

### 1.3.1 Studying History Helps Us Appreciate What We Have

To understand why you should study history, let's begin by considering what it's like living in today's world. Imagine you are an adult. Now think about what you must do to satisfy your most basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing and medicine, in a typical American city, in the year 2000 AD<sup>1</sup>. If you are hungry and have money, then you can enter one of many restaurants and enjoy a delicious meal. Or, you can enter one of many grocery stores and choose from hundreds of different food items in colorful packages from all over the world. You don't have to go into the nearest forest to scrounge for edible plants and animals.

If you are cold and shivering, then you can go into your house and either turn up the heat or put on the warm clothes that you bought from a clothing store. You don't have to kill and skin animals for clothes, or rub sticks together for fire, or build your own shelter. If you are hot and sweating, you can turn on the air conditioner, take a cool shower, and either pour yourself a cold drink from the refrigerator or grab an ice-cream bar from the freezer. It's relatively easy today to find protection from extreme weather.

If you are tired, then you can go to sleep in your own bedroom on a soft mattress and fluffy pillow under silky sheets, or perhaps in one of the luxurious hotels nearby. If you are ill, then you can go to your doctor and receive medicine, X-rays, ultra-sounds, brain-scans, surgery, organ transplants, and much more. If you have a problem with your teeth, such as a toothache, you can go to a dentist and get it painlessly fixed with the latest "hi-tech" dentistry equipment.

It's obvious that today's world offers you many things called *conveniences* which make life simple and enjoyable. And if you need money to pay for such conveniences, then you can apply for one of countless jobs, such as babysitter, construction worker, teacher, scientist, architect, brain surgeon, astronaut, president of a company, or perhaps start your own business. If you need extra skills for the kind of job you want, then you can take some courses at a college or other training center.

So far we have only considered a person's most basic needs: food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. What about other needs?

If you need to communicate to someone far away, then you can write a letter, send a fax or email, or chat over the phone or World Wide Web. If you need to travel somewhere, then you can hop on a bicycle, train, car, boat, helicopter, jet, or space ship. Consider all the appliances available now—ovens, microwaves, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, etc.—to help us perform routine tasks faster and without much physical labor.

What about safety? We have the police to protect us from criminals, an army to protect us from foreign invaders, such as foreign terrorists, and all kinds of safety equipment, devices, and gadgets. What if you're just plain bored? You can read a book, watch a movie, listen to music, play a game, surf the Internet, go to a concert, fly to Disneyland or Hawaii, or simply go skateboarding, surfing, water-skiing, snowboarding, sailing, paragliding, and so on.

But all these and countless other benefits of modern life are relatively recent. Most people today tend to take them for granted, as if they were always available. But our ancestors, however, didn't have such benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> AD stands for "anno Domini," which is Latin for "in the year of the Lord," and means "after the year Jesus was born." The alternative is BC, meaning "before Christ." Hence, 2000 AD is 3000 years after 1000 BC. Some modern books use BCE, meaning "before the common era," instead of BC. Likewise, they use CE, which stands for "common era," instead of AD.

Just ten years earlier, 1990 AD, very few people had access to the Internet, and the computers were not nearly as fast and powerful as they are today. One hundred years earlier, 1900 AD, people didn't have computers, cars, television, radio, electric appliances, or electric lights. Jobs were more labor intensive, meaning that they required more muscle than brain. It took weeks to communicate across the ocean, via boat, whereas now it takes less than a second, via satellite. People generally lived in very small houses and spent most of their time doing simple, boring, manual chores, such as cleaning, cooking, washing, etc. If you were seriously ill or injured, your chances of recovering were small. Most people didn't make much money, and there weren't many things to buy at the store. A lot of progress occurred in only a hundred years.

One thousand years earlier, 1000 AD, people in the West had almost no conveniences, not even flush toilets. Few people had books or even knew how to read. It was during a period called the Dark Ages, a period of regression when things had gotten much worse before getting better. Most people, including children, worked hard all day yet barely had enough to eat. Many starved to death. Life was hard, painful, miserable, and short.

Ten thousand years ago, 8000 BC, there were no cities, towns, stores, machines, or books anywhere. A few people were just learning to grow food and tame wild animals, such as goats, sheep, cows, and chickens, for meat, milk, and wool. Most people survived by hunting wild animals and eating whatever fruits, nuts, vegetables, insects, worms, and other food they could find in the wilderness.

And if we keep going back in time to our first ancestors, about 5 million years ago, they had no conveniences whatsoever—no medicine, no tools, no shelter, no clothing, no fire, and no language.

Our earliest human ancestors spent their whole day just trying to find enough food to eat, and often went to sleep hungry. Theirs was a situation much worse than we would be in if we were lost in the wilderness today with no survival equipment. We have plenty of knowledge and skills to help us survive, such as how to find food, make tools, build fires, erect shelters, sew clothes, and communicate to each other. Our early ancestors had virtually nothing; thankfully, they still managed to survive.

All the knowledge and skills we now have, and all the benefits we enjoy today, had accumulated over time as people made new discoveries and improved on old ones. But none of it was guaranteed. There were periods of history where things got worse and much knowledge was lost. And it could happen again if we take things for granted and don't understand what makes progress possible. Studying history provides us with that understanding.