

*History and its Critical Applications:
Reflections on a Pedagogical Approach*

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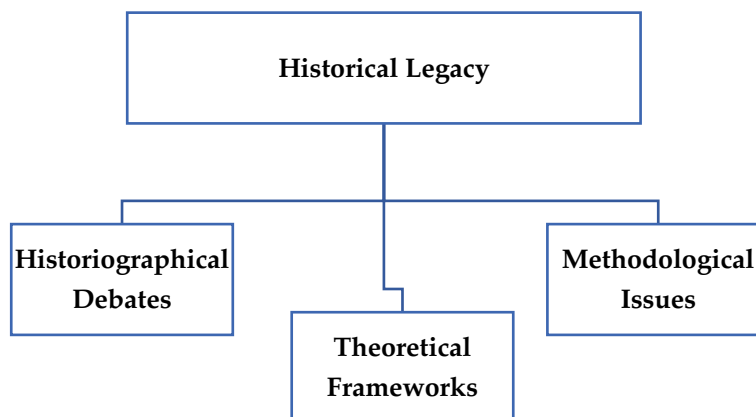
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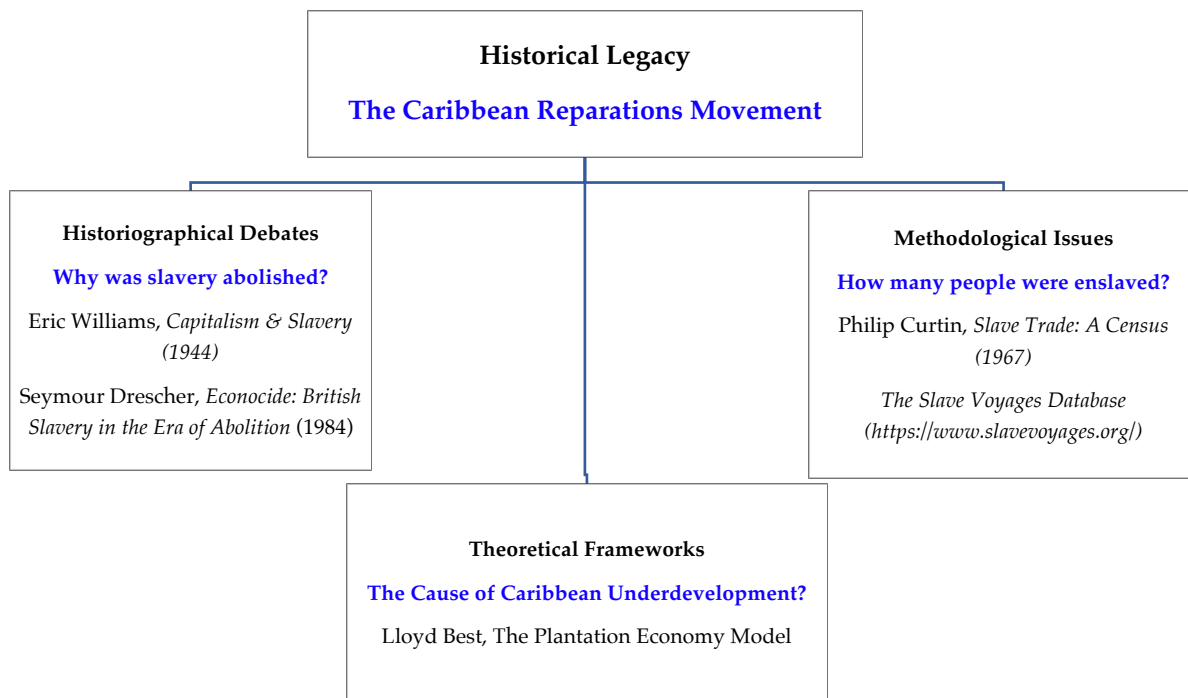
Most of the students who enroll in the first year World History course at my university are *not* history majors. The World History course I will be teaching in September, for example, has 6 *history majors* out of the 100 students who are currently enrolled. Students in Public Affairs and Policy Management are the largest group and account for 34 students. Other students are majoring in Communication and Media Studies, International Relations, Human Rights and Social Justice among a list of other specializations. How should I be teaching World History when the course enrollment includes 94 students who are *not* history majors?? Should my pedagogical objectives be any different from a course in which I will be teaching 100 history majors?

It is my belief that in some ways our obligations to *non*-history majors are even more burdensome than those we have to students who have declared history as a major. The latter group will continue their studies in the discipline of history and enroll in numerous history courses throughout the duration of their program. For the *94 other students* I will be teaching in September, however, World History may very well be the *only* history course they take as an undergraduate student. Hence, I will have approximately twelve weeks to convince them about the importance of historically informed thinking as they aspire to launch careers in public policy, journalism, law, and international relations.

As historians, it is not uncommon for us to find ourselves defending the importance of our discipline to specialists of other fields. This might include either our students or our colleagues. In both my research and teaching, I have decided to stop playing defense and start playing offense (forgive the sports metaphor). Instead of trying to defend the value of history, I have decided to show the problematic ways in which history is *applied* in other disciplines and arenas. In the classroom, this means covering content very differently. I resist the temptation to focus on following a strictly chronological narrative form that exposes students to historical interpretations of the past. Instead, the primary objective I set for myself in my course is to make a very clear link between the 21st century world in which my students live and the historical work to which I intend to expose them. It is the organizing principle of the course and the starting point for each lecture. I strive to emphasize the explanatory value of history. A visual representation of how my lectures tend to be organized might look something like this:



If for example, I was to give a lecture on the *Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas* my material might be organized as below:



My lecture *starts* with the selected contemporary issue (reparations), goes on to introduce students to debates in the historical interpretation, the methodological challenges or strategies, and then underscores the relationship between history and theory as it relates to the issue at hand (i.e. Theory should be historically grounded. History can be used to test the limits of a particular theory). In other words, the course is “problem oriented” and it shows students how historical thinking shapes our perception about 21st century issues. My pedagogical goal is *not* limited to helping students accurately imagine the past, but also to showing them how *history shapes their imagination of the present and the future*. It explores the *critical application* of the past so that the aspiring journalists and policy makers in my course will leave with no doubt about the importance of being historically informed.

To be clear, applied history, as it is being used here borrows from John Tosh’s definition and refers to the use of historical knowledge to address contemporary public concerns. As Tosh argues, it stands distinct from public history which produces historical narratives for ‘the public’ and tends to refer to narratives in museums, sites of public commemoration, heritage and other public spaces that evoke memory and shape public historical consciousness. The objective of applied history, however, is to bring the complexities of academic research to matters of public concern.¹ It engages with the discourses produced by the experts in those fields that undertake efforts at ‘social engineering.’

¹ John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), x. Although a number of universities now offer applied history specializations, these programs tend to use the term interchangeably with public history, archival management, or with simply ‘doing history’ – the latter which might include going to the archive or undertaking an oral history project. For example, the University of Waterloo offers a specialization in applied history and the core courses cover traditional archival research as well as historical fiction, digital history and public policy research. Shippensburg University has a Master of Arts Degree in Applied History with ‘Specialized classes in Museum Studies, Historic Preservation, Archives, Oral History, and Local History Research.’ George Mason University also offers a Masters degree with an applied history concentration that prepares students for ‘archival management, museum studies, historic preservation, and historical editing.’ Boise State University offers a Master of Applied Historical Research ‘which prepares students for work in the field of public history.’

The history assignments I develop also reflect the pedagogical objectives of the course. For example, students might be required to write a critical analysis of the historical assumptions imbedded in an op-ed or a policy paper. In my first year World History course, I am less concerned with getting my students to construct narratives in the form of a traditional history essay (although this is useful and has merits) – since so few of them are interested in becoming historians. I am far more interested in getting them to *deconstruct* narratives. The requirements of the assignment stay true to historical methods (primary and secondary research, etc.) and necessitate that students evaluate evidence, have an awareness of chronology, and think both critically and creatively.

They also address another important element of historical literacy which is rarely addressed explicitly - it is the ability to identify historical assumptions that are so carefully embedded in dominant discourses that they seem like 'common sense' and out of reach of critical analysis. Because the aspiring economists, policymakers, and politicians in my classroom will all *apply* particular, sometimes flawed understandings of the past to their analyses of the present and their proposals for the future, I have chosen to develop assignments that require students to *critically* assess the *application* of history in narratives and discourses that are produced outside the domain of historians – domains which are generally concerned with circumstances in the present and formulating proposals for a particular vision of the future.