

USING "INFLUENTIAL PERSONS" TO TEACH WORLD HISTORY

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The questions start early in the first class of the semester, smacking of curiosity with some hints of "what's in this for me?" "What's the point of learning about the past?" "What connection do dead people have to me?" Questions such as these, whether directly expressed or not, are the most basic ones that students bring to introductory history classes. They deserve answers.¹

With students, it is appropriate to begin by acknowledging that skepticism about the value of the past is a legitimate position, one that should be taken seriously. This is especially true in classes that for many students seem to be distant from their lives. At my college, World History is such a course. World Civ, as we call it, is required of all Arts and Sciences students. It is fair to say that more students enroll in the class under compulsion than because they think learning about the distant past has some connection to the twenty-first century. There are times when I deplore the present-mindedness of my students and of society generally, but this is not one of those times. I will note instead as I do in class that their skepticism about the past puts them in good company. A long line of Americans, including Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau, have questioned the value of the past for the present. In other words, skepticism about the past has a past.

The skeptics include Huck Finn. In the first chapter of his story Huck describes how "The Widow Douglas, she took me for her son, and allowed she would civilize me ... After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers; and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by-and-by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take no stock in dead people."²

"I don't take no stock in dead people"—Huck has a pithy eloquence about him. Is it self-evident that any of us should care about the dead? As Jefferson famously

¹Knowing that the title of this essay might cause some concern, let me offer a caveat: Although I refer to "Influential Persons," it is neither my philosophical purpose to advocate a "Great Man Theory of History" nor my pedagogical one to urge that we teach classes primarily through the words and deeds of the most prominent people. A "great man" approach to teaching history would distort the past and strip history of much of its content and interest. My purpose is a limited, but important one: To explore ways of answering the most basic questions that students bring to a college history class: What's the point? What's the point of learning about the past? What connection does it have with me and my life?

²Mark Twain, *Mississippi Writings: The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; Life on the Mississippi; Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; Pudd'nhead Wilson* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 625–626. Some years ago, a fellow graduate student, Roderick McDonald, now of Rider University, first called my attention to Huck's lack of interest in dead people.

proclaimed, the earth belongs to the living.³ The future beckons; every day is a new day. In different ways, researchers of history, teachers of history, and college students in history classes must all wrestle with the "Huck Finn question"—why should the living take interest in the dead?

Using Huck, I raise this question with my World Civ classes right away. If we cannot find an answer, class might as well be dismissed. At my college, we teach World Civ as a two-semester survey, breaking around 1500. Huck's objection can be raised about the entire business, but it is especially potent for the first course. Every person we deal with in the class lived and died centuries ago. These people are not just dead, they are lots of dead.

Having brought Huck's question before a class, how might we go about answering it? One way is to make the issue more concrete, by thinking about the contributions of specific people. To do this, I draw on Michael Hart's *The 100*, first published in 1979 and re-issued in 1996. The book is an attempt to identify the 100 most influential men and women in history.⁴ Any guy at a bar can make a list. The virtue of Hart's lies in his thoughtful justification of each selection and his attempt to anticipate objections to his choices. My point, though, is not to defend Hart's choices or his rankings, but to use his list to make the case that the past connects to the present.⁵

³Letter to James Madison, September 6, 1789, in Thomas Jefferson, *Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 959–964.

⁴Michael H. Hart, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, second edition (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1996). There are other lists, of course. For one example of a list that covers the eleventh through the twentieth centuries, see Agnes Hooper Gottlieb, Henry Gottlieb, Barbara Bowers, Brent Bowers, *1,000 Years, 1,000 People: Ranking the Men and Women Who Shaped the Millennium* (Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha International, 1998), cited at: <http://www.wisdomportal.com/Books/1000Years1000People.html>. This list includes: 1) Johannes Gutenberg; 2) Christopher Columbus; 3) Martin Luther; 4) Galileo; 5) William Shakespeare; 6) Isaac Newton; 7) Charles Darwin; 8) Thomas Aquinas; 9) Leonardo da Vinci; 10) Ludwig van Beethoven. *Time* magazine, in its December 31, 1999, issue, selected Albert Einstein as its "Person of the [Twentieth] Century." The runners-up were Franklin D. Roosevelt and Mohandas Gandhi. The magazine also selected the most important person in each century of the second millennium AD: William the Conqueror, Saladin, Genghis Khan, Giotto, Gutenberg, Elizabeth I, Isaac Newton, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Edison.

⁵Any list invites disagreement. Hart's inclusion of George Washington (#26), the Wright Brothers (#28), Thomas Edison (#35), and Thomas Jefferson (#64) might not surprise U.S. historians, but placing John F. Kennedy on a list (at #81) that does not include Abraham Lincoln, among other indisputably greater figures, is, at first glance, jaw-dropping. Hart's explanation: "A thousand years from now, neither the Peace Corps, nor the Alliance for Progress, nor the Bay of Pigs is likely to be much remembered. Nor will it seem very important what Kennedy's policies were concerning taxes or civil rights legislation. John F. Kennedy has been placed on this list for one reason only: he was the person who was primarily responsible for instituting the Apollo Space Program. Providing that the human race has not blown itself
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With these caveats in mind, I invite the class to identify his top ten, starting with number ten. With occasional hints (initials are often sufficient), students usually do a good job of coming up with Hart's "influential" people, who include (going #10 to #1) Einstein, Columbus, Gutenberg, Ts'ai Lun, St. Paul, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, Newton, and Muhammad.

In one recent class, after we reached #2 I asked the students who they thought Hart's top choice might be. After a few wrong guesses, I gave them a hint, that the person's name is currently the most popular male name in the world. The following discussion ensued:

First Student: Is it Jacob?

FN: No, Remember, we're looking for the most popular name in the whole world.

Second Student: John?

FN: Nope.

Third Student: Michael?

FN: No. Don't forget: We're talking about the most popular name on the entire planet.

Fourth Student: Oh! Oh! Jason?

This is why we teach World History.

The mysterious Jason notwithstanding, students usually have some knowledge of most of the people on the list. They can begin to explain why these individuals have made a difference. Once the list is on the board, it's time to consider it. What, I ask, do you notice about these people? It is not unusual for someone in the class to note, perhaps with a smile, that everyone on the list is dead. Indeed they are. We're dealing with dead people. As someone else is sure to observe, with the exception of Einstein, all have been dead for centuries, or as Huck would put it, "a considerable long time." This is an especially valuable point to establish in a World Civ class that stops at 1500. In Michael Hart's view, eight of the ten most influential people of all time lived in the period covered by the class. In addition, six of the top seven (Muhammad, Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Paul, and Ts'ai Lun, the Chinese inventor of paper) were born over 1300 years ago. Four of the top six lived 2000 or more years ago.

Students aren't equally familiar with all of the names on the list, but they have no hesitancy in arguing that some they do know (Einstein, Newton, Muhammad, and Jesus, for example) matter tremendously. Invariably, there are students who think one person or another is ranked too low.

The most heated disagreements focus on the top three: Muhammad, Newton, and Jesus (#1, 2, and 3, respectively). Instructors sometimes try to stimulate debate. In my experience, putting those three names on the board just as Hart ranked them is often

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to smithereens in the intervening time, our trip to the moon will still be regarded as a truly momentous event, one of the great landmarks in human history." Hart, 400-401.

enough to generate that most wondrous of things, spontaneous discussion. Questions frequently come first from those who cannot believe that Jesus is only #3—too low! If Muhammad is first, perhaps it is because the list maker is a Muslim—what else could explain it? There are various ways to respond to this observation, which is, in fact, an opportunity. One is to stress that historical significance and spiritual significance are two entirely different things. These days it is worth emphasizing that the Jesus and Muhammad and Moses of the history classroom are not precisely the Jesus and Muhammad and Moses of the church, mosque, and temple. Over the years, my students have come from a variety of religious backgrounds. Some are not religious at all. But the majority of them are at least nominal Christians, and for them it might be salutary to find Jesus placed third. It need do no violence to their beliefs to find other names ahead of his. There are two billion Christians in the world, but there are more than four billion people who are something else.

Sometimes the liveliest debate focuses on Newton. Two years ago, a student objected to Newton being ranked second (above Jesus), declaring, "Gravity ain't got *sh*** on rising from the dead." (When it comes to pithy eloquence, Huck Finn had nothing on this student.) Invariably, though, there are students who quickly rise to Newton's defense. Science goes beyond religious affiliation, they will say. Regardless of what we believe or where we live, we all live in a world created by science and technology. If anything, they say, Newton and Einstein are ranked too low.

Hart's list has rarely failed to engage a class. By their often passionate arguments, students demonstrate that, whether they realized it before or not, they do take stock in dead people. Some make the point explicitly. How can a Muslim not take stock in dead people, if that group includes Muhammad? How can a Christian not take stock in St. Paul or Jesus (the latter of whom is, for many, a living presence)? And indeed we do live in the world created by Newton and Einstein and other scientists.⁶ As I've noted before, my point in presenting Hart's list to classes is not to impose his rankings on them, but to get students thinking about specific people who have mattered, and who continue to matter. Students might debate the order—who should be up, who should be down—but the more they argue, the more they refute Huck's dismissal of the

⁶My emphasis in this essay is on the use of Hart's list in the first half of the World Civilization survey, which, because of its distance from the present, often seems less relevant to students than a course on recent events. But the list has value for the second half of the survey as well. Although the top of Hart's rankings is dominated by religious figures, none lived more recently than Martin Luther (#25). To note the increasing importance after 1500 of people whose contributions were in science, technology, and medicine is to make an obvious point. More importantly, perhaps, it presents a way to explore differences between religious and scientific truth. Religious truth gains some of its authority precisely because it is old. The eternal verities cannot have been discovered yesterday, and for that reason Muhammad, Jesus, and Buddha are unlikely to have successors in worldwide spiritual influence. Science, by contrast, proceeds by propounding ever newer and more satisfactory theories. As great a scientist as he was, Newton is not the source of authority for physicists that Jesus is for Christians.

dead. "Subtract the people on this list," I tell the class, "and the world would be an unimaginably different place." Students don't disagree.

Why take stock in dead people? Because as William Faulkner wrote, and as the students are now prepared to believe, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."⁷ Is every day actually a new day? If I ask that question at the beginning of class, most students reflexively answer, "yes." In many ways it obviously is. And yet, in a profound sense, yesterday is not over yet. Without the past, we would know nothing, we could not grieve, and our joys would be shallow. Without the past, we might be unburdened, but we would also be unmoored. As Faulkner also observed, "no man is himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing really as was because the past is. It is a part of every man, every woman, and every moment. All of his and her ancestry, background, is all a part of himself and herself at any moment."⁸ I used to make such points in a rather abstract way. I find now that students, fresh from their discussion of Hart's rankings, are prepared to grasp the point more readily than before.

When I teach World Civ, I'm not interested in covering every king or conqueror. So I am pleased when, as usually happens, a student notes the absence of purely political or military figures on the list. As Thomas Gray observed, "the paths of glory lead but to the grave." As a cultural and intellectual historian, I tend to emphasize the importance of ideas. Hart helps me do this. The majority of those in his top ten were men of ideas. While people die, their ideas can live on. We take stock in their ideas. The list helps me establish early in a semester that the affairs of kings, emperors, and generals will not be the main business of the course.⁹

More than kings are missing from the top ten. There are no women either. How many women, a student will ask suspiciously, are on the entire list? The answer: just two, two out of 100 (Queen Isabella and Queen Elizabeth I). Naturally, this does not satisfy the student, who thinks there should be many more. Hart, who some earlier thought was Muslim, is now thought to be a sexist—or maybe not. Perhaps the absence of women on his list is more a reflection of the way the world has been than it is of Hart's biases. The fact that men dominate his ranking of influential persons is a way

⁷William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 80.

⁸Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 84.

⁹Hart writes in his preface, xxi, "We all tend to overestimate the importance of current heads of state. They seem to us like giants; whereas statesmen who lived a few centuries ago and who seemed every bit as important to *their* contemporaries are now nearly forgotten."

of highlighting the power of patriarchal ideas, ideas even more long-lived than those of the most ancient thinkers on the list.¹⁰

Sometimes we take stock of the dead because their ideas nourish and inspire us. Other times we must know them to escape them. As historian Gerda Lerner has observed, "Human beings have always used history in order to find their direction toward the future: to repeat the past or to depart from it. Lacking knowledge of their own history, women thinkers did not have the self-knowledge from which to project a desired future."¹¹

If I am lucky, a thoughtful student will comment that there are some important parts of history that are not represented by Hart's influential persons. The emergence of agriculture is just one example. (It is always gratifying when my students make my points for me.) By this stage, Hart's ranking has done its considerable work. We will have used a list of influential persons to go beyond the list.

A few final observations: College should be a place to debate, to think, to challenge, and to be challenged. But for many students it can also be an intimidating place. They might fear, as some have told me, that they will be shot down if they say something their professor disagrees with. They might worry that their ideas, often tentative and underdeveloped, will not be taken seriously or treated with respect. When we discuss Hart's list, we inevitably talk about religion and science. What could be more combustible than that? Yet what I have found is that such early-in-the-semester discussions as I have described, if handled properly, can go a long way toward allaying students' fears. Despite—or maybe because of—these debates, students seem to become comfortable very quickly: comfortable with each other, comfortable with me, comfortable to think and to try out new ideas.

Debating Hart's ranking also makes an important point about the nature of history. It is more than "just the facts, ma'am." We know that, of course, but many of my freshmen come wanting "The Truth." They need to learn quickly that I will not give it to them. The experience students get on the first day, arguing about influential

¹⁰On this point, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). In his preface, xxxi, Hart explains the dearth of women on his list: "The influence of women on human affairs, as well as the contribution that females have made to human civilization, is obviously far greater than might be indicated by their numbers in this list. But a galaxy of influential figures will naturally be composed of individuals who had both the talent *and* the opportunity to exert a great influence. Throughout history, women have generally been denied such opportunities, and my inclusion of only two females is simply a reflection of that regrettable truth."

¹¹Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 281.

persons, provides an early demonstration that interpretation is a central part of historical understanding.¹² Historiography can come later, if one wants.

Beginning a course with "influential persons" accomplishes several things. It shows that history is interpretation as well as facts. It stimulates discussion. It demonstrates the historical force of ideas. It shows that history is more than the story of a few great men. It reveals a connection between the past and the present, and that the dead are not yet gone—a point that our students, sometimes to their surprise, discover they knew already.¹³

APPENDIX

Michael Hart's 100

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| 1. Muhammad | 9. Christopher Columbus |
| 2. Isaac Newton | 10. Albert Einstein |
| 3. Jesus Christ | 11. Louis Pasteur |
| 4. Buddha | 12. Galileo Galilei |
| 5. Confucius | 13. Aristotle |
| 6. St. Paul | 14. Euclid |
| 7. Ts'ai Lun | 15. Moses |
| 8. Johann Gutenberg | 16. Charles Darwin |

¹²If one wants to get into it, one can use lists like Hart's to demonstrate how evaluations of significance change over time. In the years that elapsed between the first edition of *The 100* and the second, a brief period in historical time, Hart reconsidered some of his rankings. "When the first edition of this book was being written," he says in the preface of his second edition (1996), xxii, "it seemed as though the Communist movement as dreadful as it appeared to me was so firmly entrenched in so many countries, and so skilled and ruthless in its hold on power, that it might well endure for many decades, perhaps even for centuries.... If that was so, then the founders of the Communist system (Marx, Lenin, and Stalin) were all extremely influential men. However, the events of the past few years have shown that the Communist system was not nearly as powerful, nor as firmly entrenched, as I had feared."

¹³Late in 2006, *Atlantic Monthly* offered its listing of the "Top 100" Americans as an interesting companion to the Hart list: "The Top 100: The Most Influential Figures in American History," *Atlantic Monthly* (December 2006), on line at <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/2006/12/influentials>. The top ten includes, in order, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, John Marshall, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Edison, and Woodrow Wilson. I used to do an influential persons exercise at the beginning of my U.S. (pre-1865) survey. In fact, that's where I first used Huck Finn and his "dead people," though just about everything else about the class was different than what I do in World Civ. I invited the students to come up with their own list of ten Americans who had contributed to history (I didn't use the word "influential"), which I must say, usually looked an awful lot like what the *Atlantic* has just produced. One of the points was to observe how extremely narrow (dead white political males excepting King) the selections seemed to be and to suggest that other kinds of people can and do make history. You don't want to repeat yourself too often, so I moved on to other approaches, but maybe with the *Atlantic's* list in hand, I'll do something like this again.

17. Shih Huang Ti
18. August Caesar
19. Nicolaus Copernicus
20. Antoine Laurent Lavoisier
21. Constantine the Great
22. James Watt
23. Michael Faraday
24. James Clerk Maxwell
25. Martin Luther
26. George Washington
27. Karl Marx
28. Orville Wright & Wilbur Wright
29. Genghis Khan
30. Adam Smith
31. Edward de Vere/William Shakespeare
32. John Dalton
33. Alexander the Great
34. Napoleon Bonaparte
35. Thomas Edison
36. Antony van Leeuwenhoek
37. William T. G. Morton
38. Guglielmo Marconi
39. Adolf Hitler
40. Plato
41. Oliver Cromwell
42. Alexander Graham Bell
43. Alexander Fleming
44. John Locke
45. Ludwig van Beethoven
46. Werner Heisenberg
47. Louis Daguerre
48. Simón Bolívar
49. René Descartes
50. Michelangelo
51. Pope Urban II
52. Umar ibn al-Khattab
53. Asoka
54. St. Augustine
55. William Harvey
56. Ernest Rutherford
57. John Calvin
58. Gregor Mendel
59. Max Planck
60. Joseph Lister
61. Nikolaus August Otto
62. Francisco Pizarro
63. Hernando Cortés
64. Thomas Jefferson
65. Queen Isabella I
66. Joseph Stalin
67. Julius Caesar
68. William the Conqueror
69. Sigmund Freud
70. Edward Jenner
71. William Conrad Röntgen
72. Johann Sebastian Bach
73. Lao Tzu
74. Voltaire
75. Johannes Kepler
76. Enrico Fermi
77. Leonhard Euler
78. Jean-Jacques Rousseau
79. Niccolò Machiavelli
80. Thomas Malthus
81. John F. Kennedy
82. Gregory Pincus
83. Mani
84. Lenin
85. Sui Wen Ti
86. Vasco da Gama
87. Cyrus the Great
88. Peter the Great
89. Mao Zedong
90. Francis Bacon
91. Henry Ford
92. Mencius
93. Zoroaster
94. Queen Elizabeth I
95. Mikhail Gorbachev
96. Menes
97. Charlemagne
98. Homer
99. Justinian I
100. Mahavira