

# --The Tea Party--

History, Myth, Tradition, Meme, Belief



# and Information

This is going to talk about some things you might not have thought of before.

- How history is made
- How history turns into memory
- How memory becomes culture

**And ultimately how all of that impacts information.**

I am not going to tell you **HOW** to think about these things, but I am going to ask you **TO** think about these things.

**Fair enough?**

# History is interesting!

Knowing about how it is made and used is an important part of understanding information.

## Information is

**All the noise, whether it is true or not...**

*in your textbooks*  
*common knowledge*

*discussions on the internet*

*on the news*

*conversations with your neighbor*

People often think about history as if it is static and unchanging:

**“Well, those are the facts!”**

There is nothing more to say.

But all history is in the continuous process of being better understood.

That's how historians spend their days...



**Learning more about exactly what, why, when, and how history actually happened.**

## **Here's why that is hard:**

**After something happens, it is no longer an actual thing.**

**It becomes part of a narrative.**

A narrative is a story we tell *about* the thing that happened.

**It is not the thing, itself!**

A tree falls, but our narrative about the tree falling is never exactly accurate.



“We organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of **narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on...**”

--Jerome Bruner, *The Narrative Construction of Reality*

# Mr. Bruner continues...

“Unlike the constructions generated by logical and scientific procedures that can be weeded out by falsification, **narrative constructions can only achieve ‘verisimilitude’.**”

That is, narratives don't have to **BE** true

only **SEEM** true!

**Facts are bound to reality.  
Narratives are not!**

Which one of these pictures of the  
**Boston Tea Party** is accurate?



It doesn't matter because they are both just imagined  
representations of an event, **and we know that.**

But what about the stories people *told* about the event?

Weren't those stories just representations too?

That is not to say you cannot know the truth!

Or that all history is wrong!

But some interpretations are certainly more supported by the historical record than others.

It is important to recognize that

a quote,

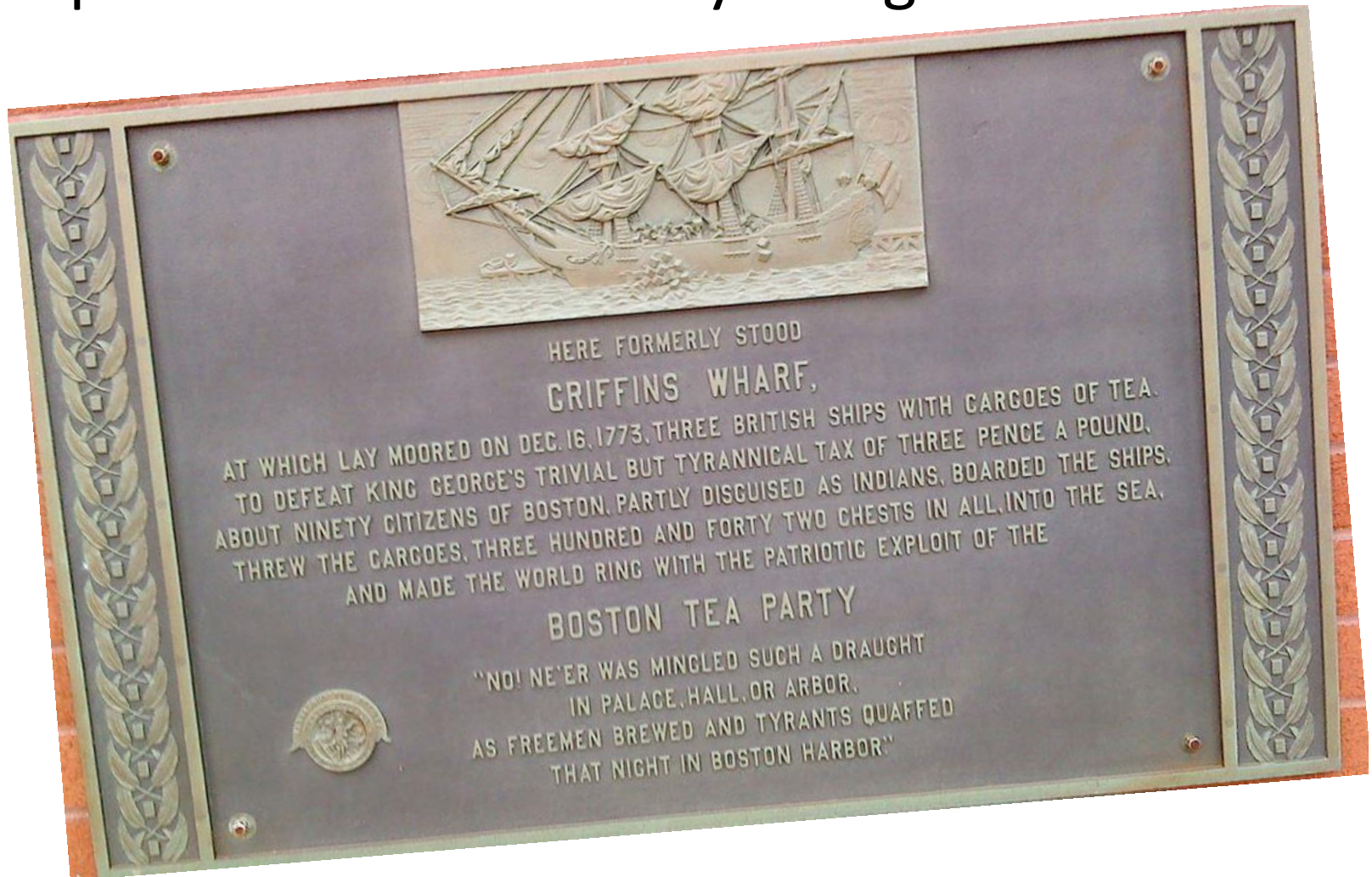
a moment,

or even an entire event

**can and will be taken out of context to  
persuade you of one thing or another.**



What we think of as the Tea Party and how it led to the American Revolution is a lot more complicated than is usually recognized.





# The short version:

- \* tax imposed
- \* colonists dump tea
- \* No taxation without representation
- \* Winter in Valley Forge
- \* Whites of their eyes, (don't shoot until)
- \* Yay! America!

That leaves a lot of stuff out!

And even if you get *some* of the facts right on **WHAT happened**, the details of **HOW** and **WHY** might be more important when trying to use the past to guide the present.

Here is something most short  
versions of American history leave  
out of the story...

**In 1774, the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia.**

They announced their intention neither to import, nor export nor use any good to or from Great Britain, Ireland, or any other British colony unless **six grievances** were addressed.

# The list of grievances:

- 1) a ruinous system of colony administration
- 2) acts of parliament seeking to raise revenue in America
- 3) the deprivation of Americans to trial by jury
- 4) the direction of new and illegal trial beyond the sea
- 5) the passage of cruel and oppressive acts in Boston and Massachusetts Bay
- 6) the extension of the province of Quebec

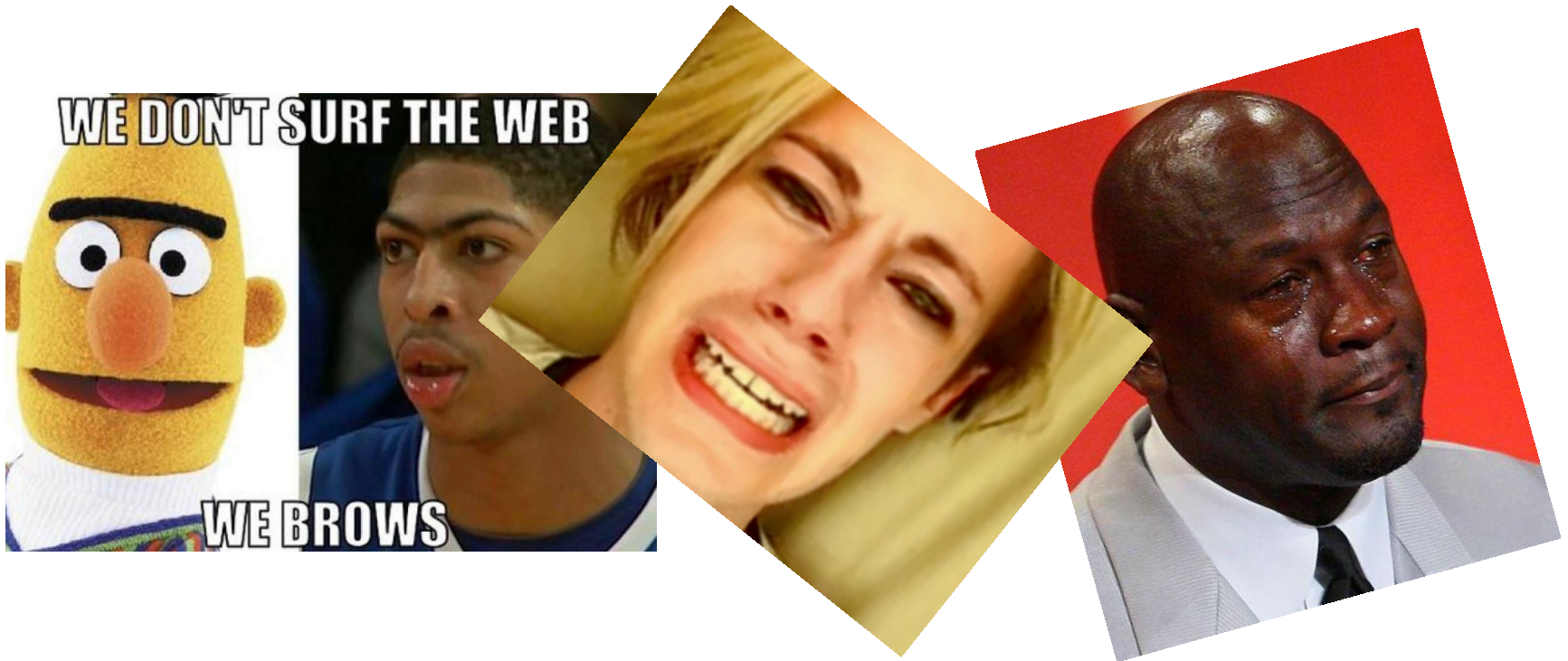
Taxation was on the list, but it wasn't the first thing, and it wasn't the only thing.

But it is typically the only thing we HEAR about when people talk about it.

***But WHY?***

# Richard Dawkins introduced us to the idea of memes back in the 70s.

- **meme:** (noun) an element of a culture or system of behavior that may be considered to be passed from one individual to another by non-genetic means, esp. imitation.



Messages survive only if they are extremely robust or able to adapt to and change with present society...

Kind of like evolution.

Envision information as a living organism.

Trippy, huh?



Tradition and culture spread from person to person, creating beliefs and identities:

the idea that X is the right thing to do,  
that Y is important, and that Z is gauche.

If a message is catchy and truthy,  
it will go far!

**For instance:**

It is easier to say,

**They were mad about taxation!**

than it is to say

It was a complex, philosophical response to long-brewing tensions with British hegemony.

Because everybody hates taxes

and most people don't know

what hegemony means.

Note that only one of these ideas is a central tenet of one of our political parties.



# We're not dumb, but...

History is Full of People Who Have Misused History.

That seems at least  
quasi-ironic, right?

But how do they get away with it?

Since history is all common knowledge or  
available in textbooks, or whatever,

how does bad information get started?

# Welcome to the Twilight Zone!

At the time, the Boston Tea Party was not called the Boston Tea Party. It was called

## ***The Destruction of the Tea***

But the colonists didn't talk about it much for 50-60 years.

And then it entered what is known as the

**twilight zone of memory.**

When private memories fade, and the facts become mythologized.



There are two biographies about George Robert Twelves Hewes, the last surviving guy from the Boston Tea Party, both of which were written in the 1830s **(i.e.: in the twilight zone of living memory!)**

These books are **ALSO the first recorded instances of people calling it the Boston Tea Party**, which was sort of a politically-nice name for the Destruction of the Tea.

50-60 years after the fact means a lot of the private memories have “died” and that the stories become at least a little mythologized. That means what is recorded is

**not *necessarily* true,**  
but based on how things turned out,  
***might as well* be true.**

Mythologizing turned normal men into heroes, turned sometimes random events into precise plans, and summed everything up into a cause-and-effect story with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

In short, **the Destruction of the Tea** had been turned into a narrative so we could talk about it more easily and present the outcome as the product of an ordered series of steps.



This isn't just about history, by the way....

Scholars Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger  
talk about "invented tradition."

# Invented Tradition

Ritualized or symbolic practices that serve to "inculcate certain values and norms of behavior."



This is part of what they say is:

“the conscious process in almost all countries, especially during the 19th century, through which elites and popular movements created rituals, symbols, and texts of a politically usable past.”

The phrase “politically usable past” is as cynical as it sounds.

Rulers must have figured that a community would hold together better if the people had a shared reverence for certain things, a shared vocabulary for talking about ideas, and a shared admiration for symbols that represent those ideas.

Think of the many rituals we have here—

- parades
- holidays
- the air and water show with the Blue Angels
- saying the pledge of allegiance
- and so on...



All of those things serve to tie us to the past  
and make clear

...in an unspoken way...

what we **SHOULD** value if we want to be good  
Americans and decent citizens.

**In other words, they comprise our culture  
and become our beliefs and identities!**

# The impact of all these things on information is inestimable.

History becomes tradition, tradition becomes belief, and all of it becomes culture.

People are so immersed in their culture that they often develop bias blind spots about it.

They may resist new information that seems contrary to what they believe.

Likewise, people informed by different cultures may look at the same situation and have radically different interpretations of it.

People who wish to perpetuate a culture may distort or frame information in a way that reinforces its core values.

And vice-versa.

# Things to think about...

- Our (mis)understanding of history impacts our culture
- Culture can be used to package or frame information
- Culture and tradition impact how people respond to information
- People may be blind to their culture

# Sources Consulted

- Bruner, Jerome. “The Narrative Construction of Reality.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1991, pp. 1–21., doi:10.1086/448619.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Randolph, Peyton. “Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789.” *American Memory*: The Library of Congress, 2000, <http://memory.loc.gov>.
- Williams, William Carlos. *In the American Grain. With an introd. by Horace Gregory*. J. Laughlin, 1956.
- Young, Alfred F. *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution*. Beacon Press, 1999.