbus. But 'being critical' and 'thinking critically' are not the same. In fact, Jacob's response was quite off the cuff: he gazed cursorily at the sheet and then launched into a mini-speech

about Columbus, intoning with youthful exuberance his zeitgeist's politically correct shibboleths.

In another research study, we presented this brief excerpt from Jacob, along with the original document, to a group of primary school teachers with no formal historical training. We asked them to generate questions that could be put to Jacob in order to spur him to 'think historically.' Figure 3 reproduces some of the questions these teachers formulated to spark Jacob to think more deeply about Harrison's 1892 Proclamation.

Overall, these teachers were more similar to Jacob than they might have imagined. Like him, they responded to the Harrison document's most salient feature: the polarizing figure of Christopher Columbus, and his changing fortunes in the court of public opinion, from vaunted hero worthy of commemoration to scandalous rogue now dwelling on the

Figure 2: Jacob's response to President Harrison's Declaration



wrong side of the politically correct tracks. Once students' and teachers' eyes fixated on 'Columbus', the information most available in memory was activated, whether coming from a *Sopranos* episode, in which an ill-tempered Tony grumbled against Columbus Day revisionists, to a near-legendary lesson plan (with countless knockoffs) by history

What on earth were these young historians thinking — 'shameless appeals,' 'Pan-Whiteness,' 'a Mediterranean horde'? Did they even read the same document as Jacob? The expanded response of Matt, a doctoral candidate who 'thought aloud' into a tape recorder as he worked through this document, gives us some clues.¹² The first words out of

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teacher Bill Bigelow, in which he recommends that teachers initiate a unit on Columbus by grabbing one of their students' purses, claiming to have 'discovered' it.¹¹ The point is this: Once the 'Columbus node' in memory is activated, all sorts of related information about the mariner become available.

But what if this document has little to do with Columbus—particularly when examined through the prism of historical thinking? At the heart of disciplinary history is the imperative to consider context and its dual lodestars of space and time. Contextual thinking requires as prerequisite that readers ask how and why the source before them came into being.

Consider how a group of PhD students in history—none of whom possessed any specialized knowledge of Columbus—responded to the same document during a seminar conducted at the University of California, Berkeley last February. To them, Columbus was but a sideshow to the main point of Harrison's text; Columbus, if you will, as pretext. Figure 4 shows how some of these budding historians responded when asked what this document was about.

Matt's mouth hint at how a historical reading of Harrison's Proclamation differs from an ordinary, everyday perusal:

Okay it's 1892, so it's the 400th anniversary. Benjamin Harrison. Curious. It's not on the front page. Why? But it is in the New York Times, the so-called national newspaper. The 1890s, the beginning of the Progressive Era, end of the century, closing of the frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner, you've got the Columbian Exposition coming up the following year. Biggest wave of immigration in US history. That's it.

'That's it.' Matt's light bulb ignited.

Matt and the other historians we interviewed are no less susceptible to the 'availability heuristic' and 'spread of activation' than Jacob and the teachers. Indeed, were we somehow able to examine the networks of information in their brains using Magnetic Resonance Imaging, we doubtless would find the same excited hues, indicating activation of the 'Columbus' network. Contrary to what some might think, historians are hardwired just like the rest of us.

Figure 3: Primary school teachers' suggestions about how to move Jacob's thinking on

- ▶ To push his thinking I'd ask, 'What do you consider to be noble? What would you consider to be the 'sad story' behind Columbus's exploration?
- ▶ I'd ask him 'what did Columbus do right'?
- ▶ I'd ask, 'Is there someone in your lifetime that is viewed more positively than he or she should be?'
- ▶ Why do you feel Columbus wasn't a true Christian? Explain.

But it is what they did after that initial millisecond that is, for our purposes, most instructive.

To a one, historians used the document to puzzle about 1892, not 1492. They paused long enough to allow their eyes to readjust from the flashing neon of Columbus's name to go down to the bottom of the document to ponder the context of the document's production: 1892, a Federal Proclamation, important enough to make it into the *New York Times*, a newspaper of record, but not important enough to appear on its front page.

By the end of the 19th century, the United States was getting a makeover. Unprecedented immigration had transformed the country's look overnight; in the 30 years between 1880 and 1910, 18 million newcomers came to America's shores. And they were immigrants of a different breed—European, to be sure, but a different kind of European; what in those days were called 'Slavs,' 'Alpines,' 'Hebrews,' 'Iberics' or 'Mediterraneans.' They were swarthy, spoke strange languages and worshipped God differently from the indigenous Protestant majority.

At the beginning of the 1880s there were about 300,000 Italians in the U.S.; 10 years later, that number had doubled. And by 1910 there were 2 million Italians in the U.S., more than 10% of the nation's foreign-born population. The Italians—along with Poles and Portuguese among others—joined a swelling Irish ('Celtic') community to form a new political bloc: the urban Catholic.

Catholics badly needed a hero. And what better symbol to mobilize them than one of their own? Columbus

Figure 4: Berkeley doctoral history students' responses to the Harrison Declaration

- ▶ The expansion of heroic pantheon to include former undesirables.
- ▶ The shameless appeal to superheroes in order to gain votes in urban centers.
- ▶ The beginning of Pan-Whiteness in postbellum America; or, the Mediterranean horde gets into the country club.

—'discoverer' of the New World but born in the Italian port city of Genoa—was a logical choice. As an editorial in the 1878 *Connecticut Catholic* put it, no one was more deserving 'of grateful remembrance than the great and noble man—the pious, zealous, faithful Catholic ... Christopher Columbus.'

By the time Harrison's 'Discovery Day' came along, it merely sanctioned the many celebrations already in place. San Francisco's Italians had celebrated their first Discovery Day in 1869, and in 1876, Philadelphia's Italians erected a statue of Columbus in that city's Fairmount Park. Well before the 1892 proclamation, the celebration was already on the calendar in St. Louis, Boston, Cincinnati and New Orleans. Declaring 'Discovery Day' made good political sense for any politician—a way to appeal to millions of new voters and to bring them, along with a hero who was one of their own, into the political fold.

All well and good, you might be thinking, but what 17-year-old could be expected to marshal such an armamentarium of contextual knowledge? Fair enough. But none of these history graduate students—specializing in gender relations among French colonialists in Tunisia, the relationship between the Siege of Paris and German unification, or doctrinal schisms after Ali's death in Islam—knew these specifics either. The topic of immigration is taught in the U.S. educational system at three points: when students are 10 years old, 13 years old, and then again in the history curriculum of the secondary school. Immigration units are elaborate and accompanied by 'search your roots' assignments that feature interviews with grandparents or other family members. That the great wave in European immigration occurred during the 1890s and into the first decade of the twentieth century was knowledge that Jacob, as well as the elementary teachers who responded to him, possessed—at least in contour.

But knowledge possessed does not mean knowledge deployed. When most people look at this document it is not knowledge of immigration trends that gets 'activated.' For

many readers, the alpha to omega of thinking begins and ends with 'Columbus.' It is almost as if the Columbus button in memory is pressed, and the document provides the green light to erect a soapbox and preach the gospel of our age.

Students typically encountered this document and issued judgments. By painstakingly specifying what they did not know, historians positioned themselves not only to judge. They positioned themselves to learn.

To be sure, there was grandstanding on the parts of these budding historians too, a kind of knee-jerk jadedness indigenous to Berkeley that assumes a hidden agenda on the part of every political act. But historians' witty barbs about 'letting in the Mediterranean horde' should not obscure the basic fact that they *saw* a different document from Jacob and the schoolteachers. To them, this document was a child of 1892, a fact overlooked by other readers but which for historians shone a light on things they did not know, but wanted to find out. They wanted to know, for example, if there was a precedent to Harrison's act. Did individual states make 12 October a holiday before the Federal declaration? If so, was it in states with the largest population of Catholics? How was Columbus Day celebrated in 1792? Was this same date even recognized in 1692 or 1592? Was there nativist opposition to Harrison's Proclamation? Did the proclamation cause anti-Catholic backlash?

These questions, what I call elsewhere 'the specification of ignorance,' are another characteristic feature of mature historical thinking.¹³ Faced with an unfamiliar document, the historians' goal is not merely to issue a judgment about it, but to use it to stimulate new questions, to identify gaps in knowledge that prevent them from understanding the fullness of the historical moment. Students typically encountered this document and issued judgments. By painstakingly specifying what they did not know, historians positioned themselves not only to judge. They positioned themselves to learn.

It is for this reason that we owe it to our students to cultivate the unnatural aspects of our engagements with the past. No one reading this article can escape the inborn features of the human mind. We could scarcely read and comprehend these words were we not aided by lightning bolts of activation that reduce cognitive load and pave the way toward meaning. But speed bears a dark side. We seize upon the vivid at the expense of the probative. History provides an antidote to impulse by cultivating modes of thought that counterbalance haste and avert premature judgment.

This is why we call history a discipline, a word that carries two essential, but different, meanings. The first refers to the disciplines of the university: those bodies of knowledge that have accrued over generations, each with its own distinctive means of investigation and form of argument. But the second meaning of 'discipline' is no less important. This is the word's original meaning—the opposite of disorderly, slovenly, whimsical, and capricious. In this sense of discipline, history teaches us to resist first-draft thinking and the flimsy

conclusions that are its fruits. This kind of history cultivates caution and teaches us we must engage in a sober accounting of what we do not know. Without this capacity, we are destined to be history's victims rather than its students.

In a world dominated by emotional appeals, quotations ripped out of context, incendiary language, and journalistic analyses that aim at extinguishing sobriety rather than cultivating it, the role of such *unnatural* historical thinking has never seemed more imperative.

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