

Why Study History - LTE *Bisbee Gazette* (August 24, 1988)

People sometimes ask, “Why study history?”

In this election year, the following excerpt from a nineteenth-century essay may be instructive.

*. . . . The electors did not know how to elect. The representatives did not know how to deliberate. . . . Their debates consisted of endless successions of trashy pamphlets, all beginning with something about the original compact of society, man in the hunting state, and other such foolery. They sometimes diversified and enlivened these long readings by a little rioting. They bawled; they hooted; they shook their fists. They kept no order among themselves. They were insulted with impunity by the crowd. . . . They gave long and solemn consideration to trifles. They hurried through the most important resolutions with fearful expedition. They wasted months in quibbling about the words of that false and childish Declaration of Rights on which they professed to found their new constitution, and which was at irreconcilable variance with every clause of that constitution. They annihilated in a single night privileges, many of which partook of the nature of property, and ought therefore to have been most delicately handled.*

*They are called the Constituent Assembly. Never was a name less appropriate. They were not constituent, but the very reverse of constituent. They constituted nothing that stood or that deserved to last. They had not, and they could not possibly have, the information or the habits of mind which are necessary for the framing of that most exquisite of all machines—a government. The metaphysical cant with which they prefaced their constitution has long been the scoff of all parties. . . . They were great only in the work of destruction. . . . They were utterly incompetent to perform any work which required a discriminating eye and a skilful hand.*

Sound familiar? It was written in 1832 by the English liberal Thomas Macaulay. The subject of the essay is the 1799 government of France, ten years after the successful revolution of the French middle class in 1789.