

CQ: What kind of perspective does a historian need to have?

### “Perspective on the Past”

I want to talk about perspective. Now there are several definitions for this word. If you look it up, you'll see what I mean. There is, for example, the very specific definition from the art world, which we'll get to later in the course. There is also the more general definition, which is “what you see, based on where you are.” This general definition is what I want to talk about.

Think of the world today. Now really think about TODAY. How do you do that? Can you really get a good picture of today if you live in it? Okay, let's assume you are inside your house or inside the school building. Now try and remember what the outside of the building (or your house) looks like. Be as accurate as you can in your thought. Where's the best place to actually be if you're going to tell someone what the outside of your house or of the building is like? Should you be inside a room, or outside, looking at the building? The answer is probably clear: you should be outside. This is why history is valuable. It's very hard to understand the world that you live in—simply because you're living in it, and it's hard to get any distance between you and what you're thinking about—what you're experiencing. It's like being too close to the camera—things go out of focus.

Here's another analogy. Remember a time when you had an argument with a close friend or relative. And we'll assume that you've made up with them since the argument. Now in the heat of the argument, you just couldn't find a way to agree with them about . . . whatever it was. You just couldn't understand their way of thinking, and they couldn't understand yours. But as time passed, you discussed the issue and you came to some understanding about what it was they meant in the argument. It just happened over time—you talked it out, you made up, you understood one another better. Well, that's kind of how history works. When we can get a little distance, we get some perspective. Things get a bit clearer. Not always crystal clear, but somewhat more understandable than things can be in the present. So getting a little distance between yourself and the time you are studying helps a lot.

However, there are many problems that come with studying the past. One of the problems is that looking at something from the outside means, well, that you're an outsider. And here's the situation: we think that because we lived long enough or late enough to be able to look at this thing from the outside, that we must have some superior perspective on things. In other words, people who lived hundreds of years ago are dead, and we're alive! So that must mean we've got a better way of seeing things.

Be careful with that idea. It's a problem that some historians call “Presentism.” It's the idea that you bring a perspective from the present that may not really fit with how people thought or lived in the past.

Let's take an example from the past that I think you'd find interesting. And I'm thinking about the guy who jumped off the Eiffel Tower (in Paris) in 1912 as he tested out a new overcoat he had invented that he thought could work as a parachute. His name was Franz Reichelt, and he was spectacularly UNSUCCESSFUL. He died in this experiment. Now, it's easy to say, WHAT AN IDIOT! HOW COULD HE HAVE DONE THAT? HE COULD HAVE AT LEAST TESTED IT OUT WITH A DUMMY FIRST. All right, granted, I'm not going to try out his idea—and I STRONGLY URGE YOU NOT to try this at home. However, the problem with this kind of analysis—that poor Franz was simply an idiot—is that we label this guy by assuming we know exactly what WE would have done in his situation—when in fact, we're probably thinking about what we would do—(or NOT do) in OUR situation today, a hundred years later. It seems crazy to do something like that today, testing out something like that in

such a dangerous situation. But keep in mind that Franz was competing with other inventors in a time when there was potentially a lot of money and fame to be had by the best idea about how to travel in the air. Remember that it had been only a few years since the Wright brothers had tested out the first successful airplane in North Carolina. Human flight was still VERY MUCH in its infancy—nobody knew how it was going to turn out. There were people ALL OVER THE WORLD trying to perfect the airplane—and in the process, killing themselves in airplane accidents. But these airplane pilots were HEROES. They were HUGELY popular—because they had begun to do something that nature told us we humans weren't supposed to be able to do. And this guy in Paris probably thought that if he could invent something and try it out before anyone else, he could influence the way people did air travel. And if it was a safety device for pilots he was working on, it could save lives. And, again, he might have become stinking rich with his invention.

So we've got to be careful about how we judge the past and the people in it. Try to get outside the perspective of the present—by learning what it must have been like to live in another time and place. As L.P. Hartley said, back in the 1950s, “the past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.” And what he's saying, I think, is that we all grow up in box of understanding. Some people call the box “culture,” some call it “society,” some historians simply call it “the present.” What historians try to do is see that the box is very valuable—it contains a lot of tools that you can use to understand the past. But in order to actually use the tools, you have to get them outside the box; that's where you use them.

NONE of this is meant to say that you don't know anything. In fact, what you KNOW is what will allow you to get to understand the past better than you thought you could. OF COURSE you know things, and you probably know more about the past than you think you do. Chances are, you already think about the past in ways that will help you in this course—the only problem is that you're not used to EXPRESSING those thoughts, probably because you think nobody else has those thoughts. Part of what we will do in class is practice talking about the past so that you can test your thinking and IMPROVE your thinking.

We will also WRITE about the past. You will, in other words, learn how to WRITE HISTORY. That's pretty cool. Keep in mind that all of this is a PROCESS—that you may NOT find it easy at first. That's okay. It takes TIME. And practice. The important thing is that you try, and that you KEEP TRYING. Practice, and you will probably find, as I eventually did, that this history stuff is far more interesting, is deeper, and something OTHER than what you may have thought.