

**Presidential Address:
World History Education: Recent Trends and Pitfalls**

**Lavanya Vemsani
Shawnee State University**

History. The story of the human journey on the earth is immense: its extent in time and space can be daunting. In the last five hundred years, the presence of history as a major subject of study, and its contribution to enriching young minds, is enormous: History has contributed remarkably to the understanding of civilizational progress across the world. As one popular saying notes, “we are the stories we tell ourselves.” Therefore, leaving aside the purpose of history, it is important to undertake every measure to carefully inculcate history education at all levels of education beginning with elementary schools.

In today’s lecture I will be addressing some of the issues that the subject of history education is currently facing. Mainly, I will be discussing ‘presentism’ and how it is enveloping our professional subject area in ways that some of us are not even noticing. I will limit myself to the issue of presentism in this lecture because I see something changing in recent years. At the intersection where the present begins to overlap with the past, they collapse into one.

Presentism and its dangers affect us in two ways, as American Historical Association President Lynn Hunt succinctly noted in her essay [“Against Presentism,”](#) published in the AHA’s May 2002 news magazine *Perspectives on History*. The two points of concern she noted are: 1) “the tendency to interpret the past in presentist terms,” and 2) “the shift of general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past.” Both of these tendencies are notable in current trends of education and learning about history. I will examine below the pitfalls of these two trends in the current education of history in schools and colleges.

The tendency to interpret the past in presentist terms

This first type of presentist tendency is implicit in Western historical writing. As Lynn Hunt noted:

"Although the first propensity was implicit in Western historical writing from its beginnings, it took a more problematic turn when the notion of 'the modern' began to take root in the 17th century. Over time, modernity became the standard against which most of the past, even the Western past, could be found wanting."

The issue of the first type of 'presentism,' in its enthusiasm to interpret the past, affected histories of nations commonly known as third world countries, especially those colonized nations whose history was first written by their colonial masters during the modern era. As a historian of India, I cannot help but bring up the example of India. India is the best example of this type of history which began to be written only during the modern era. Judging from these modernist and presentist interpretations, India was dismissed not only as starkly different from the West, but also as stagnant.

India's history was reconstructed based on interpretations rather than grounded in evidence. The most important development due to this type of historical reconstruction was the framing of Indian history as a series of conquests beginning with the mythical Aryan invasion. The result is that the history of India remains a series of invasions and conquests, lacking a uniform and native emergence of its own civilization.

Shifting general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past

This is a bigger problem for academia and those concerned with current history education. Lynn Hunt noted: "Shift of interest toward the contemporary period clearly has a connection to the invention of modernity...As late as the end of the 19th century, and in some places even after that, students in history expected to study mainly ancient history and to find therein exemplars for politics in the present." Until the 1990s, she continued, survey courses stopped at World War I, with, "the rest of the 20th century being consigned to the province of journalism rather than historical scholarship." Now history tends to prolong into the 21st century. In the recent years, we have also added future historical dimensions to our historical methods of interpretation.

Lynn Hunt cautioned the history profession about this trend in her article, and I stress, that presentism is taking over history:

It threatens to put us out of business as historians. If the undergraduates flock to 20th-century courses and even PhD students take degrees mostly in 20th-century topics, then history risks turning into a kind of general social studies subject (as it is in K-12). It becomes the short-term history of various kinds of identity politics defined by present concerns and might therefore be better approached via sociology, political science, or anthropology.

Another trend noticed in current historical writing is concerned with India. Indian history has frequently become the concern of modern geographical and regional interests, serving various short-term identity politics. Marxist interpretation has exacerbated this trend of interpreting Indian history by applying theory of classes and class conflict to the remote past of India. A confusion then ensued, erroneously collapsing two categories of ancient Indian social classification, the *varna* and the *jati*, to fit into the framework of class, in order to facilitate the Marxist interpretation of Indian history.

More immediate to today is a notable and a clear change to K-12 history curriculum to begin with study of history after the 13th century rather than the ancient past. If this trend continues, it might gradually shrink the subject of history, ultimately ending in studying only the modern history.

A most notable change and example of this second type of presentism taking over academia due to this trend of history going modern, is the recent change to AP World History exams. This year, the AP World History exams dropped Ancient World and started focusing the examinations only on the Modern World. A couple of years ago, the College Board announced its intention to change the curriculum for AP World History exams by confining World History AP Exam to the modern era, beginning with the 15th century. Following concerns and opposition from the historians, the College Board pushed it further back, beginning the AP World History: Modern curriculum at the 13th century. This is the first time the modern era of history had been pushed so far back in history.

As most of you might have been aware, College Board is also conducting a survey on the AP website to find out about interest in a

second AP World History: Ancient Exam. While it is important that the survey needs to be sent to educators and academics, the fact that the College Board chose not to send it to concerned educators, but to conduct a limited survey on its own website, indicates its half-hearted efforts. The survey needs to be completed by schools to indicate their interest in offering such a second course, and another form for the colleges to be completed indicating their interest in offering an additional AP credit for such an exam.

I urge the historians gathered here to check the College Board, AP exams website and fill out the form to support offering an additional AP World History: Ancient exam because the subject of historical interest in all aspects of history across all time periods is necessary.

World History as Part of History Education

As Lynn Hunt noted: "World history should be significant not only because so many Americans have come from places other than European countries, but also because as participants in the world we need to understand people who are hardly like us at all...This curiosity about past should apply to the past in general."

World History is important not only to understand human progress, but to understand the varieties of civilizations across the world as well as in our midst. Even though world history had been taught as a major subject only since the 1980s, its importance cannot be overestimated for the globalized world. Micro-histories and regional histories mostly constituted by national histories are important to understand individual civilizations across the world. However, it is also important simultaneously to understand world history as the major history of the world. This is especially true in this 21-century when "globalization" is becoming the norm rather than uncommon. Teaching the grand narrative of the world is not an option: it is a necessity to prepare young minds for the future world.

Friends, I would like to leave on a positive note: Students are still interested in Ancient and Classical History. They enthusiastically take courses and study it. These changes are only recent, the presentist trend is only gradually emerging in the past two decades. It is incumbent on us, the professional historians, to oppose this trend and to protect history—complete history— as a subject of study and to ensure that history in its multiple aspects is taught in K-12 schools and colleges.