

COMMENTS READ AT THE START OF CLASS
HIST 401
[Date Deleted to Protect the Guilty]

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I am preparing this document because I don't want to be misquoted (and of course you are understandably going to talk about this outside of class). Please do not interrupt me until I have completed this statement. Following these comments, there will be plenty of opportunity for response and discussion.

I found a few comments at the last class session disturbing. Ironically, two of those who made the comments are among the students I hold in highest regard. Thus my remarks are about the comments and not about the students who made them. I don't know if the statements at issue represent generally shared sentiments in the class as a whole, but they need to be addressed because they get at the heart of the distinction between the scholarly profession of History and a general interest in the past as a leisure pass-time. There is nothing wrong with the latter, but it is not the focus of advanced study in the discipline of History. I have a great interest in the opera, and know many arias by heart. As much as that enriches my life, I do not expect that to be sufficient to carry me through an advanced degree program in music, and one should not expect an interest in the past to be sufficient for a graduate program in history.

You have entered, or are contemplating entering, a program of graduate study in the discipline. The current Northeastern Illinois University Academic Catalog states the general nature and purpose of graduate programs: ***Northeastern Illinois University, through its Graduate College and faculty, provides the resources, the facilities and the academic environment to advance learning, to foster creativity, and to nurture intellectual independence in graduate education. Graduate students pursue advanced studies and join faculty in extending knowledge through research and scholarly activities.***

This general policy is specifically embodied in the following statement from the department's graduate studies brochure and home page: ***The Department of History aims to provide all graduate students with (1) an understanding of history as a mode of inquiry; (2) an in-depth exposure to at least two different historical fields; (3) a grounding in historical research methods; and (4) an introduction to the art of***

historical interpretation. This program is designed to serve all who desire a more sophisticated understanding of history.

I assume that all who enter, or seek to enter, graduate education at this institution accept the terms under which we offer participation in advanced learning. Therefore, I was surprised and disappointed to hear comments complaining about the minutia of materials, the concentration on analysis rather than narrative, the tendency of some scholars to write for other scholars and not for a general audience, the unfamiliarity of some of the topics and authors discussed in class, and the relative difficulty of the material.

In order to leave adequate time for responses and discussion, as well as for the scheduled topic this evening (and these comments are not a bad lead-in to that topic), I will make my remarks concerning these comments brief.

1. On the matter of the “frivolous minutia” involved in historical research:

"Minutia" and "frivolous" were used by several students as if they were synonymous. In what way can historical investigation be done without entering into the minutia of the evidence available? One must answer this question satisfactorily before legitimately articulating a complaint about the minutia to which one is exposed as an advanced student of history or dismissing it as “frivolous.” In addition one really must distinguish between the minutia involved in doing the research and the significance of the question, which drives the research.

One of you used the word “trivial” as a synonym for “frivolous.” Students in a university, particularly in the discipline of History, should know the difference. The latter word most likely is derived from the Latin *trivium* which referred to the lower division subjects in the Medieval university curriculum: grammar, rhetoric, and logic. The upper division subjects, or *quadrivium*, consisted of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. Together they comprised the "Seven Arts." "Trivial," therefore, refers to those matters which are elementary or foundational, but not unimportant. At some point one wishes to push beyond the trivial and concentrate on the quadrivium, but one never wishes to lose touch with the trivial.

In the above, I have delved into what some might consider minutia. If, however, we were now to enter a discussion of the differences between Medieval and Modern higher education, or a distinction between "elementary" and "unimportant," the conversation would have some

meaning and would not be frivolous. The information on "trivial," "trivium," and "quadrivium" may be elementary to such a discussion, and therefore trivial, but hardly unimportant or frivolous.

In class, I gave an example of the sort of research and reasoning process which unavoidably plunges us into minutia. One member of the class repeated the oft-cited bit of "common knowledge" that JFK's candidacy for president received widespread opposition because he was a Roman Catholic. "Common knowledge" is the enemy of verifiable information. The "general knowledge" that the candidacy of JFK was widely opposed because he was a Roman Catholic contains an assertion that implies quantitative information, and begs for definitions. I replied that it is certain that a dozen or so people thus spoke out. I raised the question: does a dozen or so satisfy the criterion of "widely opposed?" I then posed a similar problem with the election of 1928. I reported the results of a precinct by precinct study, necessarily involving immersion in minutia, which raises serious question about the facile claim that Al Smith was defeated because he was a Roman Catholic.

2. On the matter of the concentration on analysis rather than narrative:

In the previous example I also presented a verbal analysis of factors one would have to consider in order to assess the validity of those facile generalizations we often call "common knowledge." Indeed, one of the tasks of scholars in general, including historians, is to challenge unsupported generalizations, and to do so using both exhaustive information ("minutia") and rigorous logic (analysis). If we do not do this, there is no need to enter into graduate study. Just listen to the words of Uncle Walt, or visit the local neighborhood tap.

The only legitimate question here is whether the minutia and the rigor are being served to address an important question. Alas, not one student posited such a consideration.

3. On the matter of scholars who write for other scholars and not for a general audience:

As I mentioned in class, out of the tens of thousands of professional historians in the nation, there are some who write for other scholars, some who write for a general audience, some who write for both, and some who don't write at all. My guess is that what was behind the complaint was exposure to material that the complainer really didn't want to read, and that

guess was further corroborated when I was finally able to get the student to address the real concern.

What astounds me is that anyone embarking on advanced study would not expect to read materials written primarily for scholars. I invite you all to re-think what graduate education is about. If it is a matter of granting advanced status to a vague discussion of common knowledge rather than a rigorous and well grounded inquiry into the action, behavior and thought of our species in time dimension, then conversations with Uncle Walt and visits to the neighborhood tap are indicated.

4. On the matter of the unfamiliarity of some of the topics and authors:

I throw my hands in the air and wonder if the student expects that she or he will go through a course of study for an advanced degree and not encounter topics and authors previously unknown. I really need to have someone explain to me why the complaint is not completely out of place in a graduate program.

5. On the matter of the relative difficulty of the material:

Simply change the words a bit in the previous remark, and apply it to this complaint. I again invite students to contemplate the nature of graduate education.

6. One additional remark concerning "Who the hell cares about. . .?":

This probably shocked me more than anything else said in class last week. The complete dismissal of an area as irrelevant simply because one has no immediate interest in it is something one might expect from a reader of *People* magazine or a viewer of "Days of Our Lives," but certainly not from someone pursuing an advanced degree.

There is probably a good deal of frustration, anxiety, and fear behind these comments. Doing honest and rigorous graduate work is not the easiest thing in the world, and grasping what scholarship is about takes some time and effort. I am not concerned about the difficulty you may be having grasping this material. That is to be expected early in the process. I am, however, concerned about an apparent unwillingness on the part of some of the students to attempt to engage historical reading and writing at a deeper and more sophisticated level. Apparently, some have not bothered to think about the significance of the following from the syllabus:

. . .the emphasis is not on the subject matter of the authors assigned, but on the intellectual activities apparent in their work . . .Most of the reading assignments provide examples of the way in which historians have conceptualized their specific tasks and hints about how each of them conceptualize the historical enterprise generally.

The complaints have all dealt with substantive rather than conceptual issues, and the conceptual issues are clearly the focus of this course. The outbursts in class indicate that few have read the following: **. . .If you find that you are not grasping the relationship between the lecture/discussion and the readings, see the professor as soon as possible.** No one has come to see me about this, but I have instead encountered "acting-out" questions in class.

How to make sense of this? What I perceive is a resistance to graduate education, as clearly defined by the catalog and the departmental brochure. I hope I am wrong. Even if I am not, perhaps resistance is the way some are dealing with frustration, anxiety and fear in the face of unfamiliar material and a requirement for far more rigorous thinking than you were called upon to exercise as undergraduates. I am opening up the floor for an honest discussion of the issues that emerge from the comments made last week and my remarks in reply. I do think the air needs to be cleared.