



Coming to Grips with Theory: College Students' Use of Theoretical Explanation in Writing About History

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This is an exploratory study of reading and writing within a particular discipline. It is also an investigation of critical thinking and an examination of engagement and resistance in using language to learn about new concepts. I looked at how college history students wrestled with and sometimes worked around issues of theory, specifically theories of the causes of the Civil War. Using analysis of think-aloud protocols, I investigated how students comprehended theoretical writing about the Civil War and how they used the theoretical material to take a position in writing about these same issues. My main purpose in this article is to examine the cognitive moves students make, their ways of thinking, when working with theory, an activity which many educators today are touting as particularly important in developing students' critical thinking abilities. I am especially interested in the stances students take toward their subject matter which *promote* critical reasoning, that is, which lead to engagement, as well as approaches which *circumvent* or stand in the way of such thinking, that is, which lead to resistance.

I will explain the study and discuss what I mean by theory, but first I would like to put a theoretical frame around the research. Why did I look at theory? Partly because we live in theoretical times. Many disciplines have seen efforts to make their work more explicitly theoretical, that is, more open about the underlying principles governing the work, and more consistent and rigorous about adhering to those principles. Theory can obviously mean many different things, but I take as my working definition James Britton's notion of theoretical writing: writing that builds and defends a systematic argument at a conceptual level, including implicit or explicit recognition that there are alternative perspectives. Such writing also involves the formation of hypotheses and deductions from them. The theoretical turn in academia has been

most evident in the areas of research, publication, and presentation, in the “public” conversations that take place within disciplines. In history, a book by Peter Novick (1988) has created an enormous stir, causing what distinguished historians are calling one of the important debates in the profession today, by naming and examining in depth a theoretical rift that has existed for over 100 years, between so-called objectivists and relativists, or fact people and interpretation people. In literature, published work is increasingly marked or named according to the type of theoretical analysis undertaken. In our own ways, we are all trying to come to grips with theory in our research and scholarship.

But theory is beginning to find its way not just into the professional publication, academic conference, graduate seminar, or scholar’s library carrel. It is also starting to turn up in the classroom, as a challenge to the “culture of recitation” which many critics complain has dominated American schooling. Many teachers now try to be more explicitly theoretical in their teaching, using theory to inform and improve curriculum and instructional practice. Teachers are incorporating theory into their courses to help students develop richer, more conceptually-grounded understandings of subject matter and more powerful ways of thinking about material. To cite just one example, a popular American history textbook recently added a new section to each unit in which the competing theories of prominent historians are discussed and contrasted. In literature teaching, I have published a book with a colleague, George Newell, and there are other such books on the market which take developments in literary theory, such as reader response theory, and use them to formulate new ways of working with literature in the classroom. Similar examples abound.

Yet despite the increased significance of theory in academic work, and its growing importance in the classroom, we know very little about what happens when students are confronted with theory. Investigations focusing specifically on how students approach theory have not yet begun to emerge in the literature on writing in the disciplines. However, a growing number of studies in recent years examine the closely related issue of how students analyze and interpret complex subject matter in their academic writing. For example, Flower et. al. (1990) examined how college students approached an assignment to read and write about time management issues. They found that many students interpreted the task as requiring summary and little elaboration, more or less ignoring the explicit request to interpret and critique the subject matter. Nelson (1990) looked at ways in which college students in sociology, engineer-

ing, and English frequently took shortcuts in writing papers, and at how these shortcuts often allowed students to avoid the kinds of thinking and learning activities the assignments were expressly designed to promote. Walvoord and McCarthy (1990), working with faculty co-authors in biology, business, history, and psychology, looked in the chapter co-authored by Breihan, a history professor, at how students could be helped by explicit, step by step guidelines to deal more effectively with issues of historical interpretation in their writing. These are just a few examples of the body of literature that is helping us to understand how students summarize and analyze across disciplines and how instructors might best structure such writing instruction and assignments.

But moving up the abstractive scale, there has been virtually no work on how students deal with theory. We do not know how students attempt to comprehend theoretical material, how theory informs their broader understanding of subject matter, or what happens when students try to incorporate theory into their own writing. This issue of how students come to grips with theory seems particularly important in light of the current educational emphasis on developing students' thinking skills, since thinking theoretically is a major component of the critical thinking movement. McPeck (1990), Meyers (1986), and other critical thinking advocates argue that thinking skills are best acquired, nurtured, and developed *within* a particular discipline, rather than as a set of generic skills. McPeck argues that instruction should center on, quoting Schwab, "...what substantive structures gave rise to a body of knowledge, what the strengths and limits are, and what some of the alternatives are which give rise to alternative bodies of knowledge." Teaching the assumptions or the conceptual foundations of a discipline helps students develop a meta-understanding of the important issues and ways of thinking that hold the discipline together, as well as the ideas that divide people in the field. So, the attempt is to help make students more aware of the discipline as a way of thinking about and making sense of the world. History, then, is not just a collection of dates and facts, as most students conceive it to be, but a theory-based means of understanding the past and of connecting the past with the present and the future.

In this study I looked at a large lecture class, with about 200 students, Introduction to American History. I sat in on lectures, did the readings, and closely examined all course materials such as handouts, review sheets, and tests. I also talked with the teacher about the nature of the class, his goals, and how those goals related to the way he structured the course. I looked and listened carefully for mention of

theory or historical explanation in the class. That is, I looked for mention of specific interpretations of history, for the naming or discussion of different approaches or ways of looking at subject matter. This was a typical large lecture class for this particular university, and maybe for universities in general. It was a textbook example of the “culture of recitation.” There were no discussion sections, and no assigned papers, just two in-class tests in which students were mainly asked to restate material from the readings and lectures. Essentially, the teacher just lectured, and the lectures generally were chronologically organized or else discussed the professor’s view of the causes of particular events. The teacher did not model theoretical thinking by contrasting opposing views. He did not try to get students to form their own interpretations or to consider alternative views. He dealt with events and issues *as* events and issues, not trying to place them in a disciplinary context. As I said, this was a very typical history class. It did not at all stress critical thinking, questioning, reflecting about issues, forming and supporting one’s own positions, or metacognition (thinking about, locating, and framing one’s own thought processes and ideas, taking control of one’s own learning). Those were not the professor’s goals; his goals were entirely content related.

So it is within this context of a traditional, content-oriented history class that I asked students to do some more theoretical reading and writing, to read, think, and write about some contrasting theories of the Civil War. I wanted to see how freshmen at a large midwestern state university responded to a theoretical task. These students were not accustomed to operating at such a conceptual level; their teacher hadn’t prepared them for this sort of work. But with the growing emphasis on theory and with the claims of critical thinking advocates that teaching contrasting theories or views on a subject helps develop students’ reasoning powers, I thought it would be useful to see just what happens when students are asked to wrestle with issues of theory. The students were all volunteers who were told they would get extra credit. They identified themselves as average or good students of history in their previous courses. I did not want to work with people who would not be able to comprehend or write about the reading passage because they would have to be pretty deeply engaged with some rather abstruse material in order to complete the tasks I was going to give them. All of the students read a passage contrasting the two principal theories of the causes of the Civil War. The passage described the theoretical camps in some detail, naming particular historians and discussing their basic

orientations. Some of the students wrote an analytic essay about the passage, while others wrote a summary. The two writing prompts were as follows:

1. Two points of view regarding the causes of the Civil War are expressed in the reading passage “The Causes of the Civil War.” Please explain which point of view you feel is more valid and why. Be certain to defend your points with specific evidence and examples from the reading.

2. Write a summary of the reading passage “The Causes of the Civil War.”

There was another reading passage, a non-theoretical, chronologically organized one, that students also read and wrote about, in contrast to the theoretical one. But this article focuses on the theoretical task. Both reading passages were from their textbook, but when I worked with them the class hadn’t gotten to those sections yet. Students composed aloud, saying what they were thinking and doing as they wrote. But before they composed aloud, students spent one hour-long session practicing the technique until they became comfortable doing it.

Before I elaborate on what they did, I will discuss some of the limitations of the study. First of all, I used composing aloud, which has several real limitations. It turns the writing into a timed task, cutting out much of the possibility for invention, revision, multiple drafting. It also adds another layer of complexity and difficulty to the reading and writing process. The method has many strengths too, of course, and I used it mainly because I wanted to get a close, detailed look at how students handled the reading and writing tasks. No other method provides nearly as much detail as composing aloud. Also, people who have compared composing aloud with other methods, like retrospective interviewing, have found their results to be very similar, so composing aloud apparently does not greatly distort the composing process, especially if writers have been trained in the method. So composing aloud was the right methodology for me, but it is far from perfect, and I need to acknowledge that. Another limitation of the study is that I gave students tasks of my own devising. I would rather have looked at how students approached real school tasks. Unfortunately, I wanted to look at writing about history, and I could not find any history teachers, especially in survey classes for non-majors, which I wanted to look at, who had their students write, let alone write about theory. Most of the

teachers I spoke with thought the kind of writing I was talking about would be valuable, but they were so wedded to the “coverage” model of getting through the prescribed amount of material that they did not feel they could do this sort of thing. However, several have now expressed an interest in having their students write more and in possibly trying out some more theoretical kinds of writing—in the past when our history professors have had students write, it has been mainly book reports; that seems to be the departmental model. And a third limitation of the study is that I had students do a kind of writing that they were not accustomed to doing—writing about theoretical issues. So this is not a best-case scenario where we look at what well-prepared students are capable of doing. Again, my justification is that I wanted to see how typical college students, accustomed to being asked to summarize, would approach a more conceptual kind of task. But if I could have, I would have looked at students in a class where they were learning just such an approach.

For the above reasons, when I discuss my findings I will not be making claims about what students are capable of doing under ideal conditions. I can only say how they responded under timed conditions to a difficult task they were not used to doing. With that caveat in mind, I will now discuss my findings.

Engagement and resistance are Freire-ian notions which have been written about in some detail by Henry Giroux (1983); they describe different stances or ways of approaching aspects of schooling. Giroux uses these terms in a very political sense to describe the extent to which students buy into or reject the culture of schooling. That political sense is relevant to what I am looking at, but none of the students I worked with actively resisted or rejected the work I asked them to do. They all accepted the work and engaged with it, but a number of students found implicit ways to resist the kind of conceptual labor, the detailed thinking, the playing with ideas, which my reading and writing tasks asked of them. Critical thinking advocates and researchers such as Marzano (1991) argue that higher-order thinking requires certain dispositions or stances, habits or patterns of thought, all of which require intense engagement with one’s subject matter: a metacognitive inclination to monitor and reflect on one’s own thinking and problem-solving processes; a tendency to think critically about content, asking questions, exploring different positions, considering others’ ideas, generally going beyond the information given; and a propensity to think creatively, to look at ideas and events in new, uncommon ways. Some students, when asked to, will throw themselves into these activities, will adopt these

stances, while other students almost seem to work equally hard to avoid having to engage in these kinds of thinking activities. Thus, notions of engagement and resistance, when applied to the analysis of student writers' composing aloud protocols, can shed considerable light on both the strengths and the difficulties of asking students to read and write about theory.

I found three basic patterns with the 20 students whom I asked to compose aloud while writing either a summary or an analysis of the theoretical passage. There were students who engaged with the task and evidenced the kinds of thinking which the task encouraged them to do. There were students who resisted, consciously or unconsciously, or for whatever reason didn't seem to adopt a critical thinking stance. And finally, there were students who both engaged and resisted, alternating between both stances. What follows are examples of the different types of engagement and resistance I observed; these examples show some of the ways students found to manage the difficult task.

The theoretical reading passage discussed the two primary interpretations by American historians of the causes of the Civil War. One camp has argued that the war was an inevitable conflict based largely on economic and political differences, that north and south differed so fundamentally on key issues that war could not have been avoided. The other camp has argued that war could have been avoided if politicians had acted more responsibly and not been swayed by extremists on both sides. I asked students to read and write about the Civil War because I knew they would have studied it in the past, would have some background knowledge about it, and would probably have opinions as well. Of all subjects in American history, it seemed as likely as any to hold some interest for students. Ten students summarized the theoretical passage, and ten students analyzed the two interpretations, supporting one group's position. I would like first to discuss examples of engagement with the theoretical issues, instances of the kinds of critical thinking students engaged in when trying to write about theory. All student names are pseudonyms.

Types of Engagement

The most common and most general example of engagement I saw, listed below, involved attempts to form and support a position, that is, to make an argument or state an assertion, then to bring in evidence, specific details, and sub-arguments to back it up. Almost everyone asked to write an analysis of the theoretical passage attempted to do this.

All made an assertion, though several students did not specifically attempt to support their assertions. The example from Meg shows how one student went about putting together an argument. (The boldface segments indicate when she is writing as she speaks.)

a) Forming and supporting a position, bringing in evidence and sub-arguments to back it up (Meg)

Oh, let's see. You have to pick which side. I go with inevitable. It was an irrepressible conflict. Okay, **the Civil War was an irrepressible conflict in my opinion. It**, came about because, let's see, **was the result of moral, economic, cultural and ideological differences between the North and South which**, let's see, **centered around slavery. Morally, the free labor system of the North** opposed, er, **and the slave labor system in the South were nearly as** opposite as, incomparable, uh **dissimilar as two labor systems could be...** Where I'm going with this, whether I'm going to continue with the moral issue or go on to economic? Uh, I think I'll go on morally.

As can be seen from the example, Meg moves very quickly to a set position, suggesting a lack of deep engagement or consideration of alternatives. But she does take a position, gives reasons behind it, discusses cause and effect relations, and then does a kind of Aristotelian analysis, breaking the issue into parts: moral, economic, then later cultural and political.

Another way that some students engaged the material was to consider counter arguments, to think about potential problems with their position, possible strengths of the opposing view, contradictions in what they were saying, and also just complexities inherent in their subject matter. Many students glossed over complexities, but some lingered and tried to come to grips with them. This example is from Omar, an Egyptian student, son of a professor, brought up in Germany, who I was a little discomfitted to find knew more American history than the American students.

b) Considering counter arguments, contradictions, complexities, problems with a position (Omar)

I take the position of the irrepressible conflict because I think it was mainly a moral issue. And though the other side does have some valid points, such as economic and that the North and South were becoming

different people, I think the root of the problem of the Civil War was still slavery and that it was a moral conflict. Umm, I'm just trying to look for some points of the opposite side so I can disprove them and some points from my side so I can show they're true...

The fact that they say the war could have been avoided if there were more able leaders, I think is a pretty empty argument, because there were some of the most able leaders living at that time, like Lincoln, who led the war on both sides. And if there was a way to avoid it, I'm sure they would have wanted nothing better... Also, the argument that slavery was crumbling in the presence of 19th Century tendencies, that's pretty ridiculous because until the 60's black people were still considered second class citizens. I'm going to read the question one more time just to clear my head and then try to think of a thesis statement.

Here Omar takes a position; however, unlike Meg above, it is not all black and white but allows for more ambiguity. He concedes that the other side does make some valid points, but then attempts to expose some of the weaknesses in what he sets up as the opposing position. What he is doing is a crucial, fundamental part of critical thinking: he is examining arguments, subjecting them to close scrutiny. All my evidence from research and also from some years of teaching suggests that most students don't engage in this kind of activity, considering counter-arguments, unless they are specifically directed to do so and shown how.

A third way that students engaged the material was to relate reading passage content to their prior knowledge, opinions, and beliefs. Learning theorists contend that we construct knowledge by examining new information and ideas in light of what is already known, felt, thought, or believed. A number of students tried to make significant connections between the reading passage content and their background knowledge and views.

c) Relating reading passage content to prior knowledge, opinions, or beliefs (Scott)

When I was reading the essay, the section where it started talking about the different economic systems and morals, it made me think of how the Cold War started with communism, and then also where it says slavery was crumbling in the presence of 19th century tendencies." And communism today is crumbling and heading toward democracy...

Umm, I'm still trying to figure out what I want to say. In high school, we went over a lot the Civil War. In junior high we did too. We went to Gettysburg and everything for an 8th grade trip.

In these two examples, Scott tries to bring in his prior knowledge, but perhaps due to time constraints he doesn't take his comparisons far enough to do him much good on the paper. He is rather groping around here, exploring ideas, making tentative connections between points. In fact, sensing that these parallels he is making may not be that relevant to the task, he drops them and starts to consider only the Civil War material; he not only stops bringing in other historical events as possible parallels, like the Cold War, he also explicitly stops considering things he had previously read, seen, and heard about the Civil War, until he is entirely focused on the reading passage.

A final form of engagement I will discuss involves metacognition, the self-conscious consideration of thinking processes and management and monitoring of problem-solving strategies. This example again comes from Omar. Here he tries to keep tightly focused on his plan, not to go off on tangents, though as we've seen above, he is willing to spend quite a bit of time thinking over his points carefully and reflecting about them. The paradox here is that partly because he consciously directs his own thinking and writing processes, in a sense keeps himself on a tight leash, he's able to spend more time than most of the other students exploring ideas in depth, reflecting and speculating about the subject matter.

d) Metacognitive monitoring and directing of thinking and writing processes (Omar)

I guess I'm supposed to get my information from the reading here. I'll now try to use the specific examples to, to support my thesis by first showing that what I'm saying is correct and the opposite side is, is not correct...

Now, seeing that my conclusion is pretty much a restating of my introduction, I'll try, when I go through this again, try to give it some kind of a twist, some kind of thought, I guess, to leave the reader with, maybe by using an example to show what I'm saying, or by changing the introduction and leaving the conclusion like it is.

So we see that with each of these strategies of engagement, students were struggling to orient themselves in a complex body of material, to find a position of elevation. Let us look now at some other students who were given the same task but who approached it very differently. I would argue that the following examples show students who found ways to resist or finesse or approximate as best they could

under the circumstances the kinds of critical thinking exhibited in the previous examples. They formed goals or took stances which allowed them to simplify complex issues and avoid answering, exploring, and in many cases even considering difficult questions. It may be too much to say that these students were resisting. They were approaching the task in the ways they had been taught, ways they had used before in school writing, and which had been successful for them in the past. But in each case I would argue that there is some resistance, explicit or implicit, to critical thinking, a definite inclination not to mess around with complicated issues.

Types of Resistance

The most widespread form of resistance I saw involved sweeping complexity under the rug, ignoring it, or dismissing it. Often this strategy took the form of what I call “The Hermetically Sealed Essay,” consisting of an assertion, three supporting points, and out. Writers who did this seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time on surface polishing, on correctness, on word choice and things like that. I include a short example from Kim.

a) Sweeping complexity under the rug, ignoring it, or dismissing it. Writing “The Hermetically Sealed Essay.” (Kim)

Oh, let’s see. ‘Other historians... No, we don’t want to get into that because I know already I don’t like that side as well.

Here, while reviewing the reading passage, she encounters the position that she disagrees with, but like a bystander witnessing a mugging, quickly decides she doesn’t want to get involved and moves on. There is a sense in which such a strategy is legitimate, perhaps even necessary, because Kim obviously cannot deal with every point. She has to be focused. But here, in the interest of focus and support and being on task, she misses the chance to get into some interesting issues and ultimately short-circuits her critical thinking.

Another common form of resistance involved allowing one’s previously held views to dominate the consideration of new ideas. Certainly background knowledge and personal opinion play a key role in the assimilation of new ideas and information. However, sometimes, as in the following two examples, students let such factors keep them from even thinking about what might be conflicting material.

b) Letting previously-held views dominate consideration of new ideas (Daphne and Martine)

One thing to be expressed is that the Civil War was caused because of the conflict over slavery, but later, especially in the 1920's, people thought that it was, at least appeared to be, more economic. And it could have been avoided if they would have sat down and talked about it, because slavery was going to be, was already on a decline, on the outs. So that's what people, I don't think that they, umm, could have stopped the Civil War. But I want to work from the readings. But from what I've learned, I've just always believed that it was because of slavery. And then after reading this, I still do. So that's, that would be my point of the Civil War, as a cause. (Daphne)

Okay, I'm having trouble thinking how to start. I guess my first idea is to pick a side. Let's see? I can't do this. Umm, what I want to say is that because they had dealt with the war, uh, it was always caused, no, I mean it has always been told to us as inevitable, like in our history books and stuff. That's the point I'm going to have to take because it's tradition, I guess. (Martine)

Daphne's prior views on the Civil War allow her to dismiss without serious consideration a new interpretation of the conflict. She has the idea that slavery caused the war, she's comfortable and secure with this idea, and she's very reluctant to consider alternative visions. She even seems a little frightened by the possibility of other explanations. The second example, from Martine, is a little different. She appeals to tradition to justify her interpretation, and she almost makes her choice seem inevitable: "That's the point I'm going to have to take." It is a bit of an expedient, perhaps. She weighs her options and comes down on the side of tradition, a choice which conveniently allows her to avoid debating the issues at all.

A third way that students resisted involved relying on commonplaces or cliches, taking the voice of authority and presenting an argument in such a way that ideas need not be examined or explored or supported, just stated. David Bartholomae talks about this notion of the commonplace in his essay, "Inventing the University." Commonplaces are culturally or institutionally authorized statements that carry with them their own necessary elaborations. Bartholomae argues that commonplaces aren't bad in themselves, that we all use them to orient ourselves in the world. But they become problematic when

students do not go beyond them. Critical thinking works against the commonplaces, engaging the contradictions and subtleties of received thought, unpacking the conventional wisdom and examining it. A number of students in the study began and ended with commonplaces; they did not seem to attempt to go beyond them or to question them in any way. Here is an example from Brad, a varsity baseball pitcher and an extremely successful student.

c) Falling back on commonplaces and cliches, taking on the “Voice of Authority” without supporting one’s points (Brad)

Okay, after reading the essay, I’ve decided to go with the point of view which says the Civil War didn’t have to happen. I want to basically go on the fact that anytime, I think, there’s a conflict, it is avoidable if you find a compromise. I’ll just begin by stating that fact. I want to note that there were differences between the North and the South, but they weren’t big enough to cause a war. And I do agree that skillful leadership could have avoided the war, if people would have just sat down and talked and tried to come up with a compromise. I also agree with the writer that slavery was not the real issue, was on the way out anyway, so it’s just a kind of cop-out...

So, I’m going to write something to the effect of that their impatience brought about the war, and if they’d maybe just waited a little longer, they could have seen the two sides were actually a lot closer than they thought.

It’s human nature to rush in to things but a little waiting might have proved the difference here.

Brad takes as his commonplace here the idea that anytime there is a conflict, it is possible to compromise. Interestingly, he does not really look for textual support for his position, but instead brings in other commonplaces about “human nature” and about “politicians” to flesh out his essay.

The students whose protocols and essays reflected resistance were all good students; they were successful at academic work. What they did, they did very well. Yet, at least in the limited examples I observed, they seemed to flee from serious thought. Perhaps that very strategy was a key component of their success. They knew enough not to get bogged down with complexity. They went with their strengths: organizational clarity, smooth phrasing, a kind of safe, genial superficiality. I believe that one of the great advantages of having students write about theoretical issues is that such assignments make it very difficult for students successfully to hide behind cliches and the facile restatement of subject matter from lectures and readings. Yet a great deal of the history writing

students are asked to do in both high school and college involves just such an emphasis on summary and restatement. And studies of the thinking processes students employ when doing such writing, that is, summarizing chronologically-arranged history narratives, reveal very little of the critical engagement—or resistance—evident when students write about theory. Thus, the present study demonstrates that asking students to read and write about theory is one important way of encouraging reflection, questioning, speculating, metacognition, and other forms of critical thinking. But at the same time, the study shows that many students will work to find ways of avoiding rigorous thought. Therefore, those of us interested in using theory in our classes need to be aware of potential resistance to theoretical tasks, and to know that such resistance might be particularly strong where theory is concerned. We also need to develop ways of reducing that resistance, making theory less threatening, and encouraging the kinds of engagement that move students toward effective critical thinking.

That critical thinking is important has become a commonplace for a great many educators. We don't want students simply to memorize content. We believe they should ask tough questions of themselves, their teachers, and their subject matter. They should step back and reflect on what they hear and read. We want them not just to state their own views but to rethink, reformulate, and extend them. These ideas are almost items of faith. It's also a commonplace that current educational practice does not stress critical thinking sufficiently. But I would go even further and ask if, in many situations, students might actually be penalized for thinking too much and too critically. Stopping to ruminate and consider different sides of an issue can gum up the works when, as is so often the case, the goal is to get through content as crisply and efficiently as possible. In this view, an emphasis on critical thinking would seem to require not just the introduction of a few new activities, but a radically different educational agenda, one far less focused than much traditional curriculum on covering a prescribed amount of content or information.

This study suggests some challenges we face not just in designing new curricula, but in working with students who resist what for many will be very complex and unfamiliar acts of thinking. Having students “come to grips with theory” is a difficult but potentially very rich way of helping students go beyond and against the commonplaces. It is also an important way of challenging the notion that history, or any discipline, is merely a collection of facts and dates.

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