Variations on a Theme: A Taxonomy of History Theme Types

**Extrapolation.** Taking a small, single episode or circumstance and viewing it as an ingredient in a larger drama or investing it with a larger meaning.

On May 13, 1958, it may have seemed to many people in the United States that Latin Americans did not like the United States anymore. That afternoon, Vice President Richard Nixon, while on a good will mission to South America, headed a motorcade into Caracas, Venezuela’s capital. When the cars slowed down, onlookers rushed to gather around them. For twelve minutes, the crowd rocked the vehicles, bashed them with sticks and iron bars, spat on the windows, and shouted at the passengers. The U.S. delegates and their Venezuelan escorts feared for their lives and barely escaped. Whatever else this was, most witnesses agreed, it was anti-Americanism, unbridled hostility toward the United States.

**Synthesis.** Finding a revealing pattern in apparently unconnected things or developments.

On the morning of June 28, 1954, while meeting with legislative leaders, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sketched a particularly detailed figure on the bottom of his meeting agenda. It looks remarkably like a self-portrait—a portrait of the artist as a young man. We see the figure from the waist up, his chest bare, his hair close-cropped, his gaze direct. The shoulders are firmly set and the right arm carefully articulated, so muscular that it arises away from the body like a weightlifter about to move into a formal pose or a soldier moving stiffly from attention to “at ease.” Above the naked male figure, Eisenhower wrote “Guatemala” in two places. He traced over the line of one of them as if it were an exercise in a book on penmanship. In the background are three boats. The largest is some kind of gunboat, though a naval officer might be aghast at the crudeness of the drawing and the distinctly unthreatening rendering of the guns. The other vessels have no apparent military significance. Across the masts are carefully scripted, doubly written words: Internal Security.

**Localization.** The opposite of extrapolation. Taking a large international event or force and finding how it manifests itself in smaller, local or personal effects.

Los Alamos was always an anomaly. Hardly anyone was over fifty, and the average age was a mere twenty-five. “We had no invalids, no in-laws, no unemployed, no idle rich and no poor,” wrote Bernice Brode in a memoir. Everyone’s driver’s license had numbers and no name; their address was simply P.O. Box 1663. Surrounded by barbed wire, on the inside Los Alamos was transforming itself into a self-contained community of scientists, sponsored and protected by the U.S. army. Ruth Marshak recalled arriving at Los Alamos and feeling “as if we shut a great door behind us. The world I had known of friends and family would no longer be real to me.”

**Projection.** Finding how a central cause plays out (or failed to play out) in later consequences and effects.

The Taliban did not just slip back across the border in the winter of 2001/2002; they arrived in droves, by bus, taxi, and tractor, on camels and horses, and on foot. As many as ten thousand fighters holed up in Kandahar with their weapons. For many, it was not an escape but a return home—back to the refugee camps in Balochistan where they had been brought up and where their families still lived; back to the madrassas where they had once studied; back to the hospitality of the mosques where they had once prayed. For those with no families to receive them, militants from
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Pakistani extremist groups and the Jamiat-e-Ulema in Pakistan—like benevolent charity workers—welcomed them at the border with blankets, fresh clothes, and envelopes full of money. ISI officials, standing with the Frontier Constabulary guards and customs officials at Chaman, the border crossing into Balochistan province, waved them in. Musharraf was not about to discourage or arrest those Taliban who had been nurtured for two decades by the military. For Pakistan they still represented the future of Afghanistan, and they had to be hidden away until their time came.

**CONTINGENCY. FINDING A CRITICAL TURNING POINT AT WHICH HISTORY COULD (AND MIGHT) HAVE TAKEN AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT COURSE.**

Historians are tempted to overstate the importance of their topics, or their themes. This is why I am now compelled to argue my case. Had Hitler won the Second World War we would be living in a different world. That is not arguable. What is arguable is the crucial importance of 24-28 May 1940, those five days in London. Was that the hinge of fate? What if the Germans had won the air Battle of Britain? What if Hitler had captured Moscow? What if he had won at Stalingrad? What if D-Day had failed? Any of these events could have changed the course of the war. Yet my argument is that Hitler was never closer to his ultimate victory than during those five days in May 1940. This requires explanation—briefly.

**PARADOX. EXPLAINING HOW AN APPARENT CONTRADICTION REVEALS A DEEPER TRUTH.**

They were unlikely partners, the master politician who became president and the eloquent minister who led a revolution. They were suspicious of each other: the president, a rough-talking Texas white man who had lived through a time of rampant racism in the South; the preacher, a southern black visionary who inspired the nation by fighting a nonviolent war.

**EXPRESSION. HOW AN OUTWARD, VISIBLE EVENT OR OCCURRENCE REVEALS HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS OR AN INNER WORLDVIEW.**

When I stand on a patch of earth and wonder about the activity occurring underfoot, I’m not alone. Gardeners are inquisitive by nature; we’re explorers; we like to turn over a log or pull up a plant by the roots to see what’s there. Most of the gardeners I know are, like me, quite interested in earthworms, in the work they do churning the earth and making new dirt. We hold soil in our hands, squeeze it and smell it as if we’re checking a ripe melon, and sift it to see what inhabits it. Ask a gardener about the earthworm population in her garden, and I guarantee she’ll have something to say on the subject.

It seems strange, then, that most scientists before Charles Darwin (1809–82) didn’t consider worms worthy of study. In fact, very little was known about them in the 19th century, when Darwin emerged as a sort of champion of worms, devoting his last book to painstakingly detailed research on their physiology and behavior. *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, Through the Action of Worms, With Observations on Their Habits* was published in 1881. Darwin was an old man when he wrote the book, but the subject had interested him for decades. How could so insignificant a creature as the worm capture the attention of so distinguished a scientist? Darwin knew from an early age that earthworms were capable of far more than most scientists gave them credit for. He recognized, in a way no scientist had before him, that they possessed an ability to bring about gradual geological changes over decades, even centuries. And this notion that the smallest changes could result in enormous outcomes fit perfectly with Darwin’s work on evolution and the origin of species.
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