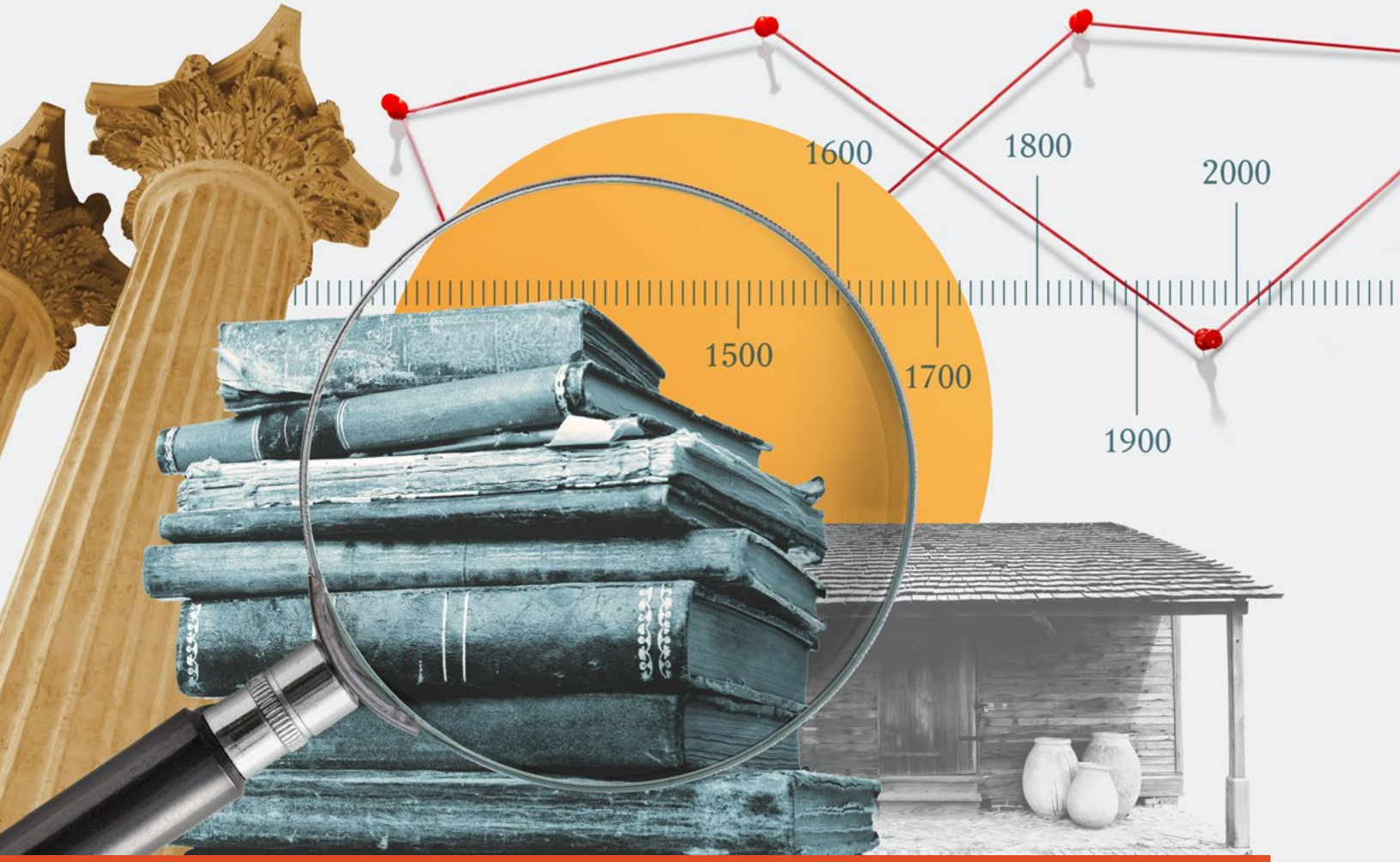

Making History Matter: From Abstract Truth to Critical Engagement

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Reframing History

AASLH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION for STATE and LOCAL HISTORY

FRAME WORKS

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History is currently the subject of high-profile political debate.

With the New York Times' "1619 Project," and more recently debates over "critical race theory," history has become a lightning rod of political discourse. While scholars and advocates are making concerted efforts to make sense of and address our country's past injustices[1], a well-organized conservative backlash against talking about these injustices is taking hold.[2] These conflicts have far-reaching policy implications, as the current attempt to legislate against teaching about systemic racism demonstrates.[3]

Debates around history are bound up with ideas about race and racism, justice, American identity, and more. They are also channeled by widely shared assumptions about history itself—what it is, how we come to understand the past, and why this is important. These debates often run aground on abstract notions of history as discovering a singular "truth" about the past that obstruct constructive engagement with history, make people suspicious of historians' evolving work as unreliable and biased, and make it hard for people to see what inclusive history looks like. And while the ubiquity of these debates in the news and on social media can create the impression that everyone is concerned about history, the reality is that people tend to think of history as a hobby for enthusiasts rather than as something they should be concerned about.

We need a more productive public conversation about history, one that builds understanding of what inclusive history looks like—especially the histories of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and other historically oppressed groups—and of its importance for all of us. In this report, we outline a framing strategy to get there. By adopting a critical engagement frame, communicators can overcome the polarized discussions surrounding the search for a singular "truth" of American history and engage the public in a more productive conversation about the past and the role of history in American society.

This framing strategy is the result of a two-year, deep-dive research project undertaken in partnership with the American Association for State and Local History, the National Council on Public History, and the Organization of American Historians and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In this report, we focus on the framing strategy, which includes a set of specific recommendations for communicators. This report is accompanied by an earlier report summarizing the public's existing understandings of history,[4] as well as a supplement that summarizes the research methods used in the project and describes the evidence behind each of the recommendations presented here.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Talk about critical thinking to shift perceptions about what history involves.

How the public currently thinks

The public assumes that there is one "truth" to be found about the past. This truth is unchanging and exists "out there" in the world. This way of thinking makes it difficult for people to recognize the complexity of historical interpretation and how understandings of history necessarily do and should evolve and change over time. This way of thinking about history leads people to assume that new interpretations of history or differing opinions are nothing more than unreliable, subjective bias. Since historical truth is thought to be singular and static, once that truth has been "found," it shouldn't, people widely assume, need to be reconsidered or updated.

What to do

Talk about how the practice of history involves critical thinking and how learning history fosters critical thinking skills. Describe in detail how making sense of the past helps develop critical thinking skills, such as the ability to analyze and evaluate evidence and diverse accounts about the past.

This framing strategy is a productive middle path between focusing on "historical truth" or describing history as simply a set of "stories" that we tell. As we discuss above, talking about truth makes it hard for people to recognize the complexity of historical interpretation. When discussions center on "truth," they become mired in an unresolvable debate over what's objectively "true" or "false." Yet simply dropping references to truth or validity and elevating the idea of history as "stories" is likely to cue the same worry, that those who tell these stories are telling biased versions of the past that are nothing more than opinions. The idea of "critical thinking" is a way of talking about validity and evaluation of evidence that allows a place for interpretation without triggering worries about unfettered subjectivity.

How to do it

Emphasize the role of critical thinking in historical practice. Explain how the practice of history requires using critical thinking to evaluate different sources and perspectives about the past and different understandings of the significance and meaning of events and trends.

Explain how learning history builds critical thinking skills that can be used in other parts of life. This is a productive way to connect the practice of historians to public engagement with history.

Use the idea of critical thinking to anchor talk about the many stories that make up history. While it is vital to emphasize that history involves many different stories and perspectives, it is important to ground discussions of different perspectives in the idea of critical evaluation of evidence to avoid the sense that these stories are nothing more than personal opinions or perspectives.

Avoid talking about historical "truth." This will cue unproductive thinking about truth versus bias and will lead people to assume that interpretations about the past—including those made by historians—are inherently "biased."

RECOMMENDATION #2

Compare historical interpretation to detective work to deepen understanding of historical practice.

How the public currently thinks

People generally don't have a clear sense of what historians do or what the process of historical interpretation involves. People think of historians as "journalists of the past" who document and report "just the facts" and describe events exactly "as they happened."[6] This idea leads the public to focus on eyewitness accounts of past events as the main source of evidence and makes it hard for people to understand the ways historians use different types of historical sources and analyses and process the evidence through discussions to build academic consensus. The belief that the past can be easily and straightforwardly documented and reported on is connected to the public's belief that "one truth" about the past is out there waiting to be found.

While people tend to model historical inquiry on journalism, which they see as straightforwardly reporting on "just the facts," there is another—if less prevalent—understanding available to most people. In this alternative way of thinking, historical interpretation requires examining multiple perspectives to find out what happened in the past. This way of thinking better aligns with the actual process of historical interpretation. Effective framing pulls forward this way of thinking while pushing to the background the idea that history simply involves documenting self-explanatory facts.

What to do

Explain the process of historical inquiry and interpretation using the metaphor of detective work. Use the metaphor to explain the following key aspects of historical interpretation:

1. **The range of sources.** Historical investigation, like detective work, integrates information from a wide range of sources.
2. **The range of methods.** Just as detective work uses different tools and techniques to understand what happened in the past, historical inquiry uses a wide range of methods.
3. **The ability to update understandings.** Both detective work and historical interpretation involve the accumulation of new evidence and perspectives that lead to new, updated understandings of what happened.

How to do it

Focus on the process of historical interpretation rather than the goal of interpretation. The idea of "solving a case" can cue unproductive thinking about "finding the truth" about the past.

Talk about the practice, not the person. Compare historical investigation to detective work, not historians to detectives. Talking about detectives can activate associations with police that aren't productive.

RECOMMENDATION #3:

Emphasize how history helps us make progress toward a just world to increase recognition of history's importance.

How the public currently thinks

People recognize that learning about the past can potentially help society learn from past mistakes, and they view societal progress as an empirical process of learning from past mistakes through trial and error.[7] Members of the public widely recognize that learning from the past is necessary to improve as a society. This is a productive starting point for deepening appreciation for history's importance. That said, what it means for society to learn from its mistakes and "move forward" varies for people and is inseparable from their diagnosis of society today. For example, people who think we have achieved racial equality assume we have already learned from and moved past racial injustice (if they believed it existed in the first place), while others recognize that taking the past seriously deepens our understanding of what we must change as a society to achieve racial justice. Moreover, the commonly used language that history helps us learn from past "mistakes" can downplay the painful past injustices of slavery and genocide that continue to inform our society today and that must be addressed in order for us to move forward.

In addition, while people recognize the need for society to learn from its past mistakes, people are sometimes fatalistic about the possibility of this happening. At times, people assume that history is doomed to repeat itself. When people think this way, they see less value in engaging with history because doing so is unlikely to make a practical difference for the future.

What to do

Make the case that history is essential for us to make progress as a country. Use the value to explicitly invoke the idea of learning from the past—from both what went right and what went wrong.

Because, as we discuss above, progress means different things to different people, it's important for communicators to be clear and specific about the goal of progress. Specifically, communicators should explicitly say, using values language, or implicitly show, using examples, that history can help us move toward justice. For example, in the context of a conversation about racism, communicators might explicitly talk about how engaging with history can help us make progress toward racial justice. Alternatively, the same idea can be communicated by providing examples of how engaging with history could help us redress the legacy of racism.

Our research suggests that the language of "justice" is not as polarizing as some might suspect—it doesn't automatically cue partisan politics or close off conversations with people on the right end of the political spectrum. We explored combining the language of "justice" with the language of "progress" in focus groups conducted in summer 2021, at the height of the debate around "critical race theory," and found that participants did not treat the language of "justice" as ideological or partisan terminology. In other words, while terms like "social justice" have become associated

RECOMMENDATION #4

Use concrete, location-specific, solutions-focused examples to build support for inclusive history.

How the public currently thinks

In our research, we found that many participants—particularly those from dominant groups (for example, white people and men)—tended to treat historical narratives that center white men as the "neutral," depoliticized American history that should be taught in schools (for example, learning about the Founding Fathers). In this view, narratives about historically oppressed groups such as BIPOC and women are seen as "extras" that are optional and unnecessary for everyone to learn. While interview participants from historically oppressed groups typically recognized this as an unfair double standard, they expressed doubt whether this could change in a meaningful way in our school systems or society.

While people often assume that dominant groups should or inevitably will be the focus of history, at times people are able to recognize that examining the past from the perspectives of different groups makes the historical record more accurate. Relatedly, some members of the public, particularly BIPOC, recognize that the exclusion of oppressed groups from history is a way of perpetuating dominant groups' power.[8]

It is worth noting that since we began this project in 2019, we have seen an important shift in people's thinking about past injustices. In our research, we have seen a rise in the recognition that our country needs to talk about painful or troubling things that have happened in the past. In 2019, many of our research participants, particularly white people, thought about past injustices such as slavery or genocide as too "unpleasant" to talk about and unnecessary to engage with because they are "in the past" and therefore irrelevant to today's society. We also found that participants of color were hesitant to bring up these topics because they made "other people" (that is, white people) uncomfortable.[9] Our subsequent research in 2020–2021 has found that members of the public are more commonly critiquing this "ignorance is bliss" way of thinking. Interview participants from diverse backgrounds, including some white people, were more likely to recognize that past injustices need to be talked about and remembered in order to make sense of current problems in society, such as racial inequality and police brutality. Other FrameWorks research conducted over the past year has found an increase in systemic thinking about racism since the uprisings of summer 2020, and while these trends appear to be more prevalent among younger people and Democrats,[10] it is notable that people across racial and ethnic backgrounds appear to be recognizing the need to talk about and make sense of society's past wrongs rather than brushing over them.

What it looks like

Instead of...

> Historic sites offer a special opportunity to engage with the past. Too often, though, that past is exclusionary and leaves out the stories of people who were not white and wealthy. The way we interpret history at historical sites needs to change in order to provide the diverse and inclusive history visitors deserve.

Try...

> Historic sites offer a special opportunity to encounter the past—especially when they give visitors a chance to grapple with our country's historic injustices. For example, the Whitney Plantation Museum in Edgard, Louisiana, focuses on the history of the enslaved people who were held there. We need more historical sites that tell the stories of people from historically oppressed groups and more opportunities for visitors to confront painful legacies such as slavery. Making progress toward a more just society requires this sort of deep engagement and reckoning with the past.

What this accomplishes and why it works

Specific, solutions-focused examples help people imagine what a shared, inclusive history of the United States looks like in practice and create a sense that this approach to history is truly possible. Focusing examples on how we can do better—on solutions, not just existing problems—helps to overcome fatalism about the possibility of decentering dominant groups in our collective recollection of the past. These examples help people think about what it means to critically engage with the experiences of people who are different from them, which helps build understanding that it is possible to learn about the past from the perspectives of other groups.

Grounding examples in specific places and cases makes it harder for people to deny the value of confronting historical injustices because they are confronted with a particular case from the past and would have to deny the value of learning about that case and the perspectives of particular excluded groups. By connecting inclusive learning to specific sites and places, examples can make it harder for people to escape into general worries about "bias" or national pride.

Conclusion

History is at the center of our public conversations, but right now these conversations are generating more heat than light. Too frequently they get stuck in abstract debates over truth and worries about "bias," as misunderstandings of what historical interpretation involves short-circuit hard conversations about confronting past injustices.

The *critical engagement* frame can productively disrupt this cycle. Shifting the conversation away from abstract truth and toward grounded, critical engagement can help us build understanding of historical interpretation and the value of inclusive history. Tapping into the existing recognition that we must learn from the past—what we have done right and wrong—can help people see the need to confront injustice in order to make progress going forward.

Identifying a frame with the potential to change the conversation is a promising start, but this potential will only be realized if we find ways of getting the frame into public discourse. The next step will be to develop a strategy for getting the frame out—through different channels, from different people and organizations—so that, over time, our conversation about history begins to shift in productive ways.

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