



Episode 88

Where Are Those French Translations When You Really Need Them?

History is flat.

According to Lisa Torte, history is not flat but bunk, the attempt of fabulists to overlay a narrative onto random events. These fabulists are not malicious in their manipulation of past events, they are simply unable to accept random events as random. But that is only one style of historical interpretation, and an old-fashioned one to boot. That is the style of history that honors Dead White European Males because the training of these historians has been in the sequential biographies of those DWEMs. History to these narrativists breaks down into:

- Pre-history, i.e., before records were kept
- Early civilizations, a hodgepodge of rulers like Kings Nebuchadnezzar and Tutankhamen (pronounced, by the way, toot uncommon) who happened to get a little ink, usually biblical, that managed to survive the ravages of time
- Ancient history, including Homer, Socrates, Plato (a student of Socrates, if Soc in fact did exist, otherwise the creator of same), Philip of Macedon, Philip Junior (aka Alexander the Great, or as his wife usually referred to him, the Fairly Decent), Aristotle (teacher of Phil, Jr.), Pericles, Caesar, Octavius, etc., etc., etc., in a messy but relatively straight line through Constantine ("Hey, guys, why don't we move the palace to Istanbul before the barbarians start bringing down the property values?") to Mega Chuck of the HRE (aka Charlemagne)
- The Middle Ages, including no famous rulers other than Mega Chuck that anyone other than specialists can remember but thank God the Arabs -- who had already

invented zero, which one would think would be no big deal ("How much you got?" "None." "Whatdya mean, none?" "I dunno.") but which obviously eluded all those highfalutin Greeks -- had stored the wisdom of all the ancient people, thus allowing for the next phase

- The next phase, the Renaissance, which began when people learned to read Arabic and found out that once upon a time there had been a Greece and a Rome ("Hey, dude, we're not so backwards after all!") and they all started doing everything at once and calling themselves Renaissance Men but today we'd call them unfocussed but at least they finally understood what zero was all about
- The Age of Exploration, which was enabled by Columbo digging up some old Greek numbers that proved he could get to China in three or four days if he went West, young man, combined with Hank the Nav who said, West, Schmest, go east and stay in sight of land and stop off every now and then and conquer a few aboriginals
- The Enlightenment, in which new philosophies were built on the foundations of the old and focussed on the rights of man so that forensicians and American patriots would have something on which to base their arguments
- The Age of Revolution, where first the Americans tried their hand at giving themselves the jobs that had previously only been available to the immediate families of the King and Queen, and then the French had to get into the act, but as usual they put their own little twist on it and added guillotines and culottes and gave Dickens an idea for his least typical novel that everyone has to read first which usually puts them off reading the good stuff like *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend* and then Napoleon took over the territory, which put the kibosh on any further government-toppling for a while
- The Industrial Revolution, which allowed eventually for the musical, "The Pajama Game"
- This war
- That war
- The next war, take your pick, up through
- The Cold War
- And finally, Bill and Monica on the one hand, and Bill and Microsoft on the other, or post-history.

One thing that may not be clearly seen in this time line, which is certainly not meant as complete, or even accurate, is that the last few hundred years fill up a lot more space in the minds of historians than earlier periods. A good reason for this is the invention of the printing press, which spurred more literacy (can you imagine Jack Gutenberg sitting surrounded by a pile of Bibles and thinking to himself, who am I going to sell these things to?) which in turned spurred more recording of events by the literate. We have mere handfuls of documents that tell us about the ancient Egyptians, or the ancient Jews, or the ancient Romans. It is not hard for an interested person to read most of them. But nowadays, we have 1429 tomes on Princess Diana alone. We suffer from information overload. Whether this is good or bad is impossible to determine.

Another problem with the DWEM time line is the E part. The narrative of Western history by definition sticks to the West. Aside from the occasional dropping by for a cup of tea or to allow the invention of the croissant or to send a few Jesuits to martyrdom, the civilizations east of the fertile crescent barely get a nod. How many British monarchs can you name? Pretty good. Now how many Chinese monarchs can you name? Hmmm. Aren't we the chauvinist?

But this is only one brand of history, as we said, the history that tries to make the past into a story, the continuous narrative of great men bringing about great events. As a social science it has its value, but it is not all-inclusive. Nor can any one historiographical system be all-inclusive. Which is why the scholar must be alert to all the nuances of the past, if he or she truly wishes to understand life in earlier times.

The comment, history is flat, with which we began this diatribe, does not refer to narrative DWEM history. It does, instead, refer to the history of daily life. This is the historical study not of great people and great events, but of average people and average events. Forget about the Mega Chucks or the Napoleons of life crowning themselves emperor; what was going on in the house of Jean Deau? What did Jean have for dinner? What did he wear? What did he believe? How did he live his life? Practically speaking, for every Napoleon there were a few million Jeans Deaux, so in terms of sheer numbers the value of the Deaux ought to outweigh the Bonapartes, since what the Deaux were doing was what was really going on in the world at the time. That is the study of this particular brand of historian.

So why is this history flat? Well, it's not completely flat. It is on the slightest of inclines, let us say. That is, for most of history, the following statement is true: one is born into the world of one's parents, which is very much like the world of one's grandparents. In other words, things don't change much.

(Is there any story in this episode? The readers are beginning to grumble that we're at it again...)

Things don't change? Think about it. In fact, think about it as it applies to Charlemagne and Napoleon and the Jeans Deaux. Jean Deau the First is born the same year as Charlemagne. His father is a farmer, a peasant. Jean lives on bread and backyard-grown vegetables, fairly regular chickens, and the occasional slaughtered pig or cow. He believes in Jesus Christ. He never travels more than ten miles from the site of his birth. Jean Deau the Thirtieth, born in the same year as Nappy, is also a farmer and a peasant, living on bread and backyard-grown vegetables, fairly regular chickens, and the occasional slaughtered pig or cow. He too believes in Jesus Christ. He never travels more than ten miles from the site of his birth, which is also the site of JD the First's birth.

Not much has happened in those thousand years to affect the life of the average citizen, has it? And this is true everywhere. In France, in Germany, in Machu Picchu, in Canton, in the Punjab, you name it. Life goes on, and life goes on slowly. Which makes things very convenient for writers of multi-generational stories, because one generation is more

or less like any other.

But then things started changing. If someone were born in 1700 and died in 1800, they would not go to their grave thinking, Oh, the wonders I have seen. There weren't that many. And those that were, didn't affect too many people. But if someone were born in 1800 and died in 1900, the wonders started coming a little more regularly, especially near the end. There was electricity, and factories, and telegraphs and telephones. The worlds of 1700 and 1800 were much more alike than the worlds of 1800 and 1900. But still, 1800 and 1900 weren't all that different. Plunk down an 1800er into 1900 and he'd survive okay. He'd be a little confused occasionally, and he'd see the world as a busier place, but nonetheless it would be a world he would be able to get around in.

And then things changed. Technology happened. Not that there wasn't always technology -- even flint arrowheads are technology -- but the growth of technology became not merely exponential, where previously it had been steady and arithmetic, but it became revolutionarily exponential. Exponentially exponential. A person born in 1900 who will be dying in 2000 will have lived in a world without heavier-than-air flight, without radio, without television, without nuclear bombs. Each of these inventions has, in its way, defined an era, and redefined the world, so much so that in at least one case, an entire generation literally defined itself through one invention: television. The Baby Boom and the birth of commercial television were for all intents and purposes simultaneous. This would be mere coincidence if it were not for the power of television to define and revise the human mind. At the time it seemed merely like a way to see Jack Benny as well as hear him, but we learned soon enough that this cool medium was sucking in its viewers like no Mesmer ever dreamed.

Quick. Find a forty-five-year-old. Whisper into his ear, "Come and listen to my story 'bout a man named Jed." If the forty-five-year-old doesn't respond with, "A poor mountaineer, barely kept his family fed," you have just whispered into the ear of a dead person.

The influence of TV has been profound, not only on Baby Boomers but on their parents and their children and, any day now, their grandchildren. But it was the Baby Boomers, the first generation to grow up with television, that had their consciousnesses formed, at least to some degree, by this power artifact.

A powerful artifact...

Something a generation is born with. Something that has the power to define an age, and separate those born to it from those who are not. A defining artifact, if you will.

Being born to radio was kind of fun, having far-away entertainment brought to your living room. Sort of cool. Almost definitive, but this was also the Great Depression, and anyone raised in the Depression always considers that fact alone their defining issue. ("Pass the peas, Grandpa." "Peas? We didn't have peas during the Depression!") Being

born to television was more than fun, it filled every moment of down time with secret stuff parents had no idea about. Not that kids hadn't always developed all sorts of secret stuff, but never this much of it, with this much hypnotic power. But still, television was ultimately a one-way medium. You sat on the couch, it did the work. Definitive? Yes. Powerful? Yes. Empowering? Well, no. The power was on the other side of the screen.

And then a new generation comes along. Television was invented long before it became popular. The invention that defined the subsequent generation was also invented long before it became popular. Putting aside the Jacquard loom or Charles Babbage, there was Univac, there was "Do not fold, spindle or mutilate," there was IBM, there was "human error," there was an imagined HAL 9000, there was even an R2D2 and 3CPO.

And then there was the PC. The Altair. The Apples I and II. The IBM PC.

MS-DOS.

PARC and the graphical interface. The Macintosh. 1984. Hi!

Windows.

Windows 3.1.

Windows 95.

Windows 98.

The end of Apple.

The I-Mac. All right, maybe not the end of Apple.

The personal computer. A growingly pervasive invention. Every kid born after 1980 can run any program known to man. They learn to manipulate a mouse before they learn to suck a pacifier. It's just the way of the world.

So what?

A computer sitting on the desk is a powerful tool for all sorts of calculations, except that the average person doesn't tend to do all that many calculations. The machine plays some cool games, but an evening of poker or spades with the gang or chess with your best buddy is ultimately more fun unless you're a total dweeb, and there have always been total dweebs even before there were the dweebish tools for them to express themselves. A computer is powerful stuff, but alone, it is limited. A fantastic business tool: Enter this year's sales figures into the spreadsheet.

The computer alone. Great tool. No revolution.

The computer connected? To every other computer in the world? Great tool? That doesn't begin to describe it. Revolution? And then some.

What should we call it?

How about the Internet?

Welcome to the Bahamas.

Computists of the world, unite!

Shavena Puente is a child of his generation, at least as far as the definitive tool of his generation is concerned. He was born the same year as the IBM PC, although the two lived in relative ignorance of one another for quite some time. Shavena's family was far from rich, and the last purchase they were about to make was a home computer. Throughout the 1980s, the idea of a need for home computing was tossed around regularly, but it seemed to interest mostly the sellers of home computers and their coterie of home-computing journalists. The average lower-middle-class family might occasionally feel guilty about their inability to provide bits and bytes to their deprived offspring, but they quickly shook off those feelings when the next rent or car-payment bill arrived. Priorities must be set.

But Shavena was not totally removed from automated calculation. His Catholic school system was regularly exposed to the dire need for school computing by the sellers of school computers and their coterie of school-computing journalists, who in fact were identical to the sellers of home computers and their coterie of home-computing journalists. But unlike the Puentes, whose finances precluded a PC purchase, the somewhat deeper pockets of the Papists allowed for the occasional purchase of the odd Commodore Pet or Apple II. A machine would appear on a corner desk for students to learn arithmetic or reading or for a teacher to automate lesson plans. If anything, the machine became more the tool of the teacher than the students. Granted that the 8 bits of raw computing power was revolutionary as compared to no computing power, it was only a beginning. More power was needed. 16-bit processors. 32-bit processors. From 48K of RAM to a minimum of 32mgs. 128K floppy disks to 4-gigabyte hard drives, CDROMs and DVDs, from Reader Rabbit to Quake. It was quite a trip, long in terms of technology, short in terms of time. But still no overweening need was seen for providing computers to every home or every student.

While Shavena was spending the occasional class period writing 500-word essays in WordPerfect and learning the concept of spell-checking, a combine of U.S. government agencies and universities was creating a concept of interconnected computers to

decentralize critical processing needs. For the government, this provided a safety net for when the Russkis bombed the major cities; if one computer in the network went down, we would simply route our data around it in another direction. For the universities, it allowed a new sort of communication between scholars, combining one-to-one intercourse through an electronic mailing system, and the creation of bulletin boards for the posting of information for downloading from remote locations.

Fast forward.

The safety net becomes a system of millions of computers routing billions of packets of information. E-mail becomes the lingua franca of the entire planet. The bulletin boards transmogrify through the magic of Hypertext Markup Language into the Worldwide Web.

Shavena's first taste of what was happening around him was his introduction to America Online, and specifically, the AOL chat rooms, or instant communication by teenagers among their peers around the country. Adults discovering chat rooms made fast, screaming exits, leaving the corridors clear for their juniors. Shavena would visit the homes of his friends at Mother of Mercy grammar school and log on through their hookups, taking on ad hoc handles like CapJLPic or FetB or whatever was on his mind at the moment. Slowly, steadily, he became hooked on the concept of electronic communication.

At the age of thirteen Shavena entered Veil of Ignorance High School. Shavena had never in his life been accused of being frivolous, and he naturally gravitated to Veil's highly regarded Policy debate team. The idea of strict dedication to an arcane art struck him as samurai-like. He pictured himself as a member of an elite and powerful fraternity. He willingly embraced the endless research, he reveled in the design of unique arguments grafted to the tree of classic rhetoric, he tirelessly drilled himself in the techniques of speed presentation. At Veil Shavena was also allowed free access to computers for as long as the doors of the building were open. Shavena took advantage of this opportunity, and, in a word, he logged on. And he took the handle that had been his nickname since his name had first appeared on a birth certificate.

Haircut@aol.com

Haircut@hotmail.com

Haircut@ibm.net

Haircut @ any service provider he could get his hands on.

And he continued to debate. His original partner as a freshman novice Polician was skinny little Meyer Lanski. Meyer was barely five feet tall and appeared to be about eight years old. Haircut, by contrast, at five-foot-eleven, with a closely shaved head and a

shadow of whiskers and an intense look in his eye, was the classic image of the anarchist. You could imagine him organizing Wobblies in the middle west of America or riding the train to Finland with Lenin or sipping Pernod with the students in 1968 Paris or generally causing serious mischief against The System from whatever platform he chose to preach from. Haircut and Meyer lasted one month. Haircut proved himself one of the best debaters of all time, as far as Seth B. Obomash was concerned, and he matched him with the other freshman he considered to be a potential giant-killer, Tara Petskin.

From that day forward, they never lost. Well, hardly ever.

Tara and Haircut had come up through different grammar schools, so they had never known each other before meeting at Veil. But they had so much in common that they seemed the most natural team imaginable. They were both serious, intense, into it more than anyone else no matter what it was. By the time of their first freshman Christmas vacation, they were a couple. Inseparable.

Until Haircut got his own computer.

Between sophomore and junior year Haircut got a summer job at a shoe store in the Veblen mall. His assignment was to keep the boxes organized in the back room and to help out on the floor when everyone else was busy. His colleagues, two college guys and the owner, an old-timer who had been selling shoes since the invention of feet, had a system. The old-timer inevitably served the matrons who frequented the store, who never seemed to leave empty-handed. He had a way with women's feet. The old-timer handled the men, too, who came in, mumbled something about oxfords, and got out as quickly as possible without their toes being pinched. The two college guys always gravitated to waiting on the teenaged girls who naturally haunted the mall and sometimes bought and sometimes flirted and every time got the two guys to comment one way or another behind their backs about their nubility. This left the children to Haircut. When everyone else was busy, the old-timer massaging the stems of the menopausal, and the two college guys looking up the skirts of the high school girls, Haircut would come out and pretend to know how much a four-year-old's feet would probably grow in the next year, and look how much room there is here at the toes, and for one summer he sent more poorly-fitted shoes out on more immature feet than ever before in the history of Veblen.

And, he made enough money to buy himself a state-of-the-art home computer.

Within three months, Haircut had broken up with Tara and quit the Policy team.

And haircutpuente.com became a registered Internet domain.

Is Bill Gates out to get Haircut Puente?

Is it necessary to have these endless bloviations on the state of the universe quite so often?

Did those old priests really live on a diet of worms?

Combine America's favorite spectator sport with our proclivity for eating too much junk food in our next episode: "Full-figure Skating."