Who Decides How History Should Be Studied?

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To the Editor:

I commend Professor David A. Bell for his apology on behalf of those historians who embraced his version of “presentism” (“[Two Cheers for Presentism](https://www.chronicle.com/article/two-cheers-for-presentism),” *The Chronicle Review,* August 23). The term “presentism,” like any other contestable term, is polysemic. Professor Bell uses it as a descriptive term to mean that “most historians would nonetheless agree that, inescapably, they write from a present-day perspective.” In so doing, he seems to argue against Professor James Sweet’s critique of historians who claim to do history that matters. He writes, “If we don’t read the past through the prism of contemporary social justice issues — race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, capitalism — [are we doing history that matters?](https://nam10.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.historians.org%2Fpublications-and-directories%2Fperspectives-on-history%2Fseptember-2022%2Fis-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present&data=05%7C01%7CDavid.Wescott%40chronicle.com%7C023742db5c434c78f96908da8856b20d%7Cd6ac7fd16f2446a49996bfcc1b587137%7C0%7C0%7C637972203201199839%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=hmln1W8YZkIpLDjADioLTiqGhLxGUiBDLrOQrvkchQg%3D&reserved=0) For presentist historians and other scholars the issue is not so much about history or truth but about what should matter in history. The latter is a controversial value judgment beyond the realm of historical research that one needs to argue for rather than accepting as true.

The claim that historians “write from a present-day perspective” does not entail that the past only matters when interpreted by categories of social justice. The past is a set of amorphous events and people, including their actions and motives. So, historians are free to explore various aspects of it to offer meaningful and compelling interpretations without necessarily privileging one category. The past is richer than we can humanely understand. Hence, it is important that new generations of scholars revise it from different angles and without ideological restrictions.

Also, one needs to explore the role that moral relativism plays in these political rather than historical debates. According to Professor Bell, “If we believe in our own moral values, then we have to believe that they apply always and everywhere.” Thus, he evidently rejects moral relativism. However, the fact that I believe in my moral values does not imply that these are correct, right, or morally worthy. Or that moral relativism is false. Scholars who privilege social justice above any other category could be mistaken in their beliefs and arguments, be they about the present or about the past.

Our values collide with one another. If so, the concept of moral values, like the concept of what-matters, is controversial. If presentist historians were to argue that we ought to interpret the past based only on present-day social-justice categories, they seem to assume that that there is a group of scholars, namely themselves, with sufficient knowledge, expertise, and high moral ground to tell other members of their profession what is truly valuable or what truly matters in history. But one can justifiably argue that the existence of such a group is debatable. Therefore, to assume its existence is just unwarranted or simply false.

Those who embrace the above reductio are adopting a one-sided view of historical research that is suspect. The issue is not about rejecting moral relativism, as Professor Bell assumes, or adopting presentism to understand the past, as Professor Sweet argues against, but rather about whether we have reason to believe that there is a group with knowledge, expertise, and high moral ground who has the right to pontificate to the rest of the profession on how and what categories they ought to focus on their historical research. If we were to accept the existence of such a pontifical group, we would be defending a one-sided and thereby impoverished conception of historical research and of culture. So, the conversation continues.

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