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Pence teaches, studies the history of Germany

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.
College Talk

“I’m really happy to talk about history because I find it a very exciting thing that helps us to understand the present and figure out how to analyze all the different things around us.” That is the way Dr. Katherine Pence explains why studying history is important beyond the stereotype of being a subject about dates and names.

“It’s good to have few dates in mind so you can figure out causes and effects and what comes before and after a certain date, such as the end of World War II in 1945. The world changed dramatically after that date,” Pence explains. “The most important thing is to figure out how to analyze what was going on in the past in order to deconstruct and figure out how we got to where we are today.”

A native of Oxford, England, she received her bachelor’s degree from Pomona College in California and a master’s and doctorate from the University of Michigan. Today she is an associate professor and department chair in the Department of History of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences in Baruch College.

Pence has specialized in the history of one of the most influential countries in the world: Germany. “I do have German heritage. My ancestors came over in the 19th century, and I studied the German language in both middle school and high school, and I remember certain things, like how people talked about Germany in terms of the Nazi period, how prominent that was in people’s memory,” says Pence.

“When I was in elementary school, there was a little German kid. The others didn’t know how to pronounce his name, and these kids were calling him a Nazi. I just thought it was very interesting to think about. How do you recover as a country from that cataclysmic destruction of democracy?” she says. And that is why she specialized in postwar history.

Instead of looking at the history that most people have heard about, she approached the question by studying how women and other everyday actors experienced big changes in political regimes and events. “What I liked was how history allows you to look at all different kinds of sources, whether it’s literature or statistical data or material objects, and to analyze those historically, which provides us with a lot of fertile ground to understand where we are today.”

One of the topics she studies is how the citizens of the former East Germany adapted to their integration into a unified democratic German state. “They weren’t just pure victims of a regime but also had their own integrity, and they were developing a culture that was somewhat separate from West Germans. They had gained a lot of strength in navigating the structures of both the difficult political situation and also the constraints of a shortage economy, which meant that a lot of things were not available much of the time. They figured out really ingenious ways to work around the limited opportunities they had on the market,” explains Pence.

What makes this process really complicated is the fact that at the same time the Germans, “have really been trying to work through their Nazi past, much more so than the United States has with its history of slavery. I think that’s something that the Germans have been really consciously focusing on just in the past couple of decades. I think that trying to maintain this openness to the world is a way to atone for those past legacies of fascism.”

As a good historian, she visits the country she teaches, studies the history of Germany in. “It’s good to have few dates in mind so you can figure out causes and effects and what comes before and after a certain date, such as the end of World War II in 1945. The world changed dramatically after that date,” Pence explains. “The most important thing is to figure out how to analyze what was going on in the past in order to deconstruct and figure out how we got to where we are today.”

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