

The Pedagogy of Mark Whittow

I first encountered Mark in Michaelmas of my first year as an Undergraduate. At the time I saw myself as a modern economic and political historian. I was taking British History II (1042 -1330), because a medieval paper was required, not because I had any particular interest in medieval history. Mark changed all of that. He passed along his love of medieval and late Antique history, and with it his passion for Byzantium, the Caliphate, Sassanian Persia and more. His teaching changed my conception of myself and what I found interesting.

This conversion was primarily the result of Mark's enthusiasm and his ability to evoke wonder and excitement in the process of historical analysis. Part of this ability was due to the way he ritualised the tutorial itself: the pouring of the coffee and dispensing of biscuits; and his catchphrases, rolled out at every opportunity: ("you pays your money, you takes your choice" and my favourite, his injunction at the end of each tutorial to have a "wild wicked and debauched weekend"). But mostly, it was due to his evident passion for the subject and the act of shared discovery. We were explorers: over the preceding week's reading we had packed our bags, consulted the stars and now at the start of the tutorial we were setting off into the unknown to find an *answer*. As if we could solve mysteries that had baffled generations of academics before us.

Alongside my conversion to the Church of the Amateur Byzantinist, being taught by Mark gave me a set of insights and experiences that have remained relevant.

One insight was to explore any subject in the broadest manner possible. Like most tutors, Mark provided us with a reading list and a selection of related essay questions. And, like many tutors, he expected one student to read their essay out at the start of the tutorial, to act theoretically as the basis for the discussions that were to follow. However, unlike *any* other tutor I encountered, Mark did not let the ensuing conversation be constrained by the choice of essay. A student who failed to attempt the most interesting or complex essay question on the reading list, would have been prudent to have to read around that topic anyway, for that issue is what they would spend most of the tutorial discussing, whether they had prepared it or not.

This happened to me early in my first year. As the tutorial progressed and Mark drew connections between things that had seemed, on the face of it, entirely unrelated, it struck me that, as Mark saw it, all these elements were connected. One could not understand the wood, by only looking at the root of one particular tree. It pays to read around your subject, a lesson I took and have put to good use since.

Although Mark guided the conversation, he rarely telegraphed a transition from one topic to another, expecting you to follow him as he leapt across subjects. He would lean back in his chair, arms crossed and head tilted at an angle and pose a question that seemed *completely* unrelated to the essay you spent hours slaving over. Though deeply frustrating, it was followed by a rush of adrenaline as you recalibrated to assess what Mark was getting at. This first question would be followed by a second and another adrenaline hit as you desperately dredged your memory to find the connection he expected you to make. Usually, something would click and all the pieces of the jigsaw would slot into place. The experience of having been held under the microscope and having to, not merely defend a pre-prepared argument, but construct one on the fly in the face of probing

questioning has been incredibly useful. Ministers and senior civil servants are not usually charitable enough to constrain themselves to carefully pre-prepared topics.

This method is, of course, not for everyone. I observed a few unengaged students refuse to take part in the intellectual dance, sticking to what they had read and written until the music stopped and the tutorial was over. Equally, even if you *were* keen to dance, you might find to your embarrassment that you had missed the specific books on the reading list that would have enabled you to follow Mark's lead. But, more often than not, if you made the effort it was an invigorating experience.

Mark was also demanding in the way he expected you to: weigh the evidence, reach your own conclusions and defend them when challenged. This began with the review of the reading list for the next tutorial. Mark would talk you through the list, highlighting which items were good, which were important and which were, in his words, "a complete hoot". Needless to say, we always read the items in the latter group.

Importantly, Mark always sketched out each author's assumptions and their approach; alerting us to the fact that there was an axe being ground, but not always telling us which axe it was. By highlighting that no text that comes free from assumptions he ensured we were primed to detect every assumption and agenda. At all times two questions, ran through one's consciousness like the words in a stick of rock – "why have they come to this conclusion?" and "do I agree with it?". This constant alertness to authorial agendas has been of constant use to me as a Civil Servant, reading policy papers from charities and thinktanks.

Mark had his own priors, of course, but they did not dominate the conversation. In fact, one of the things that drew me to apply for the Near East in the Age of Justinian and Muhammad Further Subject was the intuition that there would be a genuine exchange and evaluation of ideas. That I would not be chastised for coming to a conclusion other than the one held by my tutor – something I had unfortunately experienced with other tutors the previous year.

In fact, Mark encouraged counter-suggestibility in both Robin Whelan and me – dubbing us "Merton Rottweilers". Partially this was a function of the way he conducted tutorials; where upon being presented with an outlandish argument, Mark would become charged with energy, questioning, probing, dissecting; all the while grinning like a Cheshire cat. It was clear that he truly appreciated any attempt at original thought. This was encouraging, but even more important was his good humour when a shot was taken at him personally. At my MSt viva, Mark introduced the first of my two Extended Essays as a paper that: "politely in words of no more than two syllables explained in no uncertain terms why Mark Whittow was completely and *utterly* wrong." His introduction defused any tension. I had Mark's encouragement to disagree with him as strenuously as I wanted and I took it.

Having covered the reading list, and received permission to disagree with him as vociferously as desired, one came to the essay itself. Mark's essay questions were incredibly broad. So broad, in fact, that he really asked you to define the problem you wanted to answer, and having defined it establish what you didn't know, where the gaps in the evidence were and why they were there. If you could find alternative sources to plug those gaps, you should. Otherwise you were to devise an explanatory framework that united everything into an intellectually pleasing whole. Educated guesses were encouraged, but you could be sure that Mark would laser in on them immediately and

stress-test them. “What would X say in response?” Mark would ask, or “Is there anything else that could have prompted this?”. A Whittow tutorial often involved tussles with four or five separate academics, who deconstructed your arguments from multiple sides, as Mark jumped in and out of their personas to challenge you. Little did I know how well I was being prepared for dealing with the rebuttals, reasoned arguments and howls of anguish from partisan lobby groups. Mostly, Mark was happy to do this interrogating himself, but occasionally he would turn to the other tutee and enlist them with a question like: “surely you can’t agree with this?” I can see how this approach would have been intimidating for some. But being an argumentative soul, I was in heaven.

Mark also encouraged us to be ambitious in which topics we attempted and how we did so; pushing us to see what we could use as evidence and how far we could take it. Geography and chronology were not impassable barriers. Tutorials were littered with references to arguments on everything from Han China to the English Civil War. Mark encouraged us to seek parallels as broadly as possible and to argue by analogy. Again drawing from personal experience: policy professionals are well advised to utilise evidence from other jurisdictions, provided suitable caveats and health warnings are applied. Without exposure to Mark’s methods, I doubt that I would be as ready to scour the globe for examples of best practice as I am today.

Naturally, there were drawbacks. He could encourage us to take a broad view when we weren’t ready for it. I might, under the guidance of a more conventional tutor, have opted not to tackle Byzantine grand strategy over two centuries in a 6,500 word extended essay. I might have written a more focused essay; narrow but deep. However in doing so, I would have been less bold, my horizons would have been more limited. And, of course, it wouldn’t have been a hoot.

(1588)