

EUROPEAN HISTORY: WHY AND HOW

I. Why European History Matters

A. What is history?

1. The modern or conventional view is that history is “the study of the past.” No wonder most people don’t care about it. *We don’t live in the past!*
2. This unfortunately prevalent view of history leaves people feeling that it is a subject that just does not matter when it comes to “real life.” When given the choice, the vast majority of people simply give up on studying the past and decide to “get busy living.”
3. History is a much more valuable subject than the usual approach to the subject allows us to see. The ancient Greeks invented it because they felt a desperate need to better understand the world they lived in, and if we approach the subject in this way it can give us, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, “that knowledge...most useful to us.” (History can be the MVS—the *Most Valuable Subject!*)
4. In *History At Our House* we study the past in order to understand the world we live in. In this approach the past is not disconnected from the present. It is our means of being more aware of the present. It doesn’t just give us “hindsight,” i.e. knowledge of the way things were. It gives us *insight* into how the world came to be the way that it *is*, and—by allowing us to grasp the trajectory of the course of human events—it even gives us *foresight* (the ability to anticipate, predict, and shape the future).

B. What about Europe?

1. If we want to study the past in order to understand the world we live in, what parts of it should we study?
2. The sum of human history is a *plethora*—an overabundance of potential material to learn—so we cannot ever learn it all. It is a record of human activity over 5000 years long, spanning multiple civilizations and the interactions of billions of individuals.
3. To get the most useful information for navigating through American life, we might naturally be inclined to focus on *American* history.
4. The challenge of understanding the *world* that we live in, however, is that that *world* extends beyond America. It involves the fact that our lives are now “interconnected” with those of every one else in the world. (“Interconnected” means “multiply and complexly connected.”) Here are some of the many possible examples of connections: Americans don’t just drive American cars; we drive cars from Japan, Korea, and Germany. We eat bananas from Costa Rica and drink coffee from Kenya or Jamaica. When we dine out, we’re just as likely to eat Mexican, Greek, or Italian food as we are to eat “American” cuisine. Most of our consumer goods are “Made in China.” Our extended families are almost certainly spread among multiple countries. We communicate with each other globally using cell phones and the Internet. We can travel to any part of the world in a day. Crucially, the United States of America, acting as the

“world police power,” is entangled in the affairs of virtually all the other cultures in the world, including most notoriously the Islamic Middle East, whose culture has spawned the phenomenon of modern Jihadist terrorism (terrorism as a form of Islamic “holy war”). A world this complex and interconnected cannot be understood by focusing on American alone.

5. But what part does Europe play in it? Why is it important *today*?
 - a) European languages are spoken throughout the Americas and the world, especially English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese—the languages of the countries that enacted the “Age of Discovery” and then imposed their culture through conquest and colonization on much of the rest of the world.
 - b) European language is merely a vehicle for European *ideas, beliefs, and values*—which are globally pervasive. As an example, Christianity has spread throughout the globe. But even more widespread are European ideas of government, which have been incorporated into every government in the world in one form or another and to varying degrees. (India would not have a democracy without European influence. China would not have communism. And America would not be the republic that it is without European theories of government influencing the Founding Fathers.) Indeed every modern form of government originated in Europe.
 - c) Europe will surely play a major role, therefore, in shaping the governments of the future, in part based on the new kind of government that it recently invented and adopted for itself, which is called “*supranationalism*.”