

Historical Perspectives on Contemporary Global Politics:

Promise and Pitfalls

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Paper for the ECPR Standing Group on International Relations, 6th Pan-European Conference on International Relations, Torino, Italy, 12-15 September 2007¹

Reflect often how all the life of today is a repetition of the past; and observe that it also presages what is to come. Review the many complete dramas and their settings, all so similar, which you have known in your own experience, or from bygone history: . . . The performance is always the same; it is only the actors who change. Marcus Aurelius, Emperor of Rome, 161-180 AD (Marcus Aurelius 1993: 832).

The only thing new in the world is the history you don't know. Harry Truman (cited in Bradley 2000: 3).

We have recognized . . . that there are certain trends--particularly in relation to the possible emergence of a "new mediaeval" form of universal order--which do make against the survival of the states system, and which, if they went a great deal further, might threaten its survival. Hedley Bull (1977, 275).

¹ A version of this paper will be published in Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, *A World of Politics: Essays in Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[T]here are . . . major dimensions of the present era that have led to differences in kind and not just in degree when compared with earlier times. James N. Rosenau (1997, 22).

I claim that some of the most important characteristics of our world today can be appreciated more clearly by historical comparison. It is not that history repeats itself. Precisely the opposite: World history develops. Through historical comparison we can see that the most significant problems of our own time are novel. That is why they are difficult to solve: They are interstitial to institutions that deal effectively with the more traditional problems for which they were first set up. Michael Mann (1986: 32).

Because we have an inadequate basis for comparison, we are tempted to exaggerate either continuity with the past that we know badly or the radical originality of the present, depending upon whether we are more struck by the features we deem permanent, or with those we do not believe existed before. And yet a more rigorous examination of the past might reveal that what we sense as new really is not, and that some “traditional” features are far more complex than we think. Stanley Hoffman (cited in Holsti 2002: 23).

Political analysts since the earliest times have contemplated the past, although there is no more consensus today than there has ever been about what to make of it or to what extent it really helps us either to understand the present or to predict the future. Our contemporary postinternational world features any number of apparently new phenomena that are actually old or refurbished, and our world may in fact be much more like the world before the rise of the sovereign state in Europe than that state-centric era. But we

cannot know for sure what is genuinely new or old unless we have the clearest possible view of the past. Any assessment of change requires a baseline. For those who wish to make sense of the dynamic side of global politics, temporal comparison is essential. Our own work has led us to a comparative study of “polities” in six pre-Westphalian historical systems (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996) and now is continuing with a focus on the ancient Mediterranean world, from whence come most of the examples used in this paper.²

There are some analysts, however, including many historians, who are skeptical and even contemptuous of the claim that history helps us make sense of the present. They are inclined to accuse political scientists and others of ransacking the historical record in an effort to make and support sweeping generalizations. A frequent contention of historians is that history can only inform the reader about the particular epoch in which it took place—if that! Finley (1986: 31), for example, asks: “[W]hat is the point to a linear account over long periods of time? One can really know only one’s own time, and that is sufficient anyway. The past can yield nothing more than paradigmatic support for the conclusions one has drawn from the present; the past, in other words, may still be treated in the timeless fashion of myth.” Plumb (2004: 17) similarly remarks: “Each of us is a historical being, held in a pattern created by Time, and to be unconscious of our historical selves is to be fraught with dangers, History, however, is not the past. The past is always a created ideology with a purpose, designed to control individuals, or motivate societies,

² Working title: *Preinternational Polities*.

or inspire classes. Nothing has been so corruptly used as concepts of the past.” Freeman is hardly more sanguine about the historical enterprise: “It is in fact worth asking,” he suggests, “whether it is possible to understand Greece or any other part of the ancient world in any meaningful sense. It may be that scholars and archaeologists are simply imposing their own ideological frameworks on the limited and unrepresentative evidence that survives.” He warns the reader about his own meticulous single-volume history of three ancient civilizations: “Virtually every page that follows conceals some controversy over which academic blood has been shed.” Yet, he concludes, it is nonetheless “worth the effort” to produce such a volume (Freeman 1996: 12-13).

Studying the History of Global Politics: Benefits as well as Pitfalls

Despite the difficulties and pitfalls involved in studying the past, there are many reasons why it is attractive and even necessary to do so. One generic reason is the famous response from Sir Edmund Hillary, who, when asked why he climbed Everest, answered simply “because it is there.” Well, why not? We *should* be inherently curious about history and prehistory, for it is nothing less than the record--or at least the stories--of the travails, triumphs, and failures of our own human species on planet earth.

Beyond simple curiosity, there is a persistent sense that the past can inform us about the present, explain why we act as we do, and even warn us against the folly of our ways. The last is the essence of the familiar caution that those who do not read history are doomed to repeat it. Common assumptions are that the past is there to be “read,” that

human nature has not changed, and that there are also recurring patterns in human societies and affairs generally. As David Lowenthal (1985: 4) expresses it: “[W]e feel quite sure that the past really happened; its traces and memories reflect undeniable scenes and acts. The airy and insubstantial future may never arrive; man or nature may destroy humanity; time as we know it may end. By contrast, the past is tangible and secure; people think of it as fixed, unalterable, indelibly recorded. In the same vein, Finley (1986: 32) quotes Sir Isaiah Berlin on Tolstoy: “Tolstoy’s interest in history . . . seems to have arisen not from interest in the past as such, but from the desire to penetrate to first causes, to understand how and why things happen as they do and not otherwise And with this went an incurable love of the concrete, the empirical, the verifiable History, only history, only the sum of the concrete events in time and space . . . this alone contained the truth, the material out of which genuine answers . . . might be constructed.”

The point is also made eloquently by Thucydides, who encourages us to study his account of the Peloponnesian War for clues of things to come: “It will be enough for me . . . if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it will) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last forever” (Thucydides 1978: 48).

Some modern historians, like the eminent Hellenist, Peter Green, find not so much omens of the future, as guides to the present through its presumed “organic relationship” with the

past. As his research proceeded, he reports: “I could not help being struck, again and again, by an overpowering sense of *déjà vu*, [and being fascinated by] the ornate, indeed rococo glass in which Alexandria, Antioch and Pergamon reflect contemporary fads, failings and aspirations, from the urban malaise to religious fundamentalism, from Veblenism to *haute cuisine*, from funded scholarship and mandarin literature to a flourishing drop-out counter-culture, from political impotence in the individual to authoritarianism in government, from science perverted for military ends to illusionism for the masses, from spiritual solipsism on a private income to systematic extortion in pursuit of the materialistic and hence plutocratic dream.” He concludes: “Quite apart from some jolting lessons to be learned here about the constant elements in human nature . . . -- *déjà vu* on a truly cosmic scale--it is this depressingly familiar scenario, rather than the currently more popular Periclean myth, which remains in essence, the legacy of the Graeco-Roman world” (Green 1989: 27-28).

History and Truth

Yet there remain a variety of reasons why historical truth is ever elusive. Every generation reinterprets the past in light of its own experience, the struggle over who controls the archives has practical political and policy consequences, and each individual has his or her own personal limitations and biases. However, as we view it, the fundamental problem has little to do with extreme-relativist postmodern premises about our inability to access “reality” in any form. We insist there an abundance of “true” historical “facts,” and empirical research is decidedly possible. But even for the best-

documented eras there are huge factual gaps and serious problems with sources, as well as the question of what our facts “mean.” Interpretation is not made any easier by the fuzzy concepts (e.g., “empire,” “tribe,” or even “state”) we use to organize our information.

Consider the paucity of reliable information relevant to our current project on the politics of the ancient Mediterranean. Most of what we think we know comes from a relatively few written materials and, increasingly, from recent advances in archaeology³ and dating techniques. For ancient Mesopotamia we have many cuniform inventory tablets (still more not yet read); a few literary texts (the most famous, of course, the Gilgamesh chronicle); and monuments recording military victories, other royal accomplishments, and principles of law. For Egypt before Rome there are tomb inscriptions, some papyri fragments, and the Amarna letters treasure trove of diplomatic correspondence from a short period. If only the Alexandria Library had survived! Most of the chronology of Egyptian pharonic dynasties comes from a single source, a history of Egypt by Manetho, an Egyptian priest who wrote in Greek in the third century B.C., possibly for King Ptolemy I Soter. Manetho’s actual history is now mostly lost, but the king-list survived as well as various citations and summaries of the history by other ancient and early Christian authors.

³ As Finley (1986: 22) reminds us, we need to be careful not to be too smug about our scientific advances. Fifth-century Athenians were about as equipped in terms of tools and manpower as Schliemann and Sir Arthur Evans to dig at Mycenae or Knossos, and certainly had the intelligence to link whatever they might have found to myths of Agamemnon and Minos. “What they lacked was the interest . . .” On the other side of the coin: “Thucydides and his contemporaries knew the full corpus of lyric and elegiac poetry, but they made less use, and less skilful use, of this material for historical analysis than we make of the few scraps that have survived in our time.”

However, the king-list has some gaps and obvious inaccuracies, especially for the crucial period when Egypt's civilization was just beginning to form.

As for Greece, Finley (1981: 10) observes: “[T]he ‘events’ in the whole of Aegean prehistory can be counted on one’s fingers.” Myths and traditions are “highly problematical at best,” and archaeology only “reveals cataclysms” without telling us anything about the circumstances or personalities. There is a “remarkable absence of monumental portrayal” and “not a single dated object . . . which is not an import.” All dates derive from archaeology. One breakthrough was the deciphering of Linear B, the early form of Greek script found on clay tablets baked in fires that apparently accompanied the destruction of Mycenaean centers at Knossos (c. 1400 B.C.), Pylos and Mycenae (c. 1200 B.C.), Thebes (c. 1320 B.C.), and elsewhere. Unfortunately, these records are only fragmentary, inventorial in nature, and cover a period of no more than a single year in each center. Homer (Ionia c. 750?) draws on an older oral tradition and seems to describe the Heroic (Mycenaean) era, though some scholars argue that much of Homer reflects life in the ninth century (Fine 1983: 26). How far to trust Homer remains a subject for heated debate (cf. Chadwick 1976: 186 and Hammond 1986: 60 ff). The Boeotian poet Hesiod (c. 700 B.C.) provides a rare glimpse of life from the viewpoint of the nonruling class, although his concerns are myth and metaphysics rather than narrative history (Finley 1986: 16).

The situation does not get much better later. Finley (1986: 22) again: “No one before the fifth century tried to organize, either for his own time or for earlier generations, the

essential stuff of history. There were lists--of the kings of Sparta and the archons of Athens and the victors in the various games. They could provide a chronology if we knew what happened in the archonship of X or the reign of Y; but we do not know”

Herodotus, arguably the first historian, wrote in the third quarter of the fifth century, but his accounts, though wonderfully fascinating and colorful, are an often indistinguishable mix of myth, probable fact, and good story-telling. Finley does give him credit for producing a fairly accurate chronology from about the middle of the seventh century B.C. (Finley 1986: 18). Thucydides only gives us a few events and approximate dates about early Greece, because that was not his main concern and he, like Herodotus and all Greeks for that matter, lacked essential information. Thucydides’s account of the Peloponnesian War is more reliable, since he was a participant observer, but his very participation makes his objectivity suspect, and in any event he could not participate in, observe, or remember everything of importance. He tells us, for instance, that he had to reconstruct key speeches of Greek leaders from what he recalls was said or was appropriate to the situation.

Moving on to the Hellenistic era and Roman times, documentation substantially improves, but rarely is it nearly as plentiful as one would wish. The astonishing career of Alexander the Great generated any number of accounts during his brief reign and in decades immediately after his premature death, but none of those “primary” sources survives in anything like its entirety. Later writers presumably had access to more of the original material than we now have, but all of them are highly unreliable or incomplete in various ways (cf. Bosworth 2003). Livy relied on a collection of legends for his history of

early Rome, while Polybius and others patched together their accounts from what little actual records (or virtually none) they might have had to hand. Freeman notes that there are only 1,865 Roman manuscripts which date from before Charlemagne, partly because so many were copied and the originals allowed to disappear. Many, including for example Books 40-5 of Livy, survive in but a single copy. No one, of course, knows what errors or omissions may have been introduced in the copying process. Although many new texts are still surfacing from epigraphic inscriptions on stone, pottery, metal, and sometimes wood, Freeman (1996: 7) believes, the “amount which has been lost is staggering, and it may be the best of what was written.”

Putting aside the dearth of effects, the sheer distance produced by the “veil of time” intrudes. In Lowenthal’s words, “the past is a foreign country.” “[W]e can no more slip back to the past than leap forward into the future. Save in imaginative reconstruction, yesterday is forever barred to us” (Lowenthal 1985: 4). We cannot get into the mindset or worldview of, say, a Spartan hoplite, not only because we cannot know what he as an individual was actually thinking but also because our interpretations are severely affected by our own myths, predispositions, preoccupations, and concepts.

The gaps produced by sheer time are nowhere more obvious than in the case of key concepts of *war* and *democracy*. Regarding war, moderns find it difficult to grasp the degree to which warfare was almost a routine experience for males in the ancient world and, indeed, a deeply ingrained part of community culture. The command structure of Greek and Roman armies was a monopoly of the upper classes, but the liability inherent

in that “privilege” for them was that “military command was inescapable (until the first century B.C.) at least at the ‘brigade’ level.” Needless to say, poorer citizens were also nearly all enlisted in one capacity or another. Finley reminds us that “Socrates fought in battle twice as a hoplite, at least twice when he was already in his forties.” In Finley’s view: “There is nothing in modern experience quite like this. War was a normal part of life; not all periods compared in intensity with the Persian and Peloponnesian wars or with the Hannibalic War, but hardly a year went by without requiring a formal decision to fight, followed by a muster and the necessary preparations, and finally combat at some level” (Finley 1983: 66-67). There was thus no separate military class, military glory was an important road to political leadership, and virtually all politicians were expected to have had military experience and to continue to demonstrate their prowess in battle.

As for the concept of “democracy,” Cartledge (1993: 7), writing about ancient Greece, captures the crux of the matter brilliantly: “[W]hat . . . does and should it mean to us that ‘democracy’ was a Greek invention . . . when our democracy is so different from theirs, both institutionally and ideologically? Or to put that question more brutally . . . how was it that it was ‘okay’ for the Greeks to find the idea and practice of democracy perfectly compatible not only with the disenfranchisement of women, which was of course true of all democracies until the [twentieth century], but also with the outright enslavement of many thousands of human beings (including their fellow Greeks), whereas for us today that combination is not at all ‘okay’ on principle.” Green urges us to remember that even that limited form of democracy was far from universal in Greece and “certainly not (as is sometimes supposed) coterminous with the rule of the city-state (*polis*).” If we wanted to

increase the confusion at this point, we could (but will not) diverge to consider what is often alleged to have been Spartan “totalitarianism.” In any event, says Green, “it was the Hellenistic rather than the classical legacy, politically speaking, that was transmitted, via Rome, to the medieval and modern world” (Green 1989: 17-18).

The “facts problem” for historians parallels the issue confronted by social scientists in regard to the concept of “rationality.” Even if we believe in rationality, it is very difficult to fulfill the factual conditions to buttress the claim, especially if we define rationality as selection of the *best of all* alternatives. Limits on individual knowledge and on researchers’ efforts to get “in the heads,” complicates dramatically the task confronting rational choice and expected utility scholars. The “facts problem” alone produces serious pitfalls involved in any attempt to read and draw insights from history about the present or future--or, indeed, about the past itself. We sense that there are things we urgently need to know “there,” but we also often discover, in the immortal words of Gertrude Stein (in quite another context), that “there’s no there, there.”⁴ Or at least whatever “there” we seem to encounter is frustratingly hard to “know” with any degree of certainty

The Struggle over Meaning

Even if we had “all” of the facts, we would have an additional problem. Facts apart from context have little meaning. Like a telephone book, a listing of facts provides nothing of

⁴ Stephen J. Kobrin (2000) quotes Stein, with equal appropriateness, to describe contemporary cyberspace.

theoretical interest or value. Facts allow us to draw a crude picture at best, but meaning only is possible after an observer has imposed some sort of theoretical framework upon those facts. That framework explains how facts are related and affect one another, and it is only partly derived from the facts themselves in the constant to-ing and fro-ing between induction and deduction. The framework also emerges from personal, political, and ideological predispositions of the theorists. This is especially the case in giving meaning to history because of the factual lacunae; it is equally a problem in global politics because of the accelerated pace of change that precludes the sorts of truth claims in science that tend to assume that change is exceedingly slow.

Thucydides *History* illustrates how historical analysis can quickly become a struggle over meaning, and how historians and history can be held “hostage” to contemporary manipulation. For example, although Thucydides returns on several occasions to the question of why war breaks out, some scholars go no further than his initial explanation of war as a result of growing Athenian power, to generalize about the virtues of everything from hegemonic and power transition theory to good old realist amoral moralizing and balance-of-power theory. Realists in particular have repeatedly tried to hijack Thucydides for their own ends. For some, the Melian Dialogue serves to legitimate power politics and the norms of “might makes right.” For others, the story was even used as a metaphor for the Cold War in which “democratic Athens,” a naval power (read United States) and its allies, clashed with “authoritarian Sparta,” a land power (read Soviet Union) and its allies. Other interpretations abound. Some regard Thucydides’s *History* as an attempt to put medical science to work; in this interpretation, the historian

emulated his friend Hippocrates of Cos and employed the newly-discovered diagnostic method to the study of the social world. In another version, Thucydides, presuming acquainted with the work of the tragedians of his time, produced his own tragic vision in which the vibrant and idealistic Athens of Pericles is transformed into a cynical arena for demagogues, culminating in the plague and the disastrous Sicilian expedition and the destruction of the walls of Athens.

Looking at the past through present-day lenses inevitably entails distortion. Green (1989: 87-88) comments that “every generation gets the nonsense it needs and deserves,” for example, the New Age crediting of the Egyptians “with being the guardians, if not the inventors, of every sort of hermetic wisdom, arcane science, prophetic skill, and perennial philosophy.” Such an interpretation, he insists, detracts from the extraordinary accomplishments of Egyptian culture in other arenas and “is also seriously misleading, since it implies a gift for conceptualization which was the one thing, notoriously, that the Egyptians lacked, and which constitutes their most fundamental distinction from natural generalizers like the Greeks, who couldn’t rub two facts together without coming up with a hot universal theory.” In Green’s view, the “natural focus of Egyptian civilization . . . was not intellectual but theological, indeed theocentric.”

Green highlighted the same problem of seeing the past from the vantage of the present in interpreting Greek history. Although admitting that some reported pronouncements of the Delphic Oracle were probably forgeries, influenced by special pleading, or akin to folklore traditions, he also dismisses as “misleading in the extreme” Fontenrose’s

downgrading of the mystical role of the Delphic Oracle. “Professor Fontenrose is . . . a rationalist of the most convinced sort, and . . . ‘it is a property of your rationalist that he is unable to understand any type of mind but his own.’” Although Fontenrose “claims to have followed exclusively objective criteria,” according to Green, “he has, perhaps unconsciously, set up a working model in which the only responses recognized as historical are, almost by definition, those that avoid any taint of ambiguity, second sight, or supernatural knowledge . . . so that the whole archaic history of this extraordinary institution prior to the mid-fifth century can be treated with the same sort of patronizing and dismissive contempt that Victorian missionaries reserved for, say, Haitian voodoo” (Green 1989: 103, 105).

The religious beliefs and practices of the ancients are especially hard to fathom from our contemporary remove. From the perspective of a world in which monotheism is so prevalent, it is difficult to make sense of a culture like that of ancient Greece with its enormous number of deities and their anthropomorphic foibles. Some analysts also suggest that Greece nurtured a secular and rational Western tradition. They spotlight Plato, Thucydides, Aristotle, atomists, skeptics, and others who seem to represent that side of Greece. But what to make, then, of the Greeks’ active religious life (Dodds, 1964). To be sure, some ceremonies and shrines were closely associated with particular cities, yet was Greek religion a mere expression of civic pride?

Historians wishing to emphasize the development of a superior Western culture sometimes tell a story of Greek religion that suggests that it was a precursor of

monotheism in general and Christianity in particular. Plato has had his usefulness in this respect too. Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmidt Pantel observe that the initial approaches to Greek religion were two, prefiguration or survival. The prefiguration approach scrutinized the beliefs and practices of Greeks “with a view to discovering soil that was especially propitious for the growth of a monotheistic religion like Christianity,” including “exclusive sects and mystery cults.” The effect of that interpretation was “to refract Greek religion artificially through the distorting prism of Christianity.” Zaidman and Pantel concede that their own view of Greek religion, as “a symbolic system with its own peculiar logic and coherence” similarly reflects “our own, relativistic era.” Although current explanations are not irreconcilable, they do stress that for most analysts today Greek religion is either a successful blend of the cults and beliefs of pre-Hellenic populations and those introduced by later Greek peoples, or can best be understood as part of the ideological framework of the emerging Greek polis. By contrast, the survival approach searched for “supposed traces of magical practices and primitive mentality” that might have persisted in classical Greece. That approach brought with it “an entourage of would-be explanations that . . . invoke the discredited notion of totemism (the idea that originally religion was essentially a matter of groups of people identifying themselves with objects in the natural world)” (Zaidman and Pantel 1992: 4-6).

We see the same effort at twisting history to help tell a story—in this case Greece as the cradle of democracy—in the debate over Greek “hoplite reform.” The argument was that, at an early stage in the emergence of the polis, hoplite phalanx warfare became the dominant form of warfare, rather than the earlier form of combat waged primarily by

aristocratic cavalry. Virtually all male citizens had to take their place side-by-side in the phalanx as equals in the defense of the city, and that equality inevitably spilled over into politics. In sum, hoplite warfare was substantially responsible for pushing Greek politics in a more egalitarian and democratic direction. Only relatively recently did archaeologist Ian Morris (1987: 197-201), working from evidence gathered at burial sites near Athens, conclude that hoplite warfare had been in use long before the period in question. To his mind, there was “not a shed of evidence” for any change in Greek warfare tactics and certainly no reason to associate a “hoplite class” with any shifts in Greek politics. It should be noted that the notion of a hoplite reform is still widely accepted, but the comfortable consensus that once existed is no longer entirely intact.

Even as interpreting facts poses serious problems, so does choosing which facts to consider. Although there is inevitable factual overlap (thank goodness), each historian tends to look at or ignore certain types of facts owing to the inevitable mixing of norms in fact selection. Marxists pay careful attention to the means of production; Hegelians and Kantians, to ideas; realists, to military power, and so forth. Macro-historians of a Braudelian (French *Annales*) disposition are concerned almost exclusively with social, economic, and cultural history--and the conditions of everyday life in vanished eras and civilizations. As a profession, most historians today are, in our opinion, overreacting to a longstanding concentration on chronicles of kings and statesmen and focusing their attention almost exclusively on cultural and economic history rather than political history. No doubt the pendulum will swing at least somewhat back again, and meanwhile there are rewards from the current orientation. Yet, there is no escaping the situation that the

sources of information upon which we must draw remain overwhelmingly elitist and male. As Freeman (1996: 7-8) observes for ancient Mediterranean history, what texts we have come “overwhelmingly from those élite males with the leisure to write them.” “The vast mass of the Greek and Roman populations and their subjects have vanished unheard.” Keith Bradley, a prominent modern authority on Roman slavery, “records only one free slave.” “Women’s voices have also been lost.”

Historians and Social Scientists

Are historians and social scientists interested in global politics adversaries who are embarked on fundamentally different missions? In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Although some social scientists admittedly blindside history—certainly to their detriment—every statement that historians make is laden with theoretical assumptions. To those historians who decry “theory,” we rejoin that all analysts are theorists and it is infinitely better to be aware of and frank about one’s theoretical stance than otherwise.

Realist-Liberal Contest

There is a realist non-realist antinomy (see Ferguson and Mansbach 2003: 61-87). in historical as well as international relations scholarship. The struggle over the meaning of Thucydides illustrates this tension. A more personal example from our point of view is macrohistorian William McNeill’s extended review (McNeill 1997: 269-74) of our 1996 book, *Polities: Authority, Identities, and Change* (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996). McNeill’s critique “seems” to be a straightforward attack on the way political scientists

(mis)use history. The authors, he declares, present their theoretical argument in the first two chapters and then “devote almost all the rest of the book to illustrating how ‘world politics has always involved a crazy quilt of polities--foci of authority of varying domain and influence; distinctive in some respects and overlapping, layered, nested, and linked in others’.” He continues: “Given that they knew exactly what they were looking for, it is not surprising to find that they do indeed discover a ‘crazy quilt’ of competing and ‘overlapping, layered, nested and linked’ polities in each case.” To the contrary, he accuses us of being “profoundly ahistorical”: “The authors seek general truths about polities and politics, and, sure enough, they find what they expect--a plurality of identities and loyalties in competition with each other everywhere and always.” “Theory,” he says, “allowed the authors to create a series of pigeon holes into which they have to fit an impressive variety of information gathered through energetic reading of the best available scholarly accounts dealing with each of the cases they analyze.” The authors “radically discount chronology” and go so far as to compare different sorts of polities across cases and periods (empires with empires, for instance). McNeill concludes that “collecting data about horizontal and then about vertical relations among rival polities, is like studying anatomy by describing organs torn from the bodies of different animals--comparing legs with legs, eyes with eyes, and so on--without ever trying to put the parts together into a single, living whole.”

However, McNeill’s *real* disagreement with the book is plainly one that he never acknowledges; that is, that the analysis he decries abandons key realist premises.

Historian though he is, like all historians, McNeill is also himself a theorist—in this case,

a realist--and he is offended to the point of outrage that the “polities” approach puts a variety of polities and their need to generate multi-dimensional “value satisfaction” at the center of the analysis rather than the familiar realist categories of coercion, armed force, and states. He insists that “Ferguson and Mansbach are wrong to suppose that competition among all the diverse kinds of polity that they discovered will not continue to give pride of place to whatever authorities are able to organize and maintain superior armed force.” The Westphalian State is not under threat in the present era, because “[s]o far, no promising alternative to the territorial organization of armed force has even begun to emerge.” Like other realists in the study of international relations, historian McNeill is caught in an oddly dated state-centric worldview.

The role of power similarly forms one key realist-non-realist difference that repeatedly changes fashions in the study of world history.⁵ Not long ago, historians generally assumed that civilization diffused from major centers, as advanced cultures passed on some of their superior features to backward regions. McNeill, for example, entitled the second chapter of the late-1970s third edition of his survey text, “Diffusion of Civilization: First Phase to 1700 B.C.” (McNeill 1963, 1979). It is not hard to see in such an approach an orientation generated by European imperialism and post-World War II American hegemony and triumphalism.⁶ Archaeologists, anthropologists, and other historians have subsequently countered the diffusionist position by suggesting that

⁵ The discussion of the debates addressed in this and the following paragraph rely in part on Freeman (1996: 5-6, 10-11).

⁶ A point made by Freeman (1996: 5-6)--and by McNeill himself in the 2nd edition (1991) of *The Rise of the West*.

societies at a particular sizes of population, type and level of production, and so on, tend to follow some of the same trajectories; and in any case that local cultures have always adapted and thus put their own indigenous stamp upon foreign ideas and institutions of any kind.

Another key subtext of the realist/non-realist debate in history, as in international relations, is that of change versus continuity (or, mutability-immutability) (Ferguson and Mansbach 2003: 27-29). The change-continuity question also makes its appearance in the processual/post-processual debate in archaeology. One of the 1960s pioneers of the “New Archaeology” or “processual” archaeology, Lewis R. Binford, observed that everything his excavations unearthed was static, whereas what he and his colleagues were trying to discern was how societies related to one another and to other external influences, and what produced cultural change. As he saw it, the only appropriate methodologies capable of answering such questions were those of the natural sciences, because the main concern of social science was contemporary relationships that were no longer observable in static bones and stones. He became convinced that he had to focus his attention on contemporary people and their societies, and then to project backwards into the past through the material evidence they created, that is, “to understand the dynamics of living systems and study their static consequences” (Binford 1983: 21, 100-101). In the end, processual archaeologists settled on environment as the prime shaper of social and cultural outcomes. Perhaps predictably, they soon were challenged by “post-processual” archaeologists, who argue that what is missing in environmental determinism is a critical ideological dimension. Different societies process influences from their respective

environments through their own value systems--with widely different results (cf. Hodder, 1986 and Renfrew and Bahn, 1991: chap. 12). Anyone who is familiar with the present authors' work will not be surprised that we side with the post-processual perspective.

More broadly, most realists view history and global politics as static, a "struggle for power" that is timeless and universal. However, some historians are liberals, who see the world as going "somewhere" and who, therefore, tend to emphasize the uniqueness of different times and places. Thus, differences over meaning are compounded by whether or not the historian's training and epistemological leanings lead him to look for continuity between past and present or, perhaps more often the case, to emphasize the differences between them.

The liberal preference for uniqueness is reflected in Finley's controversial assertion that the ancients lacked any concept of "an economy." Finley emphasizes what is different and unique in contrast to what is similar or at least analogous. He argues (1985: 21-24): "Of course, they farmed, traded, manufactured, mined, taxed, coined, deposited and loaned money, made profits or failed in their enterprises. And they discussed these activities in their writing. What they did not do, however, was to combine these particular activities conceptually into a unit. . . . Hence Aristotle, whose programme was to codify the branches of knowledge, wrote no *Economics*." Finley continues: "There were no business cycles in antiquity; no cities whose growth can be ascribed, even by us, to the establishment of a manufacture; no 'Treasure by Foreign Trade.'" Therefore, the "economic language and concepts we are all familiar with, even the laymen among us, the

‘principles’, whether they are Alfred Marshall’s or Paul Samuelson’s, the models we employ, tend to draw us into a false account.” For instance, he maintains, since wage and interest rates in the Greek and Roman worlds remained reasonably stable over long periods of time, it is wrong to speak of a “labor market” or a “money market.” Moreover, there is no record of an actuarial concept applied to the likes of maritime loans, which suggests that the grave absence of statistics regarding matters of economics is not an accident. The ancients simply were not interested in compiling that sort of data for later comparison. Not surprisingly, Finley’s interpretation stirred considerable debate and is still contested (cf. Scheidel and von Reden 2002).

Agent-Structure

Another issue that both political scientists and historians must contend with is often summarized as the “agent-structure problem.” In other words, to what extent are actions taken owing to the decisions and will of persons, especially leaders and surrogates, and to what extent are they determined by structural forces over which they have no control? Neo-realists, in contrast to traditional realists like Hans Morgenthau, typically weigh in on the structural side of the continuum. Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* is the leading representative of this perspective (Waltz 1979).

Among historians and political scientists, surely those who wrote on geopolitics were among the most consistent structural determinists. Alfred Thayer Mahan, for example, argued that control of the seas was the key to world domination and helped convince Theodore Roosevelt of the need for a two-ocean navy. Others were Halfred J. Mackinder,

whose theory that control of the Eurasian heartland was more important influenced Nazi Germany's disastrous decision to invade the Soviet Union; and Nicholas Spykman, whose idea that control of the rimland of the Eurasian landmass was more essential than a heartland strategy offered an intellectual basis for America's post-World War II containment policy. These analyses smacked of single-factor geographical determinism and not only lacked staying power but also in their day created substantial mischief. In actuality, over the millennia actual physical geography has had far less impact on politics than the other way around. Contemporary political geographers like John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge (1995) are also keenly aware that global politics is very much about "mastering space" and not about geography dictating many political strategies. This is not, of course, to suggest that--even in the current era when some aspects of global politics appear to be increasingly deterritorialized--geographical proximity or topography retain no significance at all. For instance, United States relations with Cuba would no doubt have been very different if Cuba were an island in the South Pacific rather than ninety miles from Florida.⁷

By far the majority of international relations theorists have focused their attention on the twentieth century and especially the Cold War era after World War II. However, a significant and, indeed, increasing number of historians, political scientists, and other

⁷ It is important to specify *sustained* concern when making such a statement. Remote areas like Afghanistan or Quemoy/Matsu have obviously been of intense concern to the U.S. for limited periods of time. Moreover, U.S. Manifest Destiny policies and the Cold War probably had more impact upon the course of U.S.-Cuban relations at any given time than Cuba's mere proximity to the United States.

social scientists have made an effort to generalize about patterns of politics over a much longer time span.⁸

Structural bias is also evident in the work of the economic determinists. Most of the work on historical cycles, civilizations, or warfare to which we will turn shortly stresses politics more than economics. Exceptions are some of Jones's reasons for "the European miracle," Gilpin's list of factors that ended the traditional cycle of empires, and Thompson's inclusion of world-system theory as one of three somewhat complementary approaches to understanding global war. Two other important theorists with an even more pronounced economics orientation, however much they may otherwise differ, are Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1979, 1984) and Paul Kennedy (1987). As the dean of neomarxist world-system theory, Wallerstein, like earlier Marxists, is an economic determinist. In addition to a world-system or world-economy, the bedrock concepts of his approach are mode of production and division of labor. He argues that prior to about A.D. 1500, most of the world was dominated by military-bureaucratic empires that were effectively systems unto themselves, with a division of labor that rarely extended beyond their frontiers and a similar mode of production that depended on surpluses generated by mass agriculture. From his perspective, the development of a world market economy in tandem with the territorial state in Europe, changed everything. The world economy extended the division of labor beyond regional bounds and involved a predominantly capitalist mode of production. Henceforth the world-system would be one of strong states

⁸ Buzan and Little offer an unusually comprehensive and thoughtful survey of what they term "systemic thinking in world history" (Buzan and Little 2000: chapter 3).

at the center--not in every case capitalist states, for Wallerstein regarded the former Soviet Union as one of the privileged exploiters--weaker states in a semi-periphery, and still weaker states on the periphery. A crucial point, however, is that Wallerstein never has managed to explain how division of labor and mode of production might remain essentially the same for centuries while there took place dramatic shifts in political order, ideology, and relationships among polity types.

Should History Be Periodized?

We differentiate among preinternational, international, and postinternational epochs in global politics. Realist historians periodize using very different criteria than we do—power and power centers, economic system, technology, and so forth. But the basic question is should history be "periodized" or not? On the one hand, periodizing facilitates longitudinal comparison. It also allows us to highlight key factors in global politics, especially changing political identities and loyalties and changing forms of authority and political community. Finally, it makes it possible for observers to focus on patterns of change and historical directions (if any). Therein, however, also lies a risk of imputing patterns of change and historical directions where none exist. "Periods" like "systems" are constructed and imposed by observers, tend to reflect their existing predispositions and premises, and, therefore, may lead to a process in which investigators are destined to find what they are looking for. In addition, periodizing runs the additional risk of leaving the wrong impression that historical change is largely structural in nature. The labels we tack

onto decades or centuries almost never exist for the players in the historical drama themselves. In short, we must not confuse our periods with reality.

Two international relations theorists who have championed the use of history, Barry Buzan and Richard Little (2000: 387), note that there is a continual tension between a view of history as a “seamless web” and others who regard it as falling into distinct periods. “The orthodox historical periodization assumes that there is something that binds the ancient world together in a way that is different from the way that either the medieval world or the modern world is bound together.” As Buzan and Little (2000: chapter 18) emphasize, there are a number of problems with that sort of periodization. First, it is Eurocentric. What they term “pre-international systems” persisted through the next two periods and profoundly affected their evolution. Second, it neglects the fundamental fact that history “does not move at the same speed all across the planet.” For example, writing is 5000 years old in some places, 2000 in others, and 200 in others.” Third, even the usual 1648 Westphalian date for the emergence of the sovereign state is questionable at best.

Unfortunately, in our view, Buzan and Little derail from the very promising unorthodox tracks they have laid for themselves by positing a series of discrete historical eras punctuated by different types of supposedly dominant units. So we have hunter-gatherers giving way to other kinds of units, in succession, until 1500 (rather than 1648) when states become the dominant unit and impose their own standards of territoriality and sovereignty on the entire international system (Buzan and Little 2000: 274-75 and chap. 18).

In contrast, far from implying historical direction in our own designation of historical periods, we argue that every historical period features something “new” and much that is “old” and also much that is “reconstructed.” New ideas and concepts do arise. The European State was “invented” by Europeans. However, it incorporated features from earlier polities and was largely carried to the rest of the world by empires. We refer to the present of global politics as “a living museum,” by which we mean that in looking at the contemporary world we can find many polity types, variants of polity types, identities, and loyalties that have existed through much of history. At a deeper level, many essential problems of politics are as old as history itself, even though they often appear in new guises and forms. There is change and continuity, and it is ways important to try to specify how much of each we observe.

Conclusion: The Necessity of History

Despite the undeniable risks in using history, we have little option other than to do so. Social scientists neither need to reinvent the wheel nor retreat to join “critical” relativism and deconstruction. We concede that the past can sometimes be almost impenetrably complex; that there often is not enough “evidence” or too much information to sort out properly; that it is always difficult and more than occasionally impossible to establish “causation”; that significant exceptions seem to contradict almost any generalization; that no person can be an expert in more than one period of history and then may be so immersed their subject that they cannot put it into a broader perspective; and that no one

outside of a particular historical time can be fully confident of reconstructing the perceptions of those who lived in that time, and so on.

However, the aversion of some traditional historians to “theory” is a red herring, because, as we have observed, all historians have their theoretical biases too, which should be openly acknowledged. Nonetheless, we need to be aware of “the spectacles behind our eyes” and can also take additional precautions to improve the quality of the final product. Two are perhaps most important. First, the analyst can make a determined effort to look at a variety of sources that tell apparently different stories and perhaps emphasize different facts. Second, we must be prepared to modify initial assumptions based on what the ever-unfolding historical “record” continues to reveal.

When seeking to theorize, especially about several long historical periods, there is no alternative to relying heavily on secondary sources. Indeed, given our view of the difficulty in arriving at a single version of historical “truth,” it is essential to see how and why historical authorities sometimes advance different interpretations of what happened, when, and why. When exposed to competing interpretations, we cannot avoid making careful and informed judgments about which interpretation(s) are the most plausible (see Martin 1989 and Novick 1988). But plausibility is hardly the same as truth. History, as we observed earlier, consists of competing stories many of which are true in a factual sense, differing only as to the way in which the facts are linked to give meaning. At the end of the day, there are few givens--only probabilities, likelihoods, and sometimes only possibilities. We have to accept that amount of ambiguity as unavoidable and proceed as

best we can. If our investigations seem to provide a more convincing view of political reality than other constructions, then they will have at least some pragmatic value (Puchala 2003: chapter 3).

When grave doubts about the reliability of the entire enterprise set in, there are several more important sources of reassurance. First, when we examine a number of different cases over thousands of years, it really does not matter a great deal to the theoretical arguments produced if a few key facts or interpretations that we or our sources advance in particular cases turn out to be wrong.

Second, although the past is no doubt irretrievable in some respects, it is nonetheless “real.” There *is* an objective reality “back there,” however inadequately we are able to reconstruct it. Furthermore, for all our limitations and incapacity from this long remove to perceive life exactly as an Egyptian peasant, Hellenic monarch, or Roman Senator might have done, our perspective is actually far broader. We have more sources, understand much more about the world of his/her day, and also know how the story ended. Like the specialist historian, the participant observer is almost always too close to the action to appreciate what is going on, not least the wider currents in which he/she is caught up. In the words of Tudor historian G. R. Elton: “[T]hose things we discover, analyse, talk about, did actually once happen. They happened to real people They may not have known exactly what was happening, and . . . the historian is entitled to think about his discoveries and to find a significance in them which may well have been invisible at the time. But his doing so does not affect the independent reality of the event; the historian is

not entitled to suppose that he alone, by choosing this fact and ignoring that, creates history. On the contrary, no investigator is more firmly bound by his material, less able to invent or construct the object of his study” (Elton 1967: 77-78).

Third, it is humbling but perhaps in some respects comforting to know that the problems of using history are no less daunting than making sense of contemporary global politics. There is little or no agreement among defenders of different schools of contemporary international relations theory as to how to interpret the present and recent past--much less predict where history is headed. Making such tasks all the more difficult today are information overload (the opposite of the problem faced by historians of the ancient world) and the apparent acceleration of global change.

Consider some present-day debates. How are “globalization” and “localization” best defined? By this or that definition, how “global” or “local” is the world today? Are globalizing trends making for the continued advance of a “human web,” (McNeill and McNeill 2003) a global “network society,”(Castells 2000) a “flat” (Friedman 2005) or “spiky (Florida 2005) world, selective “denationalization,” (Sassen 2006) or “framegration” (Rosenau 1997)? Is globalization still advancing, stalling, or in selective retreat? Are sovereign states losing influence or merely adapting to change? Is “sovereignty” absolute, or has it always been “organized hypocrisy” (Krasner 1999)? Are we seeing “the end of history” (Fukuyama 1992) reflecting a consensus on the values of free market capitalism and political democracy? Does the concept of “democracy” extend to the likes of “transitional” post-Soviet regimes? Is it a reliable generalization that

democracies do not fight one another? Or are we seeing, rather, a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1996)? Is the world still essentially a society of states, is it unipolar and in the grip of “empire”? If it exists, is such an empire “American” or something akin to globalization (Hardt and Negri 2000) or “Westernization”? Do earlier examples of “imperial overstretch” (Kennedy 1987) have continuing relevance?

Fourth and finally, we return to the point made at the beginning of this essay. We study the past not only because it is “there” but also because we sense history has important things to teach us about the elusive present. We are sympathetic to Stanley Hoffmann’s view that “a more rigorous examination of the past might reveal that what we sense as new really is not, and that some “traditional” features are far more complex than we think” (cited in Holsti 2002: 23). Michael Mann (1986: 32) surely is correct in arguing “that some of the most important characteristics of our world today can be appreciated more clearly by historical comparison,” although the jury remains out as to whether “historical comparison” will allow us to “see that the most significant problems of our own time are novel” and “are interstitial to institutions that deal effectively with the more traditional problems for which they were first set up.”

Until now, much of IR theory has been narrowly grounded on a relatively brief and recent period in world history, either the twentieth century or at most the European era of the Westphalian State. History now is speeding up, and the Westphalian era seems to be transitioning to something like what Bull labeled a “new medievalism” or what we prefer to call a “postinternational” world. To make meaningful judgments about continuities or

(like Rosenau) about changes *in kind* in the contemporary world and global politics requires the longest possible historical perspective.

What are the enduring features and dynamics of politics? Politics, rather than “international relations,” should be the bedrock subject of our inquiry. Has Harry Truman got it right, that history simply repeats, if only we knew all of history? Or is Marcus Aurelius correct, that the performance is always the same and only the actors are different? If politics is the performance, certainly some types of actors/polities remain the same, all continue to evolve along with the context (stage setting) in which they operate, and some like TNCs or NGOs are far different from earlier prototypes.

With all due respect to Lowenthal, his otherwise felicitous phrase “the past is a foreign country” is regrettable in its reference to “country,” a decidedly modern concept. However, who can gainsay the wisdom with which Lowenthal (1985: 412) closes his book: “The past remains integral to us all, individually and collectively. We must concede the ancients their place, . . . But their place is not simply back there, in a separate and foreign country; it is assimilated in ourselves, and resurrected into an ever-changing present.”

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