

“The people of the past are dead and gone and have nothing to teach the citizens of the 21st century.” Would you agree? You may answer with reference to the ancient world or any other period of the past.

The notion that the lives of the deceased have no impact on our present livelihood is arguably fanatical and certainly lazy. As Arthur Marwick states in ‘The New Nature of History,’ not taking the time to do thorough research yet drawing such a pompous conclusion is characteristic of postmodernist historians (Marwick 2001). To avoid falling into that category and showcasing a biased argument, this investigation will fully appreciate the viability of all viewpoints before rigorously examining exactly how reflecting on and learning about notable historical events could likely assist the occupants of contemporary society in constructing a more promising future in order to prove that the people of the past and their livelihoods will eternally be valuable in terms of the influential lessons that they manifested for subsequent generations’ benefit.

An argument to support the view that the people of the past have nothing to teach the citizens of the 21st century could be found in reluctant schoolchildren who complain that history is tedious, or adults who generally underestimate the significance of such a subject. The irony of such opposition to the study of history is that these very complainers revel in the modern medical and technological advancements, attend Guy Fawkes’ Night celebrations and are occasionally women who take their vote for granted. What these snivellers fail to acknowledge is that all of those seemingly normal components of modern life were in fact facilitated by conscientious or even rebellious individuals of the past who did what it took to turn their hopes for their today into our tomorrow.

To begin, as is stated in ‘Emerging Themes in the History of Medicine’ ‘David Willis’s commitment to the idea that a broad historical knowledge and perspective would help us understand the nature of medicine in society’ is helpful in explaining how the people of the past have already proven that they have endless use in teaching the citizens of the 21st century important information to better understand life as a whole, especially with regard to healthcare and medicine (Brandt 1991). Hippocrates is commonly credited with the title of “father of modern medicine” as he was the first to explore the then new notion that disease had natural causes as opposed to supernatural ones, he scientifically described many illnesses and after observation, how they should be treated (University of Glasgow 2020). This empirical approach to understanding the ailments of the human body paved the way for many more medically trained megaminds whose discoveries still assist the quality of life in the 21st century. For example, Edward Jenner’s discovery of vaccinations has avoided many deaths, (vaccinations completely eradicated smallpox and rinderpest from society) and since Sir Alexander Fleming’s discovery of penicillin in 1928, countless bacterial illnesses have been stopped in their tracks. Equally, technological advancements like the creation of the computer in 1822 and the telephone in 1876 have since developed, thus in the centuries following their foundation, society has become increasingly unrecognisable due to its increasing reliance on sophisticated technological devices and methods which have become the norm. Without these people of the past and their clear passion for discovery, the modern day would look extremely different. Fundamentally, history itself birthed better healthcare and advanced technology which we use today. Moreover, the irony of criticising the study of history behind a screen on social media is tangible. On a similar note, fireworks, sparklers and Catherine wheels would not unite communities in parks and green spaces annually on the 5th November if Guy Fawkes had not failed his Gunpowder Plot in 1605. Accordingly and finally, if it weren’t for the persistence and gallance of the suffragettes, young women like myself would not look forward to having their say at General Elections. From hunger strikes to chaining themselves to fences, these brave individuals changed the rigid structure of society so that eventually, regardless of gender, everyone could have a chance at achieving their ideal life. What started as attaining the right to vote for women has continued to develop through subsequent generations so that the female position in modern Western society is miles further liberated than Emmeline Pankhurst and the Women’s Social and Political Union could ever have imagined. “Modern day feminists are often asked if they would have been suffragettes. Most

respond they hope so, but they fear that they might not have had the courage to speak up and engage in direct action. Yet women still give thanks to the suffrage campaigners for their bravery and feel inspired to make something of their lives as a consequence” (Pankhurst 2018). This passage from ‘Deeds Not Words: The Story of Women’s Rights - Then and Now’ encapsulates that those who have embodied the suffragettes’ attitudes have appreciated that the people of the past in their absence likely still want for a fairer future for the citizens of the 21st century and so continuing their efforts is a vital aspect of keeping their legacy of pursuing equality alive. Essentially, every aspect of modern life is intertwined with countless aspects of the past. If one influential event had not occurred before our existence, it is inevitable that our livelihoods would lack some of the components which we have become accustomed to. Therefore, any critics of the study and validity of history as a whole are arguably rather ignorantly close-minded. This chain of reasoning alone is a testament to the fact that the people of the past have already taught the people of the 21st century more than they are given credit for. Therefore, they are not dead and gone, many of their sentiments are still alive and kicking.

A more reasonable argument to present in order to justify the opinion that the people of the past are dead and gone and have nothing to teach the citizens of the 21st century would stem from caution around the legitimacy of historical information. For example, scepticism about the origin of the history and whether it has been recorded biasedly or even lost in communication over the succeeding years. Pauline Stafford validates this preoccupation in ‘Queens, Concubines and Dowagers’ during which she remarks that a ‘typical problem’ throughout historical works is that ‘truth is distorted by bias, propaganda and gossip’ (Stafford 1998). On the other hand, Judith Bennett embraces historical bias by claiming that history is always “inflected” by “political edginess” which is one of its “greatest attractions.” Interestingly, she proceeds to declare this occasional exaggeration of the historian’s personal views as the source of inspiration for countless generations to try to learn from the past to construct superior futures (Bennett 2006). Whilst these opinions are well evaluated and rational, an immediate response to them is that just because history has not been correctly documented and henceforth preserved, it does not mean that the people of the past lack things to teach modern citizens. Instead, it opens up speculation as to why some history has been built around educated inferences. Therefore, referring to the biased nature of some historical texts and the potential inaccuracies in records of the past actually overlooks the subject of the statement - the *people* of the past. Despite the considerable lack of sources from Ancient civilisations, it is known that pivotal aspects of our modern society stems from theirs. For instance, in the year 507 B.C., the Athenian leader Cleisthenes introduced a system of political reforms that he called *demokratia*, or “rule by the people.” It was the first known democracy in the world (History Channel 2018). 1516 years later, in Modern Britain, democracy remains a vital aspect of the population’s involvement in governmental affairs. Therefore, regardless of any historical inaccuracies or approximations in the study of Ancient Greece, it is still known that the past inhabitants of that country created a system which is still widely employed to this very day; even discoveries lacking in factual richness and verification personify the idea that the people of the past have already given the citizens of the 21st century functional methods of how to govern in accordance with the will of the population.

On a note of disagreement with the idea that the people of the past have nothing to teach the citizens of the 21st century, the history of the Witchcraze of the Early Modern Period indicates the ridiculously extreme consequences of delusion, particularly in Germany, yet a similar sort of indoctrination-based scapegoating featured as part of the Holocaust around 400 years later. The intrinsic link between these unfortunate phenomena is the abundance of scapegoating which essentially propelled fatalities and extrapolated their historical significance. Ultimately, the demonstration of the cyclical nature of history in these superficially separate events would indicate that the people of the past themselves failed to learn the correct lessons from their ancestors. However, that does not mean that the lives of the victims and perpetrators of the Witchcraze did not have a lot to teach the diverse victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust: it simply means that the delivery of such lessons was either inadequate, or more likely, completely avoided perhaps due to the widespread use of censorship which even affected schools in Nazi Germany (“Nazi Propaganda and Censorship | Holocaust Encyclopedia” 2021). The Witchcraze of the Early Modern Period and the Holocaust at the

hands of the Nazis simply reveal the stories of the strife of countless innocent citizens who were wronged by authorities which should have protected rather than persecuted them. The scapegoating within these two periods is distressing to recount and the two events have generally mass produced moral lessons for future generations to interpret and embody. The ruthlessness of the Witchcraze emphasises the immense importance of avoiding indoctrinatory delusion and acting irrationally at the hands of panic whilst the brutality within the Holocaust similarly stresses the importance of dignity and religious tolerance. These sentiments alone, if taught sensitively and taken seriously, could break the negative cycles of persecution and barbarism which unfortunately have continued to exist in the modern day (eg. The ongoing persecution of the Uyghur Muslims in China). On this note, history's concepts cannot be learned if they are not taught, thus just because the contemporary citizens do not make a consistent effort to study or acknowledge the former existence of their ancestors, it does not mean that there are not salient lessons in waiting that have the capacity to determine the ways in which they can learn to improve their handling of certain situations in the present.

Quite simply, history has facilitated the present day, and as the present day makes new developments towards the future: the citizens of the 21st century themselves will become people of the past. In the future, the people of the present will equally judge whether their predecessors are dead and gone and have nothing to teach the citizens of their century. It is thus, our contemporary responsibility to keep the memory of those before us alive, learn from their mistakes and in doing so, create a positive impact for further generations to build upon in the same way. Ultimately, it is inevitable that history will repeat itself, it already has done and will proceed similarly. Learning lessons from the people of the past aids the breaking of the negative cycles of oppression and hardship, allowing the cyclical nature of history to mean something more positive. It is evident in every area of the modern day that the people of the past: their lives, their discoveries, their mistakes and their sentiments are valuable, and each person who takes heed of this makes the world better one step at a time. Therefore, I strongly contest the notion that the people of the past are dead and gone and have nothing to teach the citizens of the 21st century.

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