

# Why are *You* Studying History?

By Phillip Webb

*“Why on earth are you studying history?”*

I have fielded this question many times over the last few years. I can understand the curiosity that prompts the question. The study of history is, on the surface, very far removed from what I have been doing for a large part of my life.

My background is in Psychology, and I have worked in the field for nearly two decades. I have now given that away to study and to teach. My questioners persist, “OK, I can understand a change in direction, but why **history**? Why not stay with something in your field ... the sciences?”

My field has never been science. My field has always been people.

It took me many years of work in the area however, until I came to the realisation that psychology is not about people, it's about behaviour, predictability and response. Oh yes, it is related to people, but it is not about people per se. I started to think to myself, “Why am I trying to understand people, through a discipline that is not really about people?”

Wisdom says that we are where we are today, as a consequence of decisions made yesterday. Psychology supports that on the individual basis. But, what about at the level of tribes, societies cultures and nations? The same is true. Our todays are determined by our collective yesterdays. Part of the work of the psychologist is to look at the life of the patient, to try to determine some root cause of the manifest behaviour. Is this not, in and of itself, historical research?

I used to do some consulting work in quite large organizations. There I used to be asked to formulate strategic plans for the organisations themselves. Consider the fundamental questions I used to ask these organisations to reflect on:

*“Where are you going?”*

*“How are you going to get there?”*

*“How will you know when you are there?”*

What I was doing for these organizations as a body, and the hundreds—maybe thousands of people concerned, was shaping a future for them. But what is a future, if not the product of our collective histories? The difference was, in their case, someone was taking the time to force an assessment of that history.

It is all very well asking of an organisation or group of people the broad question “where are you going?” It is entirely another if their response is to ask of you in return “how do we get there.” In order to answer any request of this variety one needs to establish the answer to one last question in this exchange: “Where are you now?” Anyone can assist in pointing the group on the road to their destination, if you are in possession of the vital data regarding the group’s point of origin—and, naturally enough, their preferred destination or outcome.

Every time I started to reflect upon what I was doing, it became progressively clearer to me that I was dealing with more with strategy, and less with the individual lives of the people who would live and die by the strategic outcomes which we were establishing.

Also, I came to a greater understanding that what I had been doing was, on a micro-scale, exactly what had shaped the destinies of entire civilisations over eons past. In reflecting on this, the day to day deliberations of Organisation X’s corporate future, or Ms Y’s somewhat bizarre anxiety related behaviour disorder began to fall into their true perspective. At this point, as a practitioner I also began to start to question the efficacy of my actions. From the view of science, on the whole, it seems as though most of us do not make a blind bit of difference in the overall scheme of things except as part of a larger matrix. We act and react according to a set of stimuli and established behavioural routines.

The private individual does not have the luxury of saying to him/herself however, “I’m not going to be part of this any more,” and simply opt out of society. The reason I say this is because the very decision to not impact on society has a societal impact. There is a consequence of individual behaviour on collective behaviour. Collective behaviour impacts society, and society’s reaction can determine future.

*We are where we are today as a consequence of decisions made yesterday, actions taken today will determine the shape of tomorrow.*

I have studied human behaviour through a science that doesn’t understand it in any kind of personal way. Now, through history, I have reversed the process and I am looking at the human behaviour that has shaped our entire existence, one person at a time.

That is why I am studying history.