

History: A Noble Quest with Clouded Vision

"I don't claim to fully comprehend the past or to describe it accurately. What I'm offering are approximations, best-guess analyses, and models, rather than actual truth. We can't really know the past. We hardly know the present, and we only partly understand ourselves and our relationship with our surroundings. Still, the search for the actual past is a self-conscious search for truth. I view it as a secularized spiritual quest of the highest order, since understanding the past on some meaningful level, recovering as much of our collective memory as is possible, can give additional meaning to our lives, a sense of balance and perspective that facilitates civilized behavior, the ability to empathize, and not to take ourselves too seriously.

Lastly, unknowingly or knowingly, every historian wears colored glasses, situations, contexts, prejudices, that sometimes cloud our vision and sometimes enable us to see more clearly. As far as I can tell, mine are male, Jewish, middle-class, liberal, and American, and even being an expert on modern European history, which makes me emphasize its importance even more so than the history of other areas. ... I work hard to transcend my context and my limitations. I do not claim to always succeed. What are your contexts? What are your limitations? Beware, and let's grow and learn together."



Source: Professor Robert L. Weiner, LaFayette College, *The Long 19th Century: European History from 1789 to 1917*

1. According to Professor Weiner, what is the purpose of studying history?
2. The professor listed some of his "situations, contexts, prejudices" that could potentially bias him. List your own in the space below to become more aware of the "color" of your own "glasses."

Summary & Assessment

Considering everything we have learned and discussed today, choose one of the four quotes below, and write a few sentences explaining the quote based on your understanding of history and arguing for whether or not you agree with the statement.

1. "What is history but a fable agreed upon?" —Napoleon Bonaparte
2. "The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice." —Mark Twain
3. "History is written by the victors." —Winston Churchill
4. "God cannot change the past, but historians can." —Samuel Butler