

“WE’LL BE RIGHT BACK”: INTRODUCING CONSTRUCTIVE “BREAKS” INTO HISTORY LECTURES

Robert Blackey
California State University, San Bernardino

Europe: A History by Norman Davies appeared in 1996.¹ In addition to its substantial text (i.e., more than 1,200 pages including notes) and a massive appendix that includes more than 100 valuable maps, graphs, tables, charts, and lists, the book is marked distinctively by the inclusion of 301 capsules. “Capsules,” as Davies notes in his preface, illustrate “narrower themes that cut across the chronological flow.”² They are boxed breaks both accompanying and interrupting the developing narrative, but they are purposely keyed, either directly or indirectly, to some event, person, object, concept, phenomenon, or other aspect of history; they offer a micro-history collection of intriguing and thoughtful commentary about subjects that are either ignored or merely grazed in standard texts. For teachers and students of European history or more broadly just history, these capsules have the potential to fascinate and appeal to a broad spectrum of tastes: from *Altmarkt* and *Archimedes* to *Zadruga* and *Zeus*, from *Codpiece* and *Vlad* [Tepes] to *Rouge* and *Usury*.

What attracted me to Davies’ capsules is that for more than a decade prior to his book’s publication I had included as part of my teaching my own version of capsules, or “breaks” as I call them.³ These breaks are employed to interrupt the lecture so as to offer a closer look—as if through a magnifying glass—at selected subjects that are often ignored or, at best, treated summarily in course textbooks but are nevertheless related to the subject or time period being examined. Actually, these breaks are not interruptions as the word is commonly used. Instead, they are subject-friendly, often-seamless detours, much like what urban explorers experience when they turn into side streets and alleys in order to take a closer look or get a better feel for a neighborhood. They also work as windows onto the historical landscape as they illuminate habits, institutions, structures, concepts, and panoramas. Based on comments from students—after class, in my office, and on student evaluation forms—these breaks are

¹Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²It should be noted that many textbooks in world, Western/European, and United States history include capsules and boxed breaks as prompts for teachers and students—sometimes in straight narrative form, including biographical sketches or commentaries on controversial topics, and other times built around primary source documents.

³As has already been inferred, what Davies calls “capsules” I call “breaks,” just as, I expect, other teachers who use these tangential interruptions to the narrative flow of a lecture or presentation—and, indeed, there are other teachers who use them—might call them “sidebars.” With apologies to Shakespeare, a break by any other name is still a break.

welcome for a variety of reasons: they enliven class sessions on a different level and in unexpected ways, but without resulting in students losing focus on the lecture; they satisfy and spike curiosity, and sometimes even encourage students to investigate further; and they pique students' attention, because breaks can't be anticipated but they can be, and are, introduced at virtually any time (i.e., sometimes at the start of or conclusion to a class session but mostly where they are relevant to the larger subject of the day).

In support of my observations above, what follows are comments from students:

"The 'breaks' were inserted in opportune times to aid the connection between students and the historical material being covered in the lecture. The 'breaks' help to enlighten the history of Europe and relate the reality in the lives of people from the past. The 'toilet break,' for example, enlivens the atmosphere with photographs of actual toilets from early modern Europe. The 'forceps break' brought about a different kind of feeling, one of appreciation, for the advancements in modern medicine. Learning about the history of the medical instrument known as forceps brought about empathy for the women living during early modern Europe who faced childbirth without the conveniences and life-saving skills of modern medicine. These breaks may seem minor, but they provide the human connections for students so they may not only know about history but also understand and feel the history."

"I started taking ballet classes as a little girl and I still dance, but mostly just for fun. But until the break on ballet, I knew nothing about its history, so after class I googled to learn more."

"The breaks are helpful because they are sometimes about people of the period we are studying. As a result, it lets us learn more about their specific values and ideals."

"Class breaks are an essential and appreciated part of the lecture. They provide specific examples of tools, artistic expressions, ways of life, and innovative measures utilized or undertaken through the time period we are studying on a specific day. They allow students a 'break' from note taking to absorb practical and sometimes humorous applications of history before we gently slip back into the larger subject we were discussing."

"I very much like the breaks because I believe they provide a more intimate window into the period of time we are learning about. While knowing who was king at any given date or what sparked some great war provides an understanding of the time and country in general, they don't give you an idea about the people living in that time, which is what I'm interested in. They also provide a mental break where no notes need to be taken, just your attention given."

"Your breaks add a dimension to the lectures that are sometimes lacking in other classes. They allow me to feel a connection to the time period."

"I've always known there were different periods in the history of art, but I knew nothing about the transitions from one period to the next. The break on the changes from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance told me and showed me how that happened

and who was responsible; plus we got to describe what we were seeing, which made it more interesting. That made me more curious about other transitions, and not just in art.”

Wherever possible—and these days the resources available to teachers make so many visuals accessible—I illustrate breaks with projected images and, occasionally, with actual artifacts or physical items I have acquired (e.g., a modern version of the long-hollow-beaked Venetian *Dottore* mask to illustrate what physicians wore, with the beaks stuffed with sweet-smelling flowers, to protect themselves from breathing in foul, disease-ridden vapors during the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of the plague; an opium pipe to accompany a break on that drug as part of a closer look at the importation of opium and what it did to Chinese society as we approach the first Opium War).

Where does one find subjects relevant to the subject matter of one’s teaching to include as breaks? Naturally, the Internet makes searches for all kinds of subjects relatively easy, especially if we allow our imaginations free rein, but I launched my collection before the Internet was available to a wide audience. Actually, “launched” makes what happened seem like the inauguration of a master plan, whereas the reality is it all happened by chance. Without any prompting I decided one day before class to investigate more thoroughly a seemingly minor subject I had hitherto mentioned merely in passing; I sought out additional relevant information,⁴ and then used that information to create a break in class. Student reaction was positive, I enjoyed presenting the subject matter, and over time this action spawned other breaks.

In reading—especially books, book reviews, and articles—I would come across mention of a subject that fell under the purview of one of my courses and that I then decided to learn more about or one I had not thought of as worthy of consideration but suddenly realized would make a good addition to one or another of my courses. So I searched to fill in the gaps in my knowledge. Magazines such as *History Today*,

⁴I make use of the World Wide Web, including Wikipedia, answers.com, and other web sources, for factual information but not for inspiration for potential breaks, because many of my breaks were created before the web was available. Instead, ideas for breaks come from reading books, articles (including newspapers and magazines), and book reviews (including *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*). For example, one of my newest breaks is on *Ballet*. A definitive book on the subject was reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review* on November 26, 2010 [Jennifer Homans, *Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010)]. The reviewer provided some history that told how ballet arrived at the French royal court from Italy in the mid-sixteenth century and then was improved upon by Louis XIII, who designed costumes, wrote librettos, and even danced leading roles, and by Louis XIV, who made his debut at age thirteen and studied with his ballet teacher every day for twenty years, with ballet eventually flourishing at Versailles. In creating the break, I double-checked facts and secured images via the web. *Voilà*, a break was born. Then there was the relatively simple matter of determining the best place for the break to be used; for me, it was during my lecture on the French Civil Wars of Religion, as the first ballet was performed in France in the middle of those wars, in 1581.

History Magazine, *BBC History Magazine*, *American History*, and *Magazine of History* (from Organization of American Historians)—current as well as back issues—sometimes offer notes and articles that can be the source or inspiration for breaks. And, naturally, there is again one's imagination that I now couple with a question I periodically ask myself: What subjects might interest students that can be tied to specific subject matter I am teaching but that are also simultaneously valid intellectually as they relate to that course? Embedded in this question is the important point that breaks be tied to the subject matter under consideration in some fashion.⁵ Doing so works effectively in Davies' book and it has worked well for me, too, as I explain below through a small sampling of the breaks I use.

A word of caution: There are some sensitive, perhaps even controversial, subjects I include as breaks—and that Davies comparably introduces as capsules—that I am careful to treat academically as the serious, legitimate subjects they are, although they might appear to some as frivolous or perhaps not even as subjects to broach at all. I allow my potential humor to emerge directly from the historical subject itself, unembellished by me or my students, as I am especially careful to avoid appealing to or feeding prurient interests. Also, teachers should be both aware of their audience in terms of grade level and maturity of students and mindful of school and community standards. Whereas I do seek to inform and even enlighten via these breaks, I do not go out of my way to offend. Each teacher must find the balance that works best for both teacher and students.

Let us now turn to a number of examples to explain the kinds of breaks I employ and the context in which I use them. These, I hope, will encourage interested teachers to create their own breaks. By the way, in two survey courses, one lower-division

⁵Examples of breaks, the subjects they are tied to, and their varied sources of inspiration include the following: The break on *Pencils* is used during an introductory lecture to the period 1450-1750, as the oldest surviving pencil, from the mid-sixteenth century, was a stick of what we call graphite that was used for marking sheep and in the next century was encased in wood; this information was acquired from *History Magazine* (July 2005), as was another break—inserted when I introduce the period 1750-1914—on *Canned Foods*, a development that began its evolution during the period of the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon. *Luther on Women* originated with a quotation that reflects his perspective and appeared as part of a Document-Based Question (DBQ) on a 1978 Advanced Placement European History exam and then grew with further investigation. The break on *Condoms* emerged from a news item in *The New York Times* (September 7, 1996), written from the French town of Condom (located between Bordeaux and Toulouse), that explained how the Bishop of Condom (from 1669), the noted political theorist and anti-Protestant fulminator Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, in his less-than-celibate moments used the protective covering of sheep's bladders, with the town, in turn, possibly lending its name to the device. When examining Dante's *Inferno*, we take a *Hell and How Hot It Is* break; this came from "The Talk of the Town" section of *The New Yorker* (July 19, 1999) that explored the subject through a brief look at temperature calculations, for both Heaven and Hell, made by scientists at different times in the twentieth century. And the break on artist and scientist of insect metamorphosis *Maria Sibylla Merian* came from a 2008 exhibit at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles (see below for further explanation).

(World Civilization III: 1450 to present), the other upper-level (Early Modern Europe, 1300-1815), let me note, for guideline purposes, that I scatter more than fifty breaks. (See Appendix for a full list.)

In discussing Renaissance Venice, I take a *Ghetto* break. I project a number of images of the city (e.g., old maps, paintings by Caneletto and others, and modern photographs), with its many small islands, canals, and connecting bridges, and then describe how the word *ghetto* is derived from *Geto Nuovo*, which is the name of the Venetian island that, until 1390, had been devoted to iron foundering. The name comes from *gettare*, meaning to cast metal and from *nuovo* meaning new, ergo “new foundry.” There is also the adjacent *Geto Vecchio*, or “old foundry” island. In 1516, the city’s Jews were compelled to move to and live permanently on the island; they were allowed to exit the island and conduct business during the day but had to return at sunset. Projected images from the island’s main piazza show what parts of the ghetto look like today and how they have changed little over the centuries. In fact, at least two of five old synagogues continue to function, although, because Venetian laws forbade the building of separate synagogues, they were added to the top floors of existing structures. Further, I add relevant additional information: what being compelled to live in the ghetto meant for its Jewish residents; how the ghetto was monitored and how patrols were paid for; how the island was where Shakespeare’s Shylock lived (i.e., *The Merchant of Venice* was published 74 years after the ghetto was established); how long the gates that locked the Jews in for the night stayed in place (until 1797); how and why Rome, a few decades later, developed its ghetto for Jews; and then how all this connects us to the development of twentieth-century ghettos, not only for Jews—say, for example, in Warsaw or even in Venice’s ghetto itself where there is a memorial commemorating the city’s Jewish victims of the Holocaust—but for other minorities as well.

Jousting is a break that emerged from a lecture on the sixteenth-century French Civil Wars of Religion. The king on the eve of these wars, Henri II, was in good spirits in 1559, following the marriage of two of his daughters and the signing of a peace treaty with the Habsburgs that improved France’s security. Henri, vibrant and athletic, decided a joust was an appropriate activity to celebrate these occasions. At this point, I describe the primary purpose of a joust—which was to break one’s lance on the chest of one’s opponent, with victory going to the competitor who amassed the most broken lances at the end of the day—while projecting a contemporary engraving that depicts Henri’s fatal joust as well as shows the soft-wood, hollow lance breaking. I also project an image of a stirrup, a Chinese invention that reached Europe through earlier contacts and invasions. Without stirrups jousting would not have been possible. This particular jousting event proved fatal for Henri: As his opponent’s lance shattered on his chest a substantial splinter pushed up his visor, pierced his eye, and penetrated his brain. He lingered for eleven days, while court physicians decapitated four criminals in order to study their cranial anatomy in an unsuccessful effort to save the king. Another sixteenth-century image depicts Henri on his deathbed, with his wife (Catherine de

Medici), his oldest son, and the about-to-be heir's new wife, Mary, Queen of Scots, anxious for his possible recovery but anticipating his imminent death. I conclude by projecting a few additional images: modern photographs of the Place des Vosges—today an upscale square on Paris' Right Bank which in Henri II's day was a park and the site of the joust; the Cathedral of St-Denis, where Henri and Catherine de Medici as well as other French monarchs, were once interred (until, that is, during the French Revolution when the remains of the entombed royal couples were scattered to parts unknown); and another, inside the cathedral, of the agonized expression—reflecting the horror of the king's death—of the sculpted representation of a recumbent Henri atop his sepulchral monument.

The role of women in Chinese history leads to a break on *Bound-foot Shoes*. We discuss their purpose, not only their erotic role and why only Han women bound their feet, but also their social function and the way such shoes made it difficult, if not impossible, for women to work. This, in turn, enables me to draw a parallel to the role of the *Corset* in the West, which functions as yet another break in my world civilizations course. It is almost impossible for students not to be interested in bound-foot shoes, but I stimulate that interest with projected images of the process by which the feet were bound; of shoes placed next to familiar objects—such as a tea cup or pack of cigarettes—in order to help students gauge how small they actually are; of a diagram comparing the shape and size of a normal foot with one that had been bound since childhood; of an X-ray of bound feet; and then a series of photographs showing an elderly woman as she unwraps one of her feet until it is bare. And if that is not enough to leave a lasting impression, I display a genuine pair of previously-owned bound-foot shoes that are in my possession. I also read a poem, "Woman" by Fu Hsüan, whose first line is, "How sad it is to be a woman!" Foot-binding decreased as the twentieth century unfolded and eventually was outlawed after the Chinese Communists came to power in 1949. Ironically, in the twenty-first century some young Chinese women have been undergoing the Ilizarov surgical procedure in order to lengthen their legs and thus become taller but which can also lead to difficulties in walking normally. I project a photograph from *The New York Times* that illustrates this procedure—while the caption describes the physical difficulties incurred by these women. Similar images and information are available on the web.

When I introduce a break on *Forceps* during the discussion of the above-mentioned French Civil Wars of Religion, some students surely must wonder where that comes from and where it will take us. After I provide a brief look at birthing in early modern Europe, accompanied by a projected sixteenth-century engraving, I address the often-fatal risks involved during difficult births. At this point, I mention the barber-surgeon Chamberlen brothers and their surgeon father, Huguenots and natives of Paris, who in 1569 fled France for London in the face of the Roman Catholic onslaught during those same civil wars. There, in about 1588, around the time the English were confronting the Spanish Armada, the brothers perfected their amazing invention, childbirth forceps, adapted perhaps from the use of spoons by midwives to facilitate

some births. Before this time there were no live deliveries of births in the face of significant complications. In order to save a mother’s life, however, hooks and other instruments were introduced to break apart the child’s skull, dismember it, and remove the tiny body piece by piece. Baptism *in utero* provided some spiritual consolation for the would-be parents. The Chamberlen brothers would be hired and paid their hefty fee in advance, whether or not it became necessary for their forceps to be introduced. Aside from the mother-to-be, no one else was permitted to be present in the delivery chamber, even though the custom was for several female family members to be in attendance. In fact, the brothers were so protective of their device that they covered the mother’s eyes so she could not catch a glimpse of the forceps. One of the brothers also made loud noises—by ringing bells, rattling chains, and banging hammers—in order to divert attention from what they were doing. The Chamberlen forceps, which I reveal through a projected photograph, were kept in a locked case so as to protect its secrecy further. Curiously, this would-be boon to birthing and saving lives was kept a secret by the brothers and their descendants, apparently for the sole purpose of the family’s singular enrichment, for about a century.

I provide breaks for *Selected Artists, Chapels, and Churches*. The paintings of Hieronymus Bosch c. 1450-1516) are particularly fascinating both for the criticism of the Catholic Church they target and their surrealistic quality. I focus, among others, on his “Garden of Earthly Delights,” a triptych that depicts human innocence in the Garden of Eden, the myriad ways men and women—after the expulsion from Eden—sin, and then the fate in store for those sinners in Hell. In addition to projecting the complex and detailed collection of images, I pass among my students an art book that contains the painting along with a magnifying glass for closer inspection of its many details.

Another break focuses on the brilliant sculptures of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), especially those that depict religious ecstasy (“The Ecstasy of St. Teresa” and “Blessed Ludovica Albertoni”) and ones that show the way he made sculpted marble look like human flesh (“Rape of Proserpina”). We also follow his mathematically precise construction of St. Peter’s Square in Rome, especially the way in which he positioned the four rows, one behind the other, of adjacent columns so that from certain spots (marked by round disks) on either side of the Egyptian obelisk in the center of the square only the front row is visible. I also devote breaks to Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652) and Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717), the former for her emphasis on both abused and revengeful women (i.e., following her own rape, Artemisia painted at least five versions of the biblical study of Judith beheading Holofernas), the latter for contributions to science through her paintings and observations of and her experiments with insect metamorphosis.

The Brancacci Chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence gets special attention because of the frescoes of Masaccio (1401-28), for his use of linear perspective and illusionistic techniques, his use of light and shade (*chiaroscuro*), as well as his influence upon a young Michelangelo, which students can see by comparing his chapel frescoes with Michelangelo’s in the Sistine Chapel. Among churches, I use

Florence's Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (i.e., the *Duomo*) to demonstrate the way architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) gained his commission following his discovery of how a dome might be built and supported, as Europeans had forgotten this knowledge in the centuries after the fall of Rome. All of these breaks are amply illustrated.

Studying the "Age of Exploration" is an ideal time for breaks on both *Sugar* and *Food*.⁶ The introduction of cane sugar into the European diet and the increase in its consumption, down to the present time, can be illustrated, for example, with Dutch still-life paintings of sweets and confections but also with the few faces that are depicted with open mouths and, alas, rotten teeth. I follow with paintings of dentists extracting teeth, horrified patients, and interested, even entertained, spectators as well as photographs of actual extraction tools, all of which help to bring the subject to life. It does not take much nudging to get students to draw the obvious parallels to their own experiences with dentists. The foods involved in the Columbian Exchange, along with the spices Europeans brought from Asia or brought back as part of their commercial voyages, broaden the *Sugar* and *Food* breaks, all of which can be illustrated with contemporary engravings and paintings as well as with modern photographs. An ambitious teacher could bring—or have students bring—samples of such foods and spices to class. And a health-conscious teacher might consider talking about the role fast foods play in contemporary life and how so much of this stems from the corn that came from the Americas. Another food break I take involves bread and the central role it played in the European diet for centuries (including as gruel). There are paintings and engravings from across centuries that illustrate the sumptuous meals of the well-to-do as well as the bread sellers who sold what was the basic food for the masses (i.e., bread was virtually synonymous with food). Other related breaks introduce *Coffee*, the *Japanese Tea Ceremony*, *Tobacco*, and the *Canning and Preservation of Food*.

And so it goes, with additional breaks including such topics as *Christmas*, the *Man in the Iron Mask and Louis XIV*, *Toilets and Toilet Paper*, *Pencils*, *Habsburg Remains in Vienna* (i.e., upon entombment their hearts and entrails were removed and placed in urns; these organs and bodies were kept separately from one another and divided among three churches, each a short walk from the others), *Bloodletting*, *Bathing*, *Vaccination*, *Vlad Tepes*, *Syphilis*, *Children: Their Role in Society and the Games They Played*, *Hysteria and Its Treatment*, *St. Brendan the Navigator*, *Walled Cities*, *Relics*, *Luther on Women*, *Marriage*, *Dutch Dikes and Windmills*, and more.

These breaks (which I see, more accurately, as relevant tangents rather than actual interruptions, and only some of which students are responsible for on exams—these are identified accordingly) not only constitute an occasionally welcome *break* in the narrative of a course, but they also are examples of micro-histories, close-up looks at topics that often escape both the history teacher's presentations and students'

⁶Roy E. Schreiber, "Some Food for Historical Thought," *Teaching History*, 24 (Fall 1999), 78-83.

attention when they think about what history encompasses. Thus, they serve the dual purpose of greasing the wheels of the narrative flow and creating interest in areas about which there is often much ignorance. They have the potential to be one of those components of a course that—although not as critical, say, as encouraging students to develop their skills to think historically and write effectively—students will remember fondly for a long time.

Appendix

Artists (e.g., Bernini, Breugel, Dürer, El Greco, Artemesia Gentileschi, Mexican muralists: Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros)

Ballet

Bathing

Black Death

Bloodletting (leeches and cutting veins)

Bound feet and bound-feet shoes

Brancacci Chapel/Sistine Chapel

Bread/Food

Canning and preservation of food

Children in the Renaissance

Christmas

Coffee

Condoms

Corsets

Dental floss

Dikes/levees and windmills

Dutch genre art (seventeenth century)

Escorial

Evolution of art from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance

Forceps and birthing

Ghetto (Venice)

Habsburg remains in Vienna

Habsburg jaw

Hell and how hot it is (when discussing Dante’s *Inferno*)

Hysteria and the first electric vibrators

Japanese tea ceremony

Jousting

Louis XIV’s bedroom

Man in the Iron Mask and Louis XIV

Maria Sibylla Merian, artist and scientist

Marriage

Martin Luther on women
Masturbation
Opium
Pantheon (Paris)
Pantheon (Rome) and Brunelleschi and Florence's Duomo
Pencils
Prague, the old Jewish quarter and cemetery and the defenestration
Relics and pilgrimages
Renaissance women and art
Saint Brendan the Navigator
Sugar, tooth decay, and dentistry
Syphilis
Tobacco
Toilets and toilet paper
Vaccination
Versailles and the Hall of Mirrors
Vlad Tepes/Dracula
Walled cities