

THE END OF SOCIAL STUDIES

Reverence or Reform?

Bryan J. Henry

“I prefer the past to the present; but I believe in a better future” wrote Friedrich Nietzsche in 1862.

The study of history is guaranteed to be part of any primary, secondary, and higher education curriculum, but this fact too often allows social studies teachers and students to take for granted that history is important. Students do not necessarily know why studying the past matters and even passionate social studies educators seldom reflect in a philosophical manner on the purpose of studying history. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Friedrich Nietzsche, two 19th

century philosophers entirely removed from and unconcerned with the curriculum debates of the 21st century, offer some thoughts on history and the way it ought to be studied that are uniquely relevant to our present civic education challenges.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the central figure of the American Transcendentalist movement in the 1830s and 1840s. His work is credited with being the intellectual catalyst that marked America’s philosophical, literary, and cultural break from Europe. Some critics have argued that Emerson contributed to America’s *lack* of historical consciousness, but others have rehabilitated Emerson by insisting that America’s break from Europe was not a break from history and that Emerson’s thought was heavily reliant upon a deep historical consciousness. Friedrich Nietzsche represents a combination of the Enlightenment’s glorification of rationality and Romanticism’s emphasis on individuality. Unlike Emerson, Nietzsche was a very harsh critic of religion and is considered a forerunner of postmodernism’s contention that values are not transcendent or absolute, but rather contingent upon the historical situation within which they arise. He, however, insists that the recognition of this contingency results in our liberation and emancipation.

Although Emerson felt that “Nothing divine dies” and Nietzsche declared that “God is dead,” much of their thought regarding history is complementary. Both Emerson and Nietzsche devote entire essays explicitly to history and discuss the relationship of the present to the past with a concern for individuality, creativity, and agency. A concern for how the past does and *ought* to influence the present is a theme in both of their writings. Both Emerson and Nietzsche argued that the study of history is necessary and their thoughts on why and to what end reinforce the arguments made by critical pedagogues that support the aim of cultivating historical agency and empowerment. Too often history is taught in a manner that fails to communicate to students their power to act within history and Emerson and Nietzsche offer insight into how this can be changed.

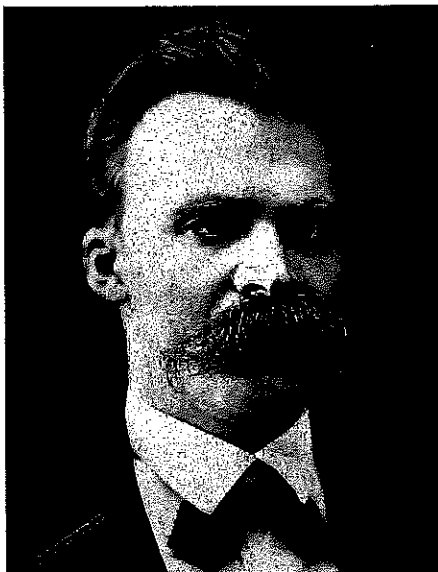
Emerson’s essays and speeches directly address the United States as being too dependent on the past, both culturally and intellectually. In “The American Scholar” Emerson argues that each individual passes through three stages in which “the boy is a Greek; the youth, romantic; the adult, reflective” (Emerson 56) and I argue that these stages can be interpreted to correspond with the three modes of studying history outlined in Nietzsche’s essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.” In this essay Nietzsche examines monumental, antiquarian, and critical history as different manners of viewing the past. Antiquarian history involves the conservation of culture and tradition as an end-in-itself that can significantly impede creativity and action in the present. Both Emerson and Nietzsche, while acknowledging the importance of history, are concerned with the weight and restraint that the past can impose on the present. Antiquarian history reveres the past to the extent that the past becomes the possessor of the historical subject, rather than the subject possessing the past. If creativity and agency are considered desirable in the present, essential for the future, and an aim of social studies instruction, then emphasizing antiquarian history may stifle the personal and civic development of students.

Emerson’s *Nature* (1836) begins with the statement that “our age is retrospective” and he seems to bemoan the fact that “it writes biographies, histories, and criticism” (Emerson 3). In other words, he views his generation as one focused on the past, too entrenched in the thought of its predecessors, and stifled by the actions and events which preceded it. He argues that his generation views the world through eyes that are not its own and asks, “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (Emerson 3). The concern that Emerson has for his generation, and the future, involves an examination and evaluation of whether

continued on page 54 ►►



Ralph Waldo Emerson



Friedrich Nietzsche

◀◀ Reverence or Reform?

continued from page 53

the past is encroaching on and impeding the growth of the present. Nietzsche expresses a similar concern in "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in acknowledging that history is a necessity, but that "it is possible to value the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate" (Nietzsche 59). While the current curriculum can hardly be accused of placing an excessive amount of value on social studies and civic education, the way that history is taught may not engender the creativity that our society needs to solve political problems and social studies educators should reflect on their role as civic educators in this regard.

Nietzsche insists that we need history, "for the sake of life and action, not so as to turn comfortably away from life and action" (Nietzsche 59). Surely, students today are not turning their backs on reality by retreating into their history books, but rather into their digital and entertainment technology. Nonetheless, the lack of *action* is the common concern in both scenarios. The fact that Nietzsche is focused on action possibly being impeded by an improper orientation towards the past indicates that action is a main reason that history should be studied. Emerson shares this sentiment with Nietzsche that the present should use the past to *act* in saying, "a man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work" (Emerson 8). In other words, history should be presented as an on-going project which involves human beings as participants and agents capable of contributing to the project. Students should study history to understand the development of human thought and action with the intention of becoming involved. Students should study history from *within* history and not outside of history.

Cultivating a sense of historical agency and creative empowerment should be a central goal of social studies instruction. Once the student understands that they are an individual within history they can approach the past in a more intimate and direct manner. Ultimately, the student can embrace their own intellectual growth as something stemming from the past, but not determined by it. With the proper orientation towards history the student will begin to recognize individual action and creativity as a duty.

Nietzsche argues that the danger of antiquarian history is that "it knows only how to

preserve life, not how to engender it; it always undervalues that which is becoming because it has no instinct for divining it" (Nietzsche 75). If students are taught that what *is* represents all that *could* be and that answers, or truth, exist primarily in the past rather than in the future or within the present, then the result will be that students are unable to recognize the possibilities of the present.

Emerson, who received an outstanding formal education, constantly emphasized that the past should be used to incite action in the present. He stated in "The American Scholar" that "meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which" previous generations have articulated; yet, fail to keep in mind that these revered individuals "were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books" (Emerson 47). Emerson's words speak to social studies instruction that encourages students to revere the past at the expense of the present. He acknowledges the intellectual heritage that each generation stands upon, but insists that this heritage be preserved, revered, and studied as a means to an end.

Unfortunately, students are too often taught at all levels of education in a manner that demands the rote memorization of facts that often have no relevance to their political, economic, or social position within society. It is the study of history in relation to these positions that situates the student *within* history and allows the student to engage the present as a historical subject. Education is inherently political and history is in many respects the most politically charged subject in the curriculum. I stress that it is a *political*, rather than partisan influence. The politics of race, class, and gender permeate every aspect of the past; particularly, the American past. However, issues of race, class, and gender are often absent or neutralized due to the influence of what Nietzsche calls monumental and antiquarian history. Some social studies educators argue that this reflects a desire for objectivity and the goal that politics not influence the curriculum's interpretation of the past. Yet, it is this false objectivity that prevents the student from developing true subjectivity and which constitutes the most political influence possible.

In promoting critical history, Nietzsche reminds us that it is unnecessary and undesirable to entirely reject the past in our

attempt to embrace the present because our heritage and history are ours whether we forget that or not. He insists that "the best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away" (Nietzsche 76). It is my contention that the social studies should be contributing to the creation of a second nature if that means dealing with issues of race, class, and gender. If social studies educators balance the valid uses of antiquarian history with critical history, then students will possess not just reverence for tradition but also the ability to dissent and achieve reform.

Nietzsche's examination of monumental, antiquarian, and critical history, coupled with Emerson's thought on education and books, provide a valuable critique that social studies educators should consider. I argue that Nietzsche's three types of history also correspond to the three stages of individual development that Emerson mentioned in "The American Scholar." Emerson proposed that, "the boy is a Greek; the youth, romantic; the adult reflective" (Emerson 56). The child is introduced to monumental history at the primary level, antiquarian history at the secondary level, and critical history in higher education. It should become the aim of both primary and secondary teachers to incorporate critical history if the creativity and action that Emerson and Nietzsche value are to be cultivated within students. Emerson's claim that "the world exists for the education of each man" (Emerson 115) will only remain a reality within the social studies curriculum if social studies educators accept Nietzsche's argument that "history *must* itself resolve the problem of history, knowledge *must* turn its sting against itself" (Nietzsche 103).

REFERENCES

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Essential Writings*. Random House, 2000.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life." *Untimely Meditations*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Bryan J Henry, M.Ed., M.A. is a social studies teacher at Kingwood High School and adjunct instructor at Lone Star College – Kingwood. He currently teaches AP European History, AP U.S. Government, and Dual Credit U.S. Government. ✦