# HISTORY AND LIFE: VIEWS FROM BRITAIN, FRANCE, CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay Thelen questions some widely-held assumptions about how people relate to history, assumptions that underlie some of the statistics in the accompanying major essay (or tables, if the numbers appear in that form). He suggests the continuing use of Nietzsche's distinction between "history" and "life."

The recent interest in how people understand and use history reaches back to a conflict in the late l980s and 1990s between the academic left and the political right. After transforming the content of American history over the previous two decades—to include new voices, methods, topics—radical scholars sought to introduce these new perspectives into museums, schools, parks and other places where people encountered history. This radical agenda appalled the simultaneously-emerging political right which shaped part of its agenda around protecting cultural institutions against these initiatives from the left.

The most remarkable thing about this conflict—soon called "the history wars"—was that both left and right agreed that the fundamental problem was that Americans were ignorant about and uninterested in their nation's past. One side thought Americans to know more about George Washington and the other about Frederick Douglass, but they agreed that historical amnesia and historical illiteracy were destroying American culture. To support this conviction they created and publicized surveys to show what Americans were ignorant about the nation's history.

In response to these attempts to document the ignorance and indifference of Americans toward history some of us sought to find out not what American did not know or care about the past, but what they did know and how they did care about and use the past. And so since the late 1990s there have been a number of careful studies that seek to unearth popular understanding and experiences with the past. The forthcoming study of popular understandings of history by Canadians will be the most methodologically sophisticated in this string of studies. And this Canadian initiative led to the present research undertaken by the Association for Canadian Studies and under discussion in these essays.

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One observation jumps out at me from survey research on how history is approached by different social groups in Britain, France, Canada and the United States. That conclusion is that "history," to the extent that word means the same thing to all respondents, is pretty much understood and experienced similarly in all four countries and, with exceptions noted below, among all demographic groups. And this is the basic conclusion of earlier and more detailed surveys of historymaking practices in the United States, Australia, and Canada.[1]

In the recent opinion surveys coordinated by the Association for Canadian Studies robust majorities of residents of all four countries report taking "great pride in our history" (77% in France, 79% in the UK, 81% in Canada, 86% in the US). In the ACS surveys large majorities in all four countries likewise report a "strong" interest in the histories of their families and countries. The majorities which report a "strong" interest in their families range

between 78% in the UK, 79% in France, 81% in Canada and 86% in the US. The majorities reporting a "strong" interest in the history of their countries range between 75% in Canada, 75% in France, 79% in the UK, and 80% in the US. Underneath these strong and similar majorities attracted to both family and national history more detailed surveys of popular attitudes in the United States and Canada reveal a significant preference in both countries: If forced to choose whether family or national history was more important to them Americans and Canadians overwhelmingly chose family history by margins of at least three to one. For both Canadians and Americans the real difference was not national cultures but a cross-national preference in both countries for family over national history.

The percentages agreeing with the statement that "everyone should share in the same perception of our history" vary little between the 36% in the US, 39% in Canada, 40% in the UK, 44% in France. Expecting and accepting diverse perspectives on history, majorities in all four countries agree that "it is to be expected that minorities and majorities have a different perception of our history" (76% in Canada, 79% in France,81% in the US, 84% in the UK).

We approach history, after all, through sources in which we have greater or lesser trust. Once again the similarities between countries are much greater than differences. Residents of all four countries report that museums are the sources in which they have the strongest trust (88% in the UK, 87% in the US, 84% in France, 83% in Canada). Ranging between 83% and 88% those majorities are strikingly similar in all four countries. Earlier, more detailed studies likewise reported that museums are the most trusted sources in Australia, Canada, and the US.[2] The central issue at stake in these numbers seems to me to be why people trust museums ahead of all sources for perspective on the past.[3]

There seems little point in searching for cultural or national differences to make sense of these numbers. At the national level residents of all four countries seem to approach history in similar ways.

The ACS surveys reveal some intriguing statistical differences in how members of different demographic groups understand and use history. The most striking difference to me is that the wealthiest groups take greater pride in "our" history and are more interested in national history than the poorest ones. In the US 61% of those earning less than $25,000 report that they "take great pride in our history" while 92% of those earning over $75,000 "take great pride in our history." In France 66% of those earning less than €20,000 "agree" with the statement that "I take great pride in our history," while that percentage rises to 87% for those earning over €70,000. These numbers cry out for more detailed analysis of why history seems to generate more pride in the wealthy. But the numbers also illustrate a deeper challenge of interpretation. Clearly income seems to make a difference, but clearly too a majority of both rich and poor "take great pride in our history."

That variation based on income seems to depend on whether the history is that of the nation or the family. In the US 46% of those earning less than $25,000 express "very strong interest" in family history and the proportion is nearly identical—45% for those earning over $75,000. But only 19% of those Americans earning under $25,000 express "very strong interest" in the history of the US while 36% of those earning over $75,000 express a "very strong interest" in national history. Put crudely, everyone seems to own family history while the wealthy seem more likely to own national history.

There are hints of other demographic differences that bear further investigation: Women seem a little more interested in family history than men. Blacks are less interested in national history than whites. The better educated have more trust in books as sources. None of these findings are particularly surprising, and, more importantly, none of these differences is great enough to explain why and how people are interested in family or national history or why they trust some sources over others.

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So where do these surveys leave us? Perhaps their most important contribution is to document that residents of these countries, at least, understand and use history and the past in rich and complex ways. Those understandings and uses are deep and broad, spreading across demographic groups. And the surveys have begun to map some of those ways and certainly identify places that warrant even more refined survey work. In contrast to both sides in "the history wars" people care deeply about the past and use it creatively in their lives.

The relatively minor various among groups and nations draw out attention back to similarities and differences in how history is practiced and experienced. The most exciting variations are in how history can be used regardless of the social or national backgrounds of its users. For example: These results have challenged professional historians, whether housed in academy or museum, to rethink how to engage these popular patterns of historymaking. The American, Australian, and Canadian studies carry somewhat different agendas or approaches to this question. The Canadian study, for example, seeks to promote wider adoption of methods of historical inquiry developed and refined by professional historians. In the US some professional historians, struck by differences between popular and academic uses, even question whether the popular patterns uncovered in these studies constitute history at all.

Beyond questions of relations between professional and popular historymaking is the larger question of how people understand and experience the relation of history to life itself. This task is made harder because the word history in English, unlike most western languages, fails to distinguish historical process themselves from the study, analysis and narration of those processes. These surveys assume that history is something out there, apart from us, something we have interest in or knowledge of, something studied by scholars and taught by teachers and displayed in museums, rather than something we are all part of, makers of.

In considering how we may be makers (as well as observers) of history we might start with perhaps the most provocative of all analyses of the issue, Friedrich Nietzsche's challenge to consider "The Uses and Abuses of History for the Living of Life." Written at a time and place—the German-speaking world of the early 1870s—where modern historical scholarship was being invented to promote the making of a new German Empire in the aftermath of Prussian victories over Austria and France, Nietzsche brooded that an emerging historical culture was increasingly sapping the capacity of people to live their lives fully. He worried that people felt dwarfed as individuals by the sheer power and thrust of historical processes around them. Instead of encouraging people to explore their full humanity through artistic expression, for example, history—set in motion by those with political, military and cultural power—was merely to Nietzsche about power and nationalistic pressures to adapt to its exercise, to defer to the powerful. (Here may be a clue about how those with power are more interested in national history.) We could explore the times and places where people feel more and less dwarfed or constrained as individuals by historical processes. Whether and where we follow Nietzsche he issues the ultimate challenge at stake in these surveys: namely, to consider "the uses and abuses of history for the living of life." We might even conclude with him that "historical study is only fruitful for the future if it follows a powerful life-giving influence."[4]

## NOTES

[1] Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton, eds., "Australians and the Pasty: A National Survey," special issue, *Australian Cultural History* 22 (2003): 1-128; Pasts collective's forthcoming *Canadians and their Pasts*. Of course there are similarities between these countries that, in the absence of studies in Asian or African countries make it hard to generalize about history across the globe.

[2] Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, 244; Hamilton and Ashton, "At Home with the Past: Initial Findings from the Survey," *Australian Cultural History*: 16.

[3] For one answer see Rosenzweig and Thelen, ch. 4, esp: 105-08.

[4] I am reading Nietzsche's essay, as recent scholars say most people read his writings, not as full workings out of a problem but as writings to think with, through and around because they present such provocative challenges. (See Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012] Introduction, and Ashley Woodward, ed., *Interpreting Nietzsche: Reception and Influence* [London: Continuing International Publishing Group, 2011], Introduction) In thinking with and through implications of Nietzsche's essay I have found it clarifying to consult his close collaborator at this time at the University of Basel, Jacob Burckhardt, who was building his own humanistic history to challenge the political history emanating from the new German Empire. Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).