

Beware of the “I-word”

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What is the most offensive word in the historian’s vocabulary? The word I have in mind numbs critical thinking, saps the desire to become an active citizen, and erases all remorse about dark and tragic chapters of history—in our history and that of any other nation.

The word is “inevitable.”

And we can add synonyms: inexorable, unstoppable, unavoidable, inescapable.

We may properly speak of the sun rising and setting inevitably and that death is inevitable. But to say that history happens inevitably is dangerous. The concept of historical inevitability is as old as the tales told by conquerors; it is a winner’s argument. Those who are on the losing side of historical developments do not bend to the idea that major events and long-range phenomena happen inevitably. Would an African historian argue that the four-century Atlantic slave trade was inevitable? Try telling Jewish historians that the Holocaust was inevitable. What woman’s historian would propose that men subordinated and exploited women because the biological differences between men and women made women’s inequality inevitable?

A half-century ago Isaiah Berlin, a philosopher in England, laid bare the dangers and origins of the concept of historical inevitability. The view arose in the 19th century as formed in the minds of history’s winners, that “the behavior of men is... what it is by factors largely beyond the control of individuals.” Thus our history has been speckled with terms such as “the march of events,” the “spirit of the age,” “the laws of history,” “manifest destiny,” the “tide of human affairs”—all phrases connoting the irresistible rhythms of human life, the guiding hand of a cosmic force, the unswervable forces that dictate the way humans act, individually and collectively. In short, history happens because of impersonal or super-personal forces. [Ira Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London, 1954), 7, 20]

Berlin goes farther. He shows that if we accept the notion of historical inevitability, we buy into the idea that “the individual’s freedom of choice is ultimately an illusion.” Take one example. If we say that Indian-white relations represented a clash between primitive and advanced societies that inevitably brought about genocide and dispossession of native lands, we have provided an explanation that the “weight of responsibility... is transferred to the broad backs of... vast impersonal forces—institutions, or historical trends—better made to bear such burdens than a feeble, thinking, reed-like man.” [Berlin, 7]

Berlin was not thinking about this example. But it fits his general argument about the way arguments of historical inevitability turn out to be rationalizations of the

powerful. “No sooner do we acquire adequate ‘natural’ or ‘metaphysical’ insight into the ‘inexorable’ or ‘inevitable’ parts played by all things animate and inanimate in the cosmic process, than we are freed from the sense of personal endeavor. Our sense of guilt and of sin, our pangs of remorse and self-condemnation are automatically dissolved; the tension, the fear of failure and frustration disappear as we become aware of the elements of a larger ‘organic and whole’ of which we are variously described as limbs or elements.” [Berlin, 20]

In reading this essay, it may occur to you by now that the idea that history happens inevitably undermines what you are accustomed to telling students: “you can make a difference;” or “in a democracy, everyone has a chance to make their dream come true;” “you can be an army of one,” or “work hard and you’ll make something of yourself.” If our rendering of history suggests that things happened inexorably, then what happens to the notion that a democracy depends on an active citizenry? Why be an engaged citizen—voting, debating, working in the community—if history has us by the throat and we can’t do anything to shape the future?

Keep your eye out for the word “inevitable” (and its synonyms) in the books you assign for student reading. And alert your students when they spot the I-word, they are reading a justification for what happened rather than a critique of how the history *might* have happened differently. This is bad history, and it is a disincentive for thinking about the lessons of the past as a guide to how an energized citizenry in a democracy can create “a more perfect union.”