

Podcast Review: *Revisionist History*. Written by Malcolm Gladwell. Produced by The Slate Group. 2016.

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“Welcome to *Revisionist History*,” host Malcolm Gladwell greets the listener, “where every week we reexamine something from the past that’s been forgotten or misunderstood.” It’s a good title, and a promising description, but both are curiously at odds with what follows in ten roughly half-hour podcast episodes. In fact, most episodes in the series are not revisionist history in any commonly understood sense of the term; Gladwell doesn’t seek to revise our understanding of established narratives by introducing new historical evidence or theoretical approaches. Rather, *Revisionist History* is an eclectic mixture of stories, most of them engaging, on subjects ranging from artistic genius to college accessibility, from misogyny to automobile accidents. If the series has a common thread, it might be that Gladwell wants us to realize that if we adopt a few social science-ish concepts—moral licensing, capitalization, conceptual innovation, the threshold model of behavior, and so on—we would all be less likely to stumble through life misunderstanding everything we see.

As his career as a best-selling author would attest, Gladwell knows how to package a narrative, and is skilled at making ideas digestible to a wide range of readers (or in this case, listeners). And podcast fans with a natural sense of curiosity about diverse subjects will find much to ponder in *Revisionist History*. The problem, however, is that the narratives are *too* neatly packaged, and the ideas are so digestible as to be oversimplified. *Revisionist History* is seductive and fun, but it’s also full of questionable dichotomies and selectively told stories.

The episode titled “Hallelujah,” which draws its title from the legendary Leonard Cohen song, highlights some of the shortcomings of the series. In “Hallelujah,” Gladwell examines the long and interesting history of the song, along with Elvis Costello’s “Deportee,” a more mature remake of his own 1984 tune “The Deportees Club.” The episode becomes a meditation on artistic genius, or rather types of artistic genius, based on a distinction theorized by the economist David Galenson. Galenson suggests that modern artists fall into one of two categories—conceptual innovators or experimental innovators. The former, like Picasso, work quickly and have clear ideas that they want to articulate, while the latter, like Cezanne, work by trial and error, producing numerous drafts of their work. Gladwell appears to accept this distinction unquestioningly, even going as far as to list familiar geniuses, fitting them neatly into one of the categories. Herman Melville and Orson Welles, we are told, are Picassos, while Mark Twain and Alfred Hitchcock are Cezannes, and so on. Gladwell’s insistence on shoehorning human creativity into this simplified, binary framework is part of the problem. But the host also fails to interrogate the underlying assumptions of the episode. To Gladwell, “genius” is a taken-for-granted category, rather than a highly subjective, gendered social construct.

Superficial analysis continues throughout much of the centerpiece of Gladwell’s podcast series, a three-episode sequence focused on economics, class, wealth, and education. Gladwell here examines the relationship between education and social mobility, sensibly concluding that Americans are not as good at providing opportunity as we think we are. “Food Fight,” the second of the three episodes, has sparked a mini-controversy in the world of liberal arts colleges. At the heart of the episode is Gladwell’s outrage that wealthy colleges seldom do enough to recruit, admit, and support low-income students. On that point, the podcast offers some useful insight. And Gladwell’s indictment of the college amenities “arms race,” whereby well-heeled institutions try to lure students with luxurious creature comforts and dazzling facilities, is fair enough. But the episode’s insistence on gimmicky storytelling descends into absurdity. Gladwell sets up a misleading,

dichotomous opposition between two elite liberal arts colleges: Vassar College, which does an admirable job of welcoming low-income students but serves terrible food in its dining halls, and Bowdoin College, which serves gourmet food but admits too few students from lower-income backgrounds. The problem, perhaps predictably, is that Gladwell insists that these things are intrinsically linked; one can either attend a college that serves delicious food, or one that has an economic conscience. This is transparently nonsense. But what is worse is that Gladwell proceeds to single out Bowdoin for a kind of demonization that it does not deserve.

To make his case, Gladwell cites The New York Times Access Index, which measures the extent to which colleges serve low-income students. The Index uses a score of 1 as average; Vassar's score of 1.36 is indeed well above the average, good enough to earn the school a laudable eighth place. Bowdoin, which Gladwell tells us scandalously wastes its resources serving high-end meals to the bourgeoisie, earns a score of 1.05, placing it fifty-first on the Index (Leonhardt). Bowdoin's score is *above average*. In other words, the school on which Gladwell focuses his indignation does a pretty good job, comparatively speaking, of admitting low-income students—better than most liberal arts colleges. If Gladwell's point were that all wealthy institutions of higher education should do more to combat inequality and to admit students from underserved populations, and that Bowdoin has a good deal of room for improvement, he'd have a point. But a nuanced, contextualized examination of this issue is not what Gladwell is after here. He wants a neatly packaged story that pits fancy food against ethics, featuring a hero and a villain, and thus he implores his listeners “if you're looking at liberal arts colleges, don't go to Bowdoin. Don't let your kids go to Bowdoin. Don't let your friends go to Bowdoin. Don't give money to Bowdoin, or to any other school that serves amazing food in its dining hall.” One imagines that administrators at, say, Oberlin College, which scores 0.77 and ranks eighty-one spots below Bowdoin on the Index, must be wondering how they escaped Gladwell's ire. (But, by extension, the food at Oberlin must surely be sublime).

Like “Food Fight,” another of *Revisionist History's* education episodes, “Carlos Doesn't Remember,” asks hard questions about social mobility and our education system. And once again, up to a point, Gladwell deserves credit. He follows the story of the episode's title character, an academically gifted young man who grows up amid gang violence in the poor Lennox section of Los Angeles. That students like Carlos face often insurmountable obstacles to educational opportunity, Gladwell argues, is evidence of America's lagging level of social mobility or “capitalization rate”—the percentage of people who are able to develop or capitalize on their potential. Fortunately for Carlos, we learn, he has a wealthy patron, a former entertainment lawyer and philanthropist whose organization works to match poor but brilliant young people with excellent schools. Nevertheless, the challenges of Carlos' underprivileged life mean that his story is more complicated than we first expect. In many ways, Gladwell's narration of Carlos's struggle is an important story, well told.

But what borders on disturbing is the story that Gladwell refuses to tell—the story of Carlos's mother. We learn little about the young man's father, other than his absence for much of Carlos's life. And we learn almost nothing concrete about his mother, either. Yet a kind of barely spoken sexist narrative emerges from the episode, whereby Carlos's mother is implicitly to blame for his situation, and directly responsible for denying Carlos a chance to attend Choate, an elite prep school in Connecticut. The clear implication was that his mother was an unfit, selfish parent. The listener has no reason to doubt this. But when Gladwell asks Carlos where his mother is now, the young man replies that she is in prison. Gladwell the narrator, maddeningly, tells the listener that he will “let you use your imagination” as to why she is incarcerated. After going to great lengths to lead the listener to identify with Carlos, who appears a very likable and sympathetic young man, Gladwell willfully elides his mother's story, othering her in the process. Gladwell, who so

generously empathizes with Carlos and the tens of thousands of poor but gifted students like him, shows no empathy for Carlos's mother.

While focusing on Carlos the individual, and Carlos the exceptional student, Gladwell obscures larger stories about class, poverty, and gender. He doesn't address the systemic inequities that created places like Lennox and the oppressive conditions of Carlos's life in the first place. That Carlos is so exceptional, so clearly brilliant, is what Gladwell seems to find heartbreaking about his story. Gladwell makes a point of recognizing that there are countless students like Carlos who will never have the opportunities he has been afforded. But the listener could be forgiven for thinking that Gladwell's larger point is that what ails our educational and economic systems could be solved by more rich lawyers who pluck more exceptional students from their surroundings and place them in elite schools. And of course, such philanthropic work changes real people's real lives, and deserves recognition. But in a nation with the world's highest incarceration rate, in which women are significantly more likely to live in poverty than men, the story of Carlos's mom seems at least worth acknowledging. As a listener, I've used my imagination, as Gladwell suggests, and I imagine a desperate, poor, single mother, and I imagine that our society failed her just as much as it did Carlos. But we don't find out.

Despite his problematic style of storytelling, Gladwell does raise important social issues throughout the various episodes of *Revisionist History*, nearly any of which could be employed in an undergraduate classroom to stimulate lively discussions. The first episode of the series, "The Lady Vanishes," examines both nineteenth and twenty-first century examples of sexism through the lens of "moral licensing," and is well worth a listen. And in a rhetoric or writing course, or perhaps an introductory social science or journalism course, even Gladwell's spirited but often questionable style of argument could serve important pedagogical purposes and generate debate. In the third episode, "The Big Man Can't Shoot," Gladwell entertainingly tells the stories of former NBA stars Wilt Chamberlain and Rick Barry and their contrasting approaches to shooting free-throws, drawing some dubious conclusions along the way. An assignment asking students to listen to the episode with a careful ear, to evaluate Gladwell's conclusions, and to examine his evidence and arguments critically could help them develop important media literacy skills.

One could even argue that Gladwell's misleading discussion of Vassar and Bowdoin has at least sparked conversation about liberal arts colleges and the perpetuation of privilege, which is a positive achievement. While often frustrating, Gladwell's podcast isn't exactly lightweight; each episode offers thought-provoking discussions of interesting and socially relevant topics. But what is disappointing and unsatisfying about *Revisionist History* is that for someone who so clearly loves sociology and economics, Gladwell leaves out a lot of both.

Works Cited

- Gladwell, Malcolm. *Revisionist History*. The Slate Group, 2016, <http://revisionisthistory.com/>. Accessed 1 April 2017.
- Leonhardt, David. "Top Colleges Doing the Most for Low-Income Students--College Access Index." *The New York Times*, 16 September 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/17/upshot/top-colleges-doing-the-most-for-low-income-students.html>.

