

283. Herodotus over Thucydides

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Herodotus collected the stories he heard on his travels and then to them added his observations of the people and places he'd seen. Thucydides investigated what he heard and saw to try to determine the truth about things, things both particular and general. Herodotus wanted to know what people said happened; Thucydides wanted to know what happened. Herodotus was a curator and an ethnographer; Thucydides was a scientist.

Curation and inquiry are both crucial academic projects. A university of curation alone would be blind and a university of inquiry alone would be empty. Almost all academics combine aspects of the two in their work, although, as with liking Elvis and The Beatles, the majority of us come down much more heavily on one side than the other.

Both are crucial but the academic mission depends on the spirit of Thucydides predominating. When Herodotus begins to ascend, the university loses its character as a place for intellectuals. It becomes a gallery or museum, and a second-rate one at that. Any institution below 70 to 30 in favour of Thucydides can be a university in name only.

Galleries and museums preserve and display artifacts. People visit them to experience what the things are like and what it was like to live with them. Visitors are encouraged by the displays to celebrate or to mourn. They celebrate when it's the ingenuity and humanity of people and cultures that is on display and they mourn when indifference or inhumanity is the subject. Visitors come away esteeming the ways of others who made the most of hard times or appalled by and fearful of the brutality of which people are capable.

Museums function to create respect for difference and to promote peaceful cohabitation or to warn us about what could happen if... They take their particular function from the desires of those (often governments) who build and oversee them.

Academics captured by the spirit of Thucydides, on the other hand, want to know how the world in fact stands, and they want to come to know how the world stands through the process of evaluating evidence and constructing arguments. They enjoy the pursuit of understanding, the process of hypothesizing and criticizing hypotheses, and they would rather get it wrong after independent study than get it right through being indoctrinated or pressured into it. They want to get it right and then to speak about it, and about their evidence and reasoning, whatever the social or political (or personal) consequences might be.

Academics who construct their syllabi and courses by making sure that women authors or third-world artists (or male authors or artists) are included are acting in the spirit of Herodotus. So are

those who want to expose their students to a wide range of approaches to their subject matter. A course on Foucault is likely an instance of curating if what matters is getting Foucault right rather than getting the phenomena he discusses right. Courses on Marxism or Plato that convey the solutions these thinkers proposed or the magnificent sweep of their visions but that don't attempt to understand in their own right the problems Marx and Plato addressed are likewise in the tradition of collecting and displaying.

The difference is in the motivation and attitude. When we turn to some aspect of the world seeking to create an articulate understanding of it, we cannot come away with knowledge simply by opening ourselves to that aspect of the world. We must begin with hypotheses or tentative understandings. We test our conjectures against what we think we've experienced. A good way to find hypotheses and ideas worth testing is to read what others have thought. When we read Foucault as part of our attempt to understand the world, we are acting as Thucydides did. When we read him so as to stay abreast of current trends in our discipline, we are not.

We find curation in my discipline, philosophy, when scholars argue about what Hume or Wittgenstein or Aristotle really meant, what their doctrines and arguments actually were. Inquirers are different from curators. They read these philosophers to find interesting ideas to appropriate and criticize; they don't much mind if their interpretations are faulty.

Herodotus began to overtake Thucydides when universities and the departments in them began to seek to make the professoriate more accurately representative of the general population. By taking any of sex, race, ethnicity, ability status, sexual orientation and the rest into account when hiring, universities promoted their curating function at the expense of their investigative function. The point of adding "female" to a job advertisement is to get a women's perspective (as though there is such a thing) that can be set alongside the men's perspective. Her research and teaching will display how a woman sees the thing, is the thought in back of it. Colleagues and students are ethnographers and she, the scholar, is their informant. The more perspectives side by side for the ethnographers to appreciate and esteem, the better. To criticize a perspective for generating incomplete or false theories of the things, though, which is what Thucydides would do, is to offend or insult a sensibility.

Indigenization initiatives are the most recent large-scale threat to Thucydidean universities, or at least so are those that valorize indigenous ways of knowing or two-eyed seeing. For the curator of knowledge, each way of knowing is an item to be added to the collection and set on display. What makes a way of knowing a way of *knowing* is simply that it delivers beliefs, whether they tend to be true or false, whether they are explanatory or inert. Two-eyed seeing (or many-eyed seeing, as there are innumerable traditions both in science and in indigenous cultures) isn't curious about the world or judgemental: here's one way it appears and here's another—how it actually is isn't of moment. Curators, for their part, value peaceful cohabitation among the items in their collection. To care as Thucydides would about how things in fact are is to risk disparaging someone's eye.

The point of a Herodotean university cannot be inquiry, the project of resolving intellectual problems and discovering how things are. Inquiry cannot be its point, for it hires and constructs

syllabi by looking to representativeness as well as (or in place of) excellence in investigation. Its point must be to spread goods around and to promote intercultural respect and reconciliation.

Now, indigenous lore might well, of course, have got it right, whatever the phenomenon we wish to understand is. So certainly let us hear and contemplate the ideas and hypotheses within whatever indigenous ways of knowing we encounter. We cannot dismiss as false or limited that which we haven't understood and sought to criticize. It is not in the spirit of Thucydides to reject indigenous ways of knowing as spiritual or traditional, even if they are. By all means, professors who find useful in their teaching or research ideas they've acquired by examining indigenous ways of knowing should discuss and use those ideas. But as soon as we begin to respect indigenous lore, or any other set of ideas or theories, rather than to engage with it critically in our projects of understanding the world, we have become curators and, thereby, have participated in blinding the university.

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