

Debating Historical Significance

What is significance and why is it important to identify and debate significance criteria?

'Significance' is a key issue in history. Ideas about historical significance help to shape how the past is remembered and represented and influence who gets remembered and who gets forgotten and who and what gets included in history books, commemorated on bank notes, in the names of streets and squares, in museum displays, in television programmes, and so on.

Whether something is deemed significant or not and how significant (or insignificant) someone or something is thought to be are all decisions made in the present about the past. Decisions about significance are judgments. Because they are judgments, these decisions rest on criteria – principles used to assess significance. When exploring or debating significance it is a good idea to ask two questions:

- What criteria are being used to judge significance and are these criteria appropriate?
- How have the criteria been applied and have they been applied in a defensible way?

Consider banknotes, for example. What kinds of people are represented? What assumptions about importance (significance criteria) have been used by the Bank of England when deciding who to put on the notes? Do you agree with these criteria? Should other criteria be applied?

Sometimes criteria for significance are made explicit. For example, UNESCO has a list of 'World Heritage Sites' and getting on the list is important in securing the status and long term preservation of sites. You can find a list of these sites here - <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/> - and you can see the criteria for the inclusion of sites here - <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>.

Whether sites get accepted for this status or not is always controversial and always debatable. Consider this criterion that sites have to meet, for example. A candidate for World Heritage Site status must be shown to:

'to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared'

There are many value judgments here (What is 'unique'? What is 'exceptional'? What is a 'cultural tradition'? (and so on)). These are always going to be contentious issues. A list of UK sites can be found here - <http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/gb>. What do these have in common? What value judgments does this list embody? Why are there no pubs or prisons on the list (and is that a good thing)?

What are some useful criteria for historical significance?

Because criteria involve judgments of value they involve highly contentious and debatable assumptions – values are, after all, one of the things that human beings tend to argue about the most.

It is possible, nevertheless, to come up with lists of criteria in relatively objective ways. For example, the history education researcher Lis Cercadillo (2006) conducted a comparative study of how young

people in schools in Spain and England evaluated significance and she identified the following criteria, by analysing, summarizing and categorizing student responses.

Cercadillo's criteria (based on Cercadillo, 2006, p.8)

Principle used to evaluate significance	Explanation
Contemporary significance	We can evaluate the significance of an historical figure, event (and so on) by considering the degree to which they were considered significant at the time that they were contemporary (e.g. How important did Victorians think something / someone was?)
Causal significance	We can evaluate the significance of an historical figure, event (and so on) by considering its importance as a cause of subsequent changes (Did an event, person and so on, cause dramatic changes in the world or not?).
Pattern significance	We can evaluate the significance of an historical figure, event (and so on) by asking whether or not it represented a moment when the pattern of the past altered (was 9/11 a dramatic turning point?)
Symbolic significance	We can evaluate the significance of an historical figure, event (and so on) by asking whether or not it represents a milestone in a general course of events (for example, the Sex Discrimination Act, 1975 might be thought significance in indicating how far things had come in the history of gender by that point).
Revelatory significance	We can evaluate the significance of an historical figure, event (and so on) by asking whether or not it tells us something important about the past. Consider, for example, what the Glastonbury Festival might reveal about our contemporary culture to historians of the future? What, to take another example, do Victorian dresses reveal about Victorian assumptions about gender?
Present significance	We can evaluate the significance of an historical figure, event (and so on) by asking how relevant it is to our contemporary concerns now (or in the future). It may be true that something was very important in the past (e.g. it had 'contemporary significance in the 1950s) but it may also be that (frankly!) we don't care about it now. Present significance is not a very historical way of thinking. It is a way in which we frequently think, however.

Cercadillo's criteria are interesting. When reading an account of someone thought to be significant it is worth considering 'are any of these criteria being applied by the author?'. When making your own assessments of significance the criteria can perhaps help – you could ask yourself which criteria am I using and are there criteria that I haven't considered.

A list of criteria doesn't help solve the significance question but it can help clarify matters when you debate the issue. But why is it that, even with criteria, historians disagree about significance? For example, AJP Taylor cited amongst the causes of the First World War the timetables for military mobilisation. Other historians have ignored this altogether. Why?

The fact is that values are things that mean different things to different people. Ultimately, this then colours our perspectives, resulting in different historians viewing the same questions about the same period in different ways.

'At the heart of history, there are sentiments' wrote the French historian Lucien Febvre. Although history is about facts, and we use reasonable criteria to form and justify our arguments, it is about our reaction to the past, and the reactions of people in the past to the events they lived through. So although Cercadillo's criteria are useful as a way of gauging historical significance, they should NOT be used as boxes to be ticked off. History is anything but a tick-box questionnaire. What these criteria should be used as is an aid to answering the ultimate question: Why is this significant, and why do I feel that it is significant?

The only way to answer the significance question is by knowing what you think about a topic, and what you feel about it.

References

Cercadillo, L. (2006) 'Maybe they haven't decided yet what is right': English and Spanish perspectives on teaching historical significance. *Teaching History*, 125, pp.6-9.