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IDS Response: Tired of Hearing About Archives

I wonder how much looking at the past impedes our ability to properly take on the present. In other words, with so much emphasis on learning lessons from history to avoid making the same mistakes, do we inevitably make the same mistakes because we are not focusing enough on the present? It all seems like a trap: "we learn history to avoid repeating it"—But that was never possible in the first place. (1) The present is inherently different from the past. Studying history with blinders on lets the present's specificity fall by the wayside. The lessons learned in the history textbook are not necessarily applicable today, for (2) trying to fit our situation into the past is a strategy blissfully ignorant of history's revision: the facts and factors omitted from the narrative do not enter our decision-making process.

As is expected, true history's narrative¹ must be trimmed to fit within the student's realistic zone of reach, care, and attention span. Too much specificity means a chapter that is too long—one that a student will not read. However, to the student that still rebels against a too-long-chapter's relevance, we might overemphasize the importance of learning from history without stressing the narrative's specificity. We might talk about history as if it is more plastic than it is. We don't stress that these outcomes and historical strategies are specific to certain set of circumstances, and that all of those circumstances are not listed in the text. There are too many to record, too many to teach. That outcomes and strategies do not seamlessly carry over to the present is invisible to the student because the full list is invisible. The student does not (and cannot) know their full extent. This is not a problem with the writing of history: this is a problem with the presentation of the material. It is not that history is worthless, but rather that it should be searched for "commonalities not universalities" (Maria Lind).

I propose, then, what I would like to call the "ambivalent archive"---that is, an archive that pledges allegiance to neither past nor present. I neither want to support nor negate the archive. I only want to create a way of presenting history that is entirely transparent about its rigidness and omission (a paradoxical task of listing what is not listed). The ambivalent archive should be presented in such a way that the student is not coerced into taking in its entirety (history is not stressed as the sole way to solve the present); but likewise, the student should always be aware that less attention paid is the equivalent of less truth

¹ By "true history" here, I mean to say the story of the past in its entirety, without omissions and bias. Subsequently, I will use "history" plainly to refer to the story of the past *with* omissions and bias, as it is written today. This is not to say, however, that history is at odds with truth, but that there are necessary edits in writing history the exclude some truth. The two differ still from the *presentation* of history, which occurs in the classroom and is where problems arise.

properly archived. The ambivalent archive does not have a preference one way or another: it makes its best attempt to contain the reasonable amount of specificity but does not overhype the transferability or plasticity of this information. It puts more emphasis on history's duality of advantages and disadvantages than it does on history's narrative, allowing the student to be fully in control of his digestion. The ambivalent archive has no agency².

² "Now to do it" is what I think your last note read to me. Working on it.