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Ruckh studies how we learn, teach and act

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Regional

Ruckh studies how we learn, teach and act

Interpretation of history has long been infused in our political discourse. From the time of our nation's founders to the current political scene, historical references have been made to justify policies and politics of all kinds.

Someone who has studied this particular issue is Eric Ruckh. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, he received his bachelor's degree from Bucknell University in Pennsylvania and his doctorate from the University of California at Irvine. Ruckh also studied in France and England. He is now an associate professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. He is, however, not your traditional historian.

Ruckh said that he initially thought of becoming a lawyer until as an undergraduate he met a historian, an economist and a philosopher.

"They showed me a set of possibilities that I had not seen before," Ruckh said. "They were 'superteachers.' Then I decided to become an academic and concentrate on intellectual history."

As a consequence of his experiences, Ruckh looks at many subjects in his work to understand the world in which we live. That includes, but is not limited to, literature and philosophy. Among the topics he has been studying is globalization.

"Globalization has been going on for 15,000 years, with humans contacting other humans," Ruckh said. "To understand contemporary globalization, we need to look at its past. Globalization today works in two different contradictory ways. On one hand it homogenizes, on another it inspires people to develop unique cultures. That is what

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

makes it so interesting."

Yet, he finds globalization today different than in the past in one fundamental aspect.

"What is different today is the speed with which information and people can move around," he explained. "That changes the notion of space and time. It is creating a deepening sense for people to forget the past. That creates some challenges to a historian, both as a researcher and as a teacher. It is an opportunity as well.

"The main argument why we need to know our history is that the past is relevant today. It still affects all of us, and it is transformative," Ruckh explained. "Social norms and political institutions all are rooted in the past."

Ruckh has also been looking at the role played by friendship in history. "It is one of those human experiences that is timeless because it has always existed," he said. "Its meaning has changed throughout time and across cultures.

"In the ancient Greek world, friendship was essential to live a great life and a political life. Friendship was crucial to live a balanced life. It was a way to become a better human being. Friendship was essential to that," Ruckh said. "Today, friendship is increasingly privatized, something that happens in private spaces."

When looking at literature he also sees things constantly interacting. "I don't think that literature is only reflective of the world,

but at the same time is transformative. It is a form of symbolic action," he added. "It provides people a different look at the world the way it was."

In addition to his scholarship in history and philosophy, Ruckh has also shown a great interest in the issue of educational reform. In fact, since 2005 he has been engaged in reforming the general education program at SIUE. He said that he sees problems with the way we teach today at colleges and universities.

"The basic problem with general education is that it is increasingly seen by students, parents, politicians, and administrators as vocational education, to train people to function in today's economy," Ruckh said. "It ignores the deep human roots of education, the possibility of education being transformative and augmenting human autonomy. You need to tie the idea of liberal education with the notion of citizenship and the skill to think critically about the world, so people can arrive at their own answers to complicated policy and economic questions. If we do not teach our students along those lines, one of the foundations of liberal democracy can be threatened."

He cites as an example a lack of deep understanding about the "Arab Spring" that is threatening the autocracies of North Africa and the Near East.

"The study of the French Revolution can help us to understand some aspects of these revolutions taking place and the role of liberal politics today in Europe and the U.S.," Ruckh said. "The French Revolution helps us understand the dynamics of today's politics, how to make citizens, how to train people to be free and to understand that to remove a



Photo by Joanne Olson

Professor Eric Ruckh of SIUE.

dictator does not guarantee the emergence of a liberal state."

Otto von Bismarck, the 19th century German statesman, once said, "Politics is the art of the possible." Translated to today's world, it sounds like all politicians have to — at some point — set principles aside in order to achieve their goals. So, is compromise something we have forgotten in today's political discourse?

"We need more of the art of the possible,"

Ruckh said. "The way is to understand that human action is limited. That makes human action in politics both deeply tragic and deeply ironic."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.