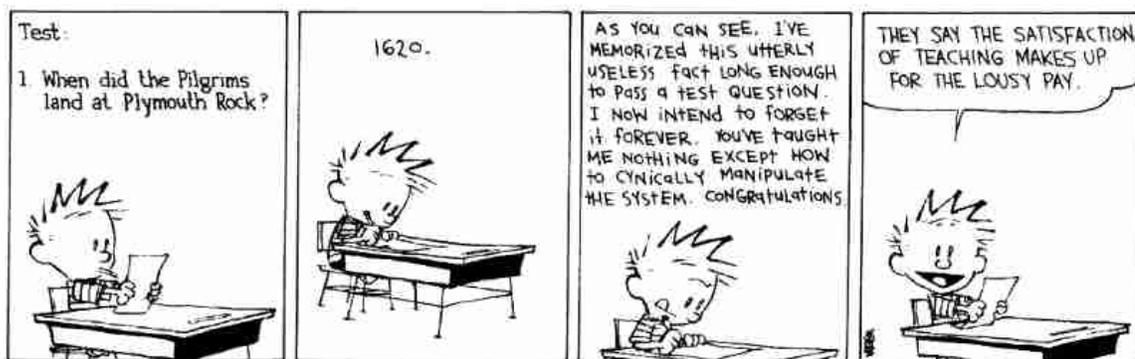


AMERICA AND THE WORLD WE LIVE IN: INTRODUCTION

I. The Missing Question

A. What is history *for*?

1. The modern or conventional view is that history is “the study of the past.” That is, quite simply, why so few people care about the subject. If history is about *the past*, but we live in the *present*, then what does it have to do with “real life”?
2. The classic predicament most people find themselves stuck in with regard to the study of the past is captured by a great *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip:



3. Leaving aside the cynical humor of this comic strip, it resonates with readers because it embodies a real issue, which I call: *the missing question*.
4. Traditional history instruction focusses on a basic set of questions: *who, what, where, when?* *Who—the Pilgrims, did what—landed, where—at Plymouth Rock, when—1620.*
 - a) Many people believe that all that is needed to fix the uselessness of knowing such things and salvage history is to add the question: *why?*
 - b) That, however, is not the missing question. All that ends up happening is that history becomes an “argument without end” about the complexity of human life as it once was.
 - c) Almost inevitably, people gravitate to answers that suit them best based on their own preferences and prejudices. Traditional patriotic American history, for instance, says that the Pilgrims came to America for “freedom.” Often such answers are an oversimplification, and sometimes (though rarely) outright lies. Which is what makes it possible for modern “revisionists” (people who want to “revise” the meaning of history) to dismiss traditional views and insist on shifting the focus to other themes, such as all the ill deeds of the Pilgrims and other Europeans who came to America, and thus to redefine the meaning of colonial times to something like: native Americans were already here, and the Pilgrims “stole” their land.
5. What does any of this have to do with life in 2020?

B. Rising Above the Culture Wars

1. Unfortunately, the arguments without end that abound in the “study of the past” today are part of a phenomenon known as the “culture wars,” which reflects the fact that “grown-ups” today (in America, and elsewhere as well) are locked in various arguments over the political direction of their cultures, and they use history as a weapon against one another.
2. The missing question that can allow us to do better is: *what for?*
 - a) If historians had placed the proper emphasis on this question, history would not be the useless, angry subject that it is.
 - b) The Pilgrims came to America in 1620? *What—*is such knowledge—*for?* In what sense can it help us to better understand the world and live the best lives we can live (all of us)?
 - c) If all that such knowledge offers is fuel to the arguments we are already having, then history is merely “subjective.” (It means one thing *to you*, and it means another thing *to me*, etc. Which means: it only means what we each want it to mean, i.e. it has no *real* meaning at all.)
 - d) The *objective* purpose of history, as defined by the ancient Greeks who invented it, was not to let ourselves be dominated by feelings and prejudices, but to rise above that and achieve real understanding—including of each other.
 - e) If we can learn to think of history as *a revelation and explanation of the world we live in*, it can, in fact, fulfill that purpose. (As we will learn, America would not be the country that it is unless the Pilgrims had come! Their story is part of our story.)