

History in Focus

S2 E8 Teaching Historiography + Chilling Affects

Wednesday, April 3, 2024

Conor Howard

Hello, and welcome to episode 2.8 of *History in Focus*, the podcast of the *American Historical Review* for April 2024. I'm Connor Howard, *History in Focus* co-producer. This week we're discussing some of the challenges and strategies for overcoming them which instructors face when teaching history. First, we hear from *History in Focus* co-producer Matt Hermane speaking with Aya Marczyk, Abby Reisman, and Brenda Santos about their article, "Teaching Historiography: Testimony and the Study of the Holocaust." Which is part of the #AHRsyllabus project appearing in the March 2024 issue. In this article, they present an instructional model called historiography-based inquiry, which they are currently testing in high school classrooms. This model is meant to help students interrogate historiography rather than just primary source documents. In their article, they provide an example lesson which revolves around how Holocaust victims' voices contribute to the making of historical narratives about the Holocaust. After that, we hear part of my conversation with Woody Holton a professor of history at the University of South Carolina in which we discuss his upcoming AHR History Lab piece titled "Chilling Affects: Newly Troubled about Triggering, the Far Right Takes Aim at Black History." This article draws upon Professor Holton's experience as a teacher and as an activist rather than his own historical research. In this piece, Professor Holton investigates the causes of and works to identify productive responses to the phenomenon which he terms *fragilism*, or the extreme emotionalization of far-right politics. This article can also be found in the March 2024 issue of the AHR. Here's Matt speaking with Aya, Abby, and Brenda.

Matt Hermane

Maybe I'll just have each of you if you wouldn't mind introducing yourselves.

Aya Marczyk

Okay, sure. My name is Aya Marczyk, I am a curriculum development fellow at the Fortunoff Archive Beinecke Library, also Research Scholar with the MacMillan Center, and my work in history focuses on 20th-century Europe.

Abby Reisman

My name is Abby Reisman. I'm an Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, and my research has been on the teaching and learning of

history, how to design curricular experiences where students engage in inquiry and formulate arguments about the past, and how to support teachers in facilitating those learning experiences.

Matt Hermane

Perfect and Brenda,

Brenda Santos

I'm Director of research-practice partnership at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown. And I'm a former history educator and history teacher educator.

Matt Hermane

Your project, the essay that you have all written for the *American Historical Review's* syllabus project, is teaching around historiography. So where did you come up with the idea for the project?

Aya Marczyk

So the initial way that we came together to do this project is actually you know, exactly in that kind of teaching problem space in the undergraduate history classroom, and then realizing how close some of those dilemmas are to what happens in the high school classrooms. And so this was in the context, I was teaching a seminar on the history of democracy and really trying to get undergraduates, I was teaching in Warsaw, and so had undergraduates from very different backgrounds all over the world. And I was trying to think of ways to bring them into a similar kind of complex thinking space that happens in graduate seminars when people do have a lot of historiographical background. And I started sort of abstracting and trying to stay faithful to the historiography, but still bring some of that conversation some of that landscape into an undergraduate seminar. And that at that point, as I was doing it, I connected with Abby about the work that she was doing with the document-based lesson, and we saw that there were similarities in the kind of dilemma that we were both working with.

Abby Reisman

From the earliest days of history being in the secondary curriculum, educators were interested in somehow capturing the judgment of historians the way they reason. And that's always bumped against what actually happens in classrooms, which is teacher-sent didactic instruction. What all of us, what we share in common is a real commitment to helping students grapple with historical interpretation in ways that historians do, and an assessment that the existing materials are insufficient in doing that, and the sense that one way that they're

insufficient in doing that, even when they do succeed in provoking discussion, or getting students to formulate arguments, is that they don't help students understand where historical arguments come from, that is to say, the historian's context, the historian's perspective, the historian's methodological approaches, and so our effort was to really develop a model that would reveal that process and engage students.

Brenda Santos

So Aya and I worked with a teacher recently who did an informal pilot of one of our modules and I worked with this teacher on some other projects as well. And he's very interested in bringing historiography to his classroom. And in my work with him had said repeatedly, you know that there's this gap between what is happening in high school classrooms and what happens when you're in college and studying history in college. And he challenged me on that he said he had just completed a master's program. And he said that he really didn't do a lot of historiography in his in his undergraduate and that it wasn't until he had gone to the master's program that he had learned historiography himself. So like Abby, a lot of my work is with pre-service teacher candidates as well, in addition to in-service teachers, and there's a clear implication there as well for how teachers are coming to the classroom and their own understanding of historical practice, historical thinking, and historiography. And there's a place for this work among history undergraduates too, who are, many of whom will become our history teachers.

Matt Hermans

So the whole idea is that your teaching around historiographically informed questions, maybe we could kind of just talk about what an example of some historiographically informed questions would look like.

Brenda Santos

So, in the article, we try to bring our readers into some of the dilemmas that we've grappled with as we've developed this project, and one of them is how to formulate a question for historiographic inquiry. We're trying to think about how to engage them with secondary sources, historians' arguments, and think about the discourse itself, right? We really are continuing to think about this question of what's the entry point for students, what question is most pedagogically helpful to students? So in some of our modules, we do present students with a historical question, and ask them to look at different historians' interpretations of that history, and to think about how and why those interpretations differ. In other cases, we've thought about asking a more directly methodological or epistemological question. And that's what you see in the, in the materials that are published with the AHR article.

Matt Hermane

So say, I'm a student who's receiving one of these modules, I walk into the classroom, I guess, and sit down in my history class, what exactly am I getting?

Aya Marczyk

I think the first caveat is that we want to invite a lot of teacher choice in how the lesson actually looks in the classroom. So it will look different depending on you know, the context, the specific classroom. One of the questions at first is first to teachers to represent the structure of a debate. Right, every historiographical debate, you know, there's, there's probably some typology, there are historic graphical debates that begin with some traditional interpretation, and then you have revisions that come you know, years later, or decades later. Those revisions may lead to some kind of resolution and new consensus, or they may not, right? You may have simultaneous debates that span disciplinary boundaries, such as you had in 89 when communism collapsed. So we try to represent through this process we call "historiographical signposts," a sort of a brief essay, specifically for teachers and teaching, where we show chronologically the major turning points, some of the major arguments and people who participated, but really short form, focusing on how these changes writ large have evolved over time. Sometimes with that, we also try to create these argument maps to sort of map out either chronologically or conceptually, analytically, what the main arguments are. And by that, we mean, you know, just statements like this main argument with these sub-claims proposed by these two different whether it's schools or people, or vice versa, a chronological kind of map where you have events on one side historical events, and then historiography, the developments and trends and historiography on the other. But some kind of relatively quick visual to understand that we're in a landscape and the landscape is evolving complex, but there are some directions that are discernible. So that we leave for teachers to decide, is this something that a teacher may use just by themselves? Or is it something they will share with students in different ways?

Brenda Santos

So you'll get some documents, and you'll engage in several rounds of reading and discussion with your class over the course of several days. You'll start with a pretty deep look at who the authors are and at both the historical context in which they're writing, their own time and place and circumstances but you'll also be looking at their historiographic context, you know, what, what conversation are they writing within. You'll be reading about their approaches to research their methodological and epistemological approaches. And you'll be thinking about who these authors are and what kinds of perspectives and methods they're bringing to their inquiry.

Matt Hermane

Are students engaging with primary sources at all or are they simply getting it through the historiographical debate surrounding the sources?

Abby Reisman

So yes, they're going to engage with primary sources. But here's the thing, what we're trying to do is kind of pull back the starting place and say, okay, here's a question, we're not going to have them identify the question. "Hey, kids, here's a question that's actually been explored, different historians have come up with different things. Here are two dominant ways that people have interpreted this question or responded to this question, and let's even look at how they interpret primary sources to arrive at that larger argument." So we get there, but the primary source is the third of three layers, right? So that's really how I see it is this layered approach to kind of revealing and making transparent what anyone today would just call historical thinking, we still do the historical thinking, these kids are very much engaged in historical thinking. But what they're watching is how others have engaged in that historical thinking and how it's yielded a different interpretation.

Matt Hermane

Based on the trials you've done, what is the reception you're getting from both students and teachers?

Abby Reisman

They love it. We've done, we've presented on this quite a few times now, both at AHA and at the National Council for the Social Studies, it's been received really well by folks who want to teach history well.

Brenda Santos

One of the things we hear from teachers quite a bit is that they were struggling to some extent with procedural instruction when working with primary sources, and that teaching students historiography has helped to infuse some significance and meaning into the work with primary sources. So we hear from teachers that it has helped to increase the rigor in their rooms for it to engage students more thoughtfully in historical discourse. But also to make it more real, and, you know, close the gap between what's happening in school history, and what happens, you know, in the discipline, where history is written and rewritten,

Aya Marczyk

The thing that I've heard repeatedly is this dilemma that teachers often have when they move from this kind of content or narrative-oriented instruction to primary sources, is that it's relatively easy to destabilize dominant narratives, right? Kids learn them, and now we've broken them up, the documents say something else it feels now, what right now, how do we make sense of it? And what this historiography-based approach helps with is to say there are practices that we can engage with certain standards of argumentation and evidence of being transparent to each other how we arrive, you know, as to the best of our human ability, with all the caveats about you know, being transparent, but attempting to follow these rules of how we construct arguments and how we look at other's arguments in good faith and in breaking them apart and putting them back together that helps to create that sense of then for students to move, just working with their opinion about the source and working with some structured space for making strong, compelling arguments and then revising them.

Abby Reisman

I think, in the end, if I were to put my finger on what is the value of historical study? What is the value of engaging students in historical understanding? I think the thing we're grasping for is an understanding of one's own historical constructiveness, one's own historical subjectivity. That we ourselves are historical beings, and the way we understand the world is historically informed. And that's a tall order, for sure. Right. And I think that a lot of what gets sort of distilled into these soundbite history wars, these politicized [...] wars, are really about specifically that, right, of a failure of understanding that our historical interpretations are historically informed and an understanding the project of history itself, right, as one of trying to understand the past through an interpretive lens. And so that's really what we're trying to get at. And I would say that, that engaging in historiography actually allows us to do all of the above, to understand the past and while doing that also understand the present and how our understandings of the past change through time. So it's, it's ambitious. But again, I'm optimistic and I'm excited to work with such fabulous people on trying to figure out how to do it.

Matt Hermane

Okay, then. Well, thank you again for taking the time to talk to me today.

Abby Reisman

All right, cool.

Conor Howard

That was *History in Focus* co-producer Matt Hermane's conversation with Aya Marczyk, Abby Reisman, and Brenda Santos about their article, "Teaching Historiography: Testimony and the

Study of the Holocaust.” Which can be found in the March 2024 issue of the *American Historical Review*. Now, here's my conversation with Woody Holton on his article, "Chilling Affects: Newly Troubled about Triggering, the Far Right Takes Aim at Black History." Also from the March 2024 issue.

In 2024, American society is more divided on a wide range of political and social issues than in nearly any other time in the nation's history. One of the spaces in which this most often manifests itself is the classroom with the debates over bans on both specific books and very broad ideas frequently making their way into the headlines. Recently, I had a chance to speak with Woody Holton, Distinguished Professor of Early American History at the University of South Carolina, about an upcoming AHR piece which reflects on these issues over the past few years. Professor Holton highlights some glimmers of hope that have manifest themselves in his personal experiences as a professor, a parent, and as a citizen of South Carolina.

Woody Holton

My name is Woody Holton, and I teach at the University of South Carolina, and this AHR piece did not arise from my research really at all, it arose from my teaching and from a little bit of unofficial service work I did, which was hard to not do, since my office is only about a half mile from the committee room where a committee was drawing up a bill that in one form would have banned *The 1619 Project*, even in colleges, they got rid of some of that stuff, but they still had a law that was going to be in beautiful books, like biographies of Martin Luther King and Ruby Bridges. And so I felt like I just couldn't let that happen. The year that I was really involved was the spring of 2022. And we succeeded that year, and others. I didn't have as much time in spring of 2023, but other people kept up the fight and succeeded, then two in all of all places, South Carolina.

Conor Howard

Yeah, that's great. Thank you. So I guess I'm kind of interested in this idea of service work. Where do you see that line in terms of your political engagement? Do you think that's something that more academics should do or just as their sort of field and interests allow?

Woody Holton

I certainly think we should. And I was careful when I described it to you as service work to kind of put that in quotation marks because I don't think it's gonna get me out of being on the, you know, the faculty tenure policies. You said, where do you draw the line? I was going to ask you, where should, where can we draw the line? Because certainly, if I was advocating for a Republican or Democratic friend running for Congress then that's not service, that's, you know,

partisan politics, but man, this is our profession is really in danger here. This is a direct threat. And I also should tell you that I'm old, I'm 64. But I have a 15-year-old and a 17-year-old kid. So this is directly relevant, you know, are they going to be in there, reading *The 1619 Project*? And also criticism of it, the AHR did a whole big forum on *The 1619 Project*. And I thought a lot of the people had very cogent criticisms of it, which I think everybody should read. And in fact, when I discussed the book was *The 1619 Project* with my students at the University of South Carolina, I loved how they just went into *The 1619 Project* in a really thoughtful way and into the critics of it. But the problem is, I found the best critics I could, but I obviously didn't find good enough ones. Because every student in that class, there was this one kid, oxford shirt buttoned down collar and the khaki pants and all that stuff. And I go, okay, well, here's gonna be my anti-1619 guy. And sure enough, he laid into one of the criticisms. So I found myself playing the sort of Gordon Wood role. You probably know Gordon Wood who has been a great friend of mine, and somebody I've always admired. Even though I've disagreed with him about a lot of things, he hates *The 1619 Project*, and I had to become Gordon because my students were nearly universal in their support. And actually, after I showed that it's okay to do that, you know, they could find critiques of it too, which of course, is oh, well, I'm not trying to doctrine anybody and onto either side, but to get them to see that most books, not *Mein Kampf*, but most books have strengths and weaknesses and so I'm interested in the pursuit of the line I can we collectively agree on a line. When do we want to tell both sides of the story? I think there's some tough issues. And I tried in my article to deal with some of the tough issues as well. Some things were obvious, like we shouldn't ban *Ruby Bridges Goes to School*, a beautiful little children's book that actually happens to be very positive towards the white teacher who really was an angel to Ruby Bridges. That's obvious. But then some of the other things like one of the issues that came up just as I was putting an article to bed after some great editing from AHR was, you know, these outbursts on campuses where three college presidents went to Congress and said, "oh, well, we only punish actions, not speech," but then that that sounds fine until someone says "okay, how about speech like Um, Israel shouldn't exist or Jewish people shouldn't exist," that's sufficiently beyond the pale. So I did try to raise some of those issues as well.

Conor Howard

What is your goal with this piece? What are you hoping to achieve by putting this out in the world? And I mean, certainly, it's not risk-free to be saying this I would think.

Woody Holton

Well, I certainly hope that it will inspire other professors to recognize, hey, you have, I have all these skills of standing up in front of a crowd, as well as students probably grad students like

you read the AHR more religiously than professors like me. So yeah, Connor, you're sort of a perfect example of my target audience in that you're, you know, you're in Bloomington, but you're also in Indiana and so it wouldn't hurt for you to pop down to Indianapolis once in a while and testify on behalf of your kids. The article opens with a personal note of, you know, I taught for 30 years, never got a complaint. Sometimes parents would call me to complain about grades, but never a complaint about a book on my syllabus. And I, you know, I've tried to assign some controversial stuff over the years, I failed to provoke any of the parents until *The 1619 Project* and then snap, the very first time I did assign *The 1619 Project*, I got a parental complaint, which I was able to take care of, he was a reasonable guy saw that there was going to be opposition essays and so forth. But anyway, my point is, I open it on this personal note of how it affected me. And that's why I felt like I should write about it. And then I closed it by saying, you know, things are looking pretty good. And I use the example of Ron DeSantis, he tried to run for president on a book banning, and, you know, don't say gay platform, and it failed miserably. And I thought that was a real, it made me patriotic to see that fail. And again, I'm not saying that because he's Republican or be the same as they were Democrat or whatever. But to think that "Vote for me I'll ban books," doesn't work in our country, was a really good sign. And I found lots of other good signs, the fact that South Carolina can't seem to pass a book banning bill, they've had two swings at it, and they failed. It made me really patriotic to think that, okay, I totally disagree with some of my neighbors, about lots of issues, but there are some fundamentals we can agree on. And one of those things we can agree on is not banning books, and specifically black history. And that was the part where the consensus was. I think, the harder one, and there were even African American members of this education committee that I sat in on all these hearings with who had real issues with a book called *Gender Queer*, I can't remember the author's name, but we have it and it does have some sexually explicit scenes. It's actually a you know, it's definitely aimed not at elementary school kids, but I think it's fine for high school kids considering what they're all looking at on the internet anyway. I think some of these issues are debatable, like how sexually explicit at what age is, different parents are gonna have different attitudes and I support opt-out. So like most states already have opt-outs, but they've always had it for sex ed, and this is sex ed, and I would support that. But one thing that was surprising to me was that advocacy worked, we were trying to get the House Education Committee to not support this bill, every white member of the committee, which was most of them, did vote for it, it went to the House floor, where just about every white member voted for it. But the Senate was listening and it stopped there. You know, and that is the great advantage of a bicameral system because the governor was ready to sign it. But I do think the activism played a huge role. And so my articles partly about that, about what kind of activism seems to work, what kind seems to not work, but also wanting to raise some of the tougher issues like you know, where do we draw the line on

depicting sexuality? Where do we, do we want to draw a line on parental opt-outs because, you know, we talk about something like trans people, it's the kids whose parents hate trans people who most need to be exposed to trans people are people. I tried to raise some tough issues, but I was also providing what I thought was a little bit of flag-waving as Nikole Hannah-Jones does in her introduction to *The 1619 Project* and say, "Hey, this country ain't all bad."

Conor Howard

As our conversation progressed, Woody and I came to the intersection of race, gender identities, and the partisan politics within the book ban debate. Here too, Professor Holton was able to find a ray of hope for a more inclusive society.

Woody Holton

Acceptance of gay people has come a huge distance in a short time, the country as a whole seems to have made rapid progress on accepting people whose sexualities are different from yours. Not that we're done, but we've made rapid progress much more so than on race. The base that pushes these book bans are the opposite of that, and so I found that intriguing. A silver lining to that was the absolute unity between, you know, NAACP is a civil rights organization founded to advocate for African Americans, but it's advocating as much against banning the anti-gay anti-trans literature. And so I thought it was a very good coalition where nobody was willing to throw the other side overboard or anything like that. At the level of the politicians. It seemed like they were listening to their base. And in the legislation they wrote in South Carolina, they were really going after the gay and the whole LGBTQIA community in a way that didn't go through black history. And I think that's because in South Carolina, after the Mother Emanuel Church, nine people killed back in 2015, I think it was. After that, it's really uncool to be racist and to be openly anti-black racist. So my point is, I think, Columbia, South Carolina, where I'm from, and maybe South Carolina more broadly, has made progress on race. And even if you're still a racist sitting on one of these committees, you're more embarrassed to admit that than you are to go after trans athletes, for instance. And so they were definitely trying to drive a wedge between those two constituencies. I thought the activists on our side were quite united when the other, the activists on the other side were almost offering us a deal. You know, we would throw LGBTQIA people under the bus then they would let Black history through. They didn't quite make it explicit. But that was kind of the devil's bargain that was being offered and nope, nobody took it.

Conor Howard

I do want to definitely talk about this idea you introduce of *fragilism*. Do you wanna talk a little bit about what you mean by that? And maybe what its utility is?

Woody Holton

Yeah, well, here's where I reveal a dirty secret from my closet. And that is that I was a Republican, all the way through high school and a little bit into college. But this is back when the Republicans were the good guys, Lincoln Republicans. But I also remember one of the things that made me proud of being Republican was that we were supposedly the party of reason. And the other side, we're the party of emotion. I remember campaigning for Nixon in 1972, as a 12 year old, sorry. And there was a classic hippie in a Volkswagen Bug, this is who used to drive VW bugs were hippies with, you know, a guy with a pig tail, which was very uncommon in the time. And he and I argued, while we were handing out our flyers, and it really seemed to me that he was all about emotion of "Don't you care about the Vietnamese" and I should have cared about the Vietnamese, but I was cared about communism, you know, rational, rational, calculated calculations, whatever. And so one could get away with being a conservative or a Republican in the old days and think of oneself as the rational one. One of the things I've witnessed is not only the racialization of the Republican Party, which has been so sad to have the party of Lincoln become the party of Trump, but it's also the emotionalization of the party. So many conservatives are not only appealing to feeling that's what talk radio does, that's what people do online is appeal to feeling rather than to cold rational calculation. Obviously, I just stole fragilism the notion of fragilism from white fragility. But it is amazing. And I think everyone's gonna think it's a typo in the headline of my, the title of my piece, because they think "you mean chilling *effects*, don't you?" And I go, no, I mean, chilling *affects*, because it's these affects, these emotions that are driving this whole thing. And of course, it's the great irony because we're the ones who issue trigger warnings before describing sexual violence or racial violence or anything. But I think where fragilism comes from is a real contempt on the part of the far-right leadership. And by leadership, I really mean talk radio, because they're the ones who are leading the whole thing. And, you know, in cable news and all that, although extremely further and further, right, new cable networks. There's a real contempt for their own people, that they think the only way to appeal to their people is through their emotions, not through their reason. And so they have to make these emotional appeals. And then if you keep making, if I keep making emotional appeals to you, sort of simple-minded appeals that any rational person would see through and they keep working, then I'm bound to start seeing you as a person who was governed by their emotions.

Conor Howard

That was my conversation with Woody Holton, of the University of South Carolina on his History Lab article concerning fragilism and the emotionalization of American far-right politics. Earlier we heard from Matt Hermane speaking with Aya Marczyk, Abby Reisman, and Brenda Santos about their article concerning the teaching of historiography and the Holocaust. Both of these articles can be found in the March 2024 issue of the American Historical Review. This has been History in Focus, History in Focus is a production of the American Historical Review, in partnership with the American Historical Association and the University Library at the University of California Santa Cruz. This episode was produced by Daniel Story, Matt Hermane, and me, Connor Howard. Audio engineering and transcription support was by Phoebe Rettberg. You can find out more about this and other episodes at americanhistoricalreview.org. That's all for now. See you again soon.