

WHAT LESSONS FROM HISTORY KEEP BEING FORGOTTEN?

UNITED KINGDOM: THE BEST EDUCATION

JOHN BEW

It has become fashionable to talk about the “return of history” in international affairs. Against this backdrop, policymakers are often urged to “learn lessons” from history and are lambasted for their failure to do so. From Vietnam to Iraq, we have seen this pattern play out time and time again. Viewed over the long term, this means that debates over politics, strategy, and foreign policy can appear somewhat cyclical. One can see this in the most recent “rediscovery” of the writings of Machiavelli. It is easy to forget that there have been many “Machiavellian moments” in the past, from the tumults of 17th century England to the era of revolutionary change and state formation in mid-19th century Europe. In reality, our view of the past is often mediated through the rediscoveries of previous eras.

This means learning from the past is easier said than done. History does not lend itself easily to the PowerPoints or executive summaries on which our policymakers increasingly rely. It is a forbidding task to quantify things like perception, mood, and moment—the often indiscernible patterns and habits and instincts that constellate to form the zeitgeist. A genuine understanding of history requires a patience that is not easy to reconcile with the urgency of policy.

A good starting point is to view the past as a source of wisdom rather than revelation. History does not provide fundamental or eternal truths, and certainly no basis for a “scientific” understanding of the world. As the diplomatic historian Paul Schroeder has written, there is

a danger that we presume “its lessons and insights lie on the surface for anyone to pick up, so that one can go at a history like a looter at an archaeological site, indifferent to context and deeper meaning, concerned only with taking what can be immediately used or sold.”

At its best, history bequeaths a way of thinking about the political or intellectual challenges that confront us today—something that might otherwise be defined as “historicism.” This approach does not regard the past as a source of immutable lessons, formulas, or rules, but trains the eye to look beyond immediate appearances—to search for context, complexity, and contingency. It is not the preserve of the left or right, of liberal or conservative. It is an ecumenical creed. It can be practiced by Marxists, who stress the need to look at the socioeconomic base as well as the superstructure, or Burkean conservatives, who take tradition and custom as living forces, and warn us against overdosing on rationalism.

In some forms, historicism can go too far and succumb to fatalism, overcaution, relativism, a cultish emphasis on empiricism, or an unimaginative and overly assertive insistence on “the real.” But a training in history remains the best education for those who aspire to change the world, as it helps people achieve a truer, deeper understanding of what’s around them.

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BURUNDI: TROUBLED DOUBLES

ROLAND RUGERO

The question that had been haunting me was simple: Who is “*Umurundi*”—the Burundian? After months of confusion, it was during a conversation with a Senegalese *mzee*, or old man, about a flag that I was finally able to put the answer into words.

In the early 1990s, President Pierre Buyoya introduced a second national flag to symbolize national unity. The older, and still official, flag already represented unity; its three central stars stand for our three major ethnic groups: the Hutu, the Twa, and the Tutsi. “Poor people you are, Burundians. You are double even at the national flag” the *mzee* told me.

That would have been bearable if the flag was the only duplicity. The Burundian tragedy is that we’ve internalized our history of divisions. Our past is one of antagonisms: Hutu against Tutsi, but also Burundi versus Elsewhere, Good Hutu versus Bad Hutu, Good Tutsi versus Bad Tutsi, those who have studied versus those who have not. At points in our history, being on the wrong side of one of these rifts could get you killed.

After more than 40 years of juggling “us and them” every day, Burundians have become “doubblers,” unconsciously reproducing destructive splits. After the Arusha Accords in 1993, we believed that we had resolved the issue of violence between Hutus and Tutsis. But just saying “calm down” in one’s daily life isn’t enough; the transmission of memories within families and between groups has perpetuated reflexes of discrimination and destruction.

We Burundians are elusive. We can be grumblers, allergic to others’ success; we ask others to change, but are often unable to change ourselves; and we’re quick to weave laurels of praise while tying the hanging rope. In addition to sometimes being the Other, there is also a

secret desire to crush the Other—to prevent the danger he or she represents.

If there is a country in which it is unfortunate to be smart, enterprising, and prosperous, it is Burundi. The people smiling around you when you succeed are actually looking for ways to sink you, even if they would benefit from your success. Living in Burundi is to be constantly ready for a fight—whether in politics, in schools, in our associations, or with our families.

Meanwhile, the non-Burundians who live among us, ignorant to our ways of life and our destructive drives, always say that we are the most calm people they have ever met. We’re told we are generous, kind, and sweet with an introverted grace. We only serve them what they want to see and hear.

There exist words, exclamations, stories, and questions about our past that were not—and still are not—asked except to those closest to us. This is what we learned from our parents at our tender age: “*Ijambo rikukunze rikuguma mu nda*”—a common Burundian proverb, which can be literally translated as: “The word that loves you stays in your belly.” Burundian culture values introversion. Publicly, everything is perceived as smooth. Agreed upon. Acceptable.

In this country of landmines generously laid in the form of rumors, accusations, and attacks, it is difficult for Burundi to move past its dangerous schisms. Burundi does not need more human rights observers or military forces; it needs an army of psychologists to combat the ghosts of our past.

—Translated from French by Aminadab Havyarimana

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CHILE: ELITE DETACHMENT

SOFIA DONOSO

In June 2011, students recreated the dance scenes from Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video outside the presidential palace. The choreography symbolized how Chile's education system had turned them into zombies. Since then, workers, environmentalists, feminists, indigenous groups, and many others have joined the protest.

This recent surge of social mobilization in Chile contrasts with the marked demobilization that followed the reinstatement of democracy in 1990. The rallies and demonstrations have sparked a public debate on the need to foster institutionalized ways for citizens to channel their disgruntlement. This wave of protest has once again raised awareness of the detachment between the country's political elites and its citizens and how, in turn, this fuels protests.

But how did Chile get here?

In 1990, democracy was reinstated in Chile after 17 years of military rule. The political polarization and gridlock of the 1970s has had long-lasting consequences on Chile's post-transition politics. The country's leaders made the assessment that excessive populist pressure contributed to the breakdown of democracy and led to the coup d'état in 1973. Ironically, to consolidate democracy, Chile's center-left governments have reinforced an aversion to popular mobilization and have offered few incentives or institutional spaces for citizen participation. Authoritarian enclaves passed down by the military regime constrained the coalition government in power from 1990 to 2010. With its cautious approach, the government has only promoted gradual reforms and built consensus internally, without public input.

Throughout the 1990s, participation in political parties and unions declined. At the

same time, an ever-growing distrust in political institutions signaled widespread discontent. Taking aim at these challenges, the government passed a law in 2011 to engage citizens in public administration and to facilitate the creation of formal organizations.

Since the center-left regained power in 2014, it has faced a series of corruption scandals that have further deteriorated the public's trust in government. However, it has embarked upon a set of reforms to improve the country's standards of transparency and introduce public financing of political parties. But the gulf between elites and the public has restricted the prospects for building the socio-political alliances needed to push for far-reaching reforms.

Reconnecting the country's government to its citizenry is one of the key challenges facing Chile's democracy today. In early 2016, a presidential commission was unveiled with the task of revising the implementation of the 2011 law and proposing ways to enhance citizen engagement. The government has proposed a series of "citizen dialogues" to discuss the content of a new constitution to replace the one left by the military regime. Limited public involvement in this initiative, however, showcases the absence of a culture of political participation. The current efforts to address distrust in political institutions and encourage citizen engagement are important first steps, but the scale of this challenge requires that politicians further push the participatory agenda. As of today, it is not clear that either the government or the people have the will.

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TURKEY: IMPERIAL FOLLY

ANDREW FINKEL

History teaches that no one learns from history. This may sound like a weary aphorism, but societies are highly selective in what they absorb from their past, capable of fictive memory, and prone to using and abusing their history. Popular memory, too, need not be obvious but embedded in language and custom. The more accurate lesson, perhaps, is that societies need to look carefully at those claiming a historical mandate. Confusing history with the tyranny of habit can be a recipe for bloodshed—as the emerging states of former Yugoslavia learned. And hiding behind history to avoid facing the present can be a recipe for disaster, as the evocation of an English golden age in the Brexit campaign has proven.

I write this as someone who has worked as a journalist in Turkey since 1989, the year the Berlin Wall came down, an event of obvious historical importance and one that redefined the geography of Istanbul. Stranded on the edge of Europe, Istanbul again regained its historically pivotal position—but in a very different context. Suddenly it became a metropolis at the center of something new and confusing. Russia, Central Asia, the Balkans, and the Middle East again came into its field of vision. Even before this, Istanbul itself embarked on an epic transformation as a result of the urban migration of rural populations. Post-World War II, Istanbul doubled in population every 10 to 15 years.

If Turkey appears to be in the flux of extraordinary change, it is also a country where some things remain depressingly the same. Turkey has been slow to answer many of the “big questions” it asks of itself.

Can the evolving demands of its large Kurdish population be resolved within the existing

rigid constitutional and political framework that enshrines Turkish nationalism? Will the country be able to control its future through consensual, democratic rule without the prop of authoritarian diktat? Can Turkey ever understand its own history in a way that offers the prospect of reconciliation with its neighbors in Armenia or even its own population outside the Sunni Muslim mainstream?

In short, is Turkey any different from any of the other nations in the asylum who, according to Einstein’s (possibly apocryphal) definition of insanity, do the same thing over and over again expecting a different outcome?

There are a host of reasons why some societies learn from their history and others are condemned to relive it. But one factor that makes repeating history more likely is when rulers try to control the transmission of the past through force and interdiction. The early Turkish republicans reveled in the discovery of the pre-Hellenic civilizations of Anatolia just as the current lot see themselves as recreating the glory of the Ottoman and Islamic empires. Imperial folly is another brand of social opium.

At the same time, it is not entirely true that only the winners write history. Dissident history is inescapable—encoded in legend, religion, and art. The winners, though, do try to make the rules. The lesson of history should be that there are alternatives. History should teach that history itself ought not be used to distract from a system constructed on patronage and corruption. History is no excuse to avoid holding the present accountable.

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VENEZUELA: A DICTATOR'S PLAYBOOK

ALFREDO ROMERO

In 2014, Venezuelan security forces grabbed Efraín José Ortega Hurtado, covered his face with a rag, beat him, and shoved him in the back of a vehicle that took him to a police station in Caracas. There, he was shackled and forced to kneel for over seven hours. To avoid external bruising, officers used masking tape to wrap his body and face in newspaper before viciously beating him with a bat. The cops handcuffed Ortega's arms behind his back and gave him electric shocks. This was all done to obtain the names of accomplices or funders of a supposed conspiracy network to overthrow the government—something Ortega knew nothing about. None of this was done with a warrant, and Ortega remains in jail to this day.

Ortega is just one of 86 political prisoners currently incarcerated by the Venezuelan government. Since 2014, the state has held close to 6,000 political detainees. However, the thin veneer of a legal system built by the Venezuelan regime allows President Nicolás Maduro to deny the existence of any such political prisoners. The government simply claims that the judicial authorities exercise autonomous power. Yet, in reality, the ruling party controls the courts, using the judiciary as a weapon for political persecution. Maduro's tactics are not unique; they're used in Ethiopia, Egypt, and Azerbaijan against human rights defenders, democratic governments, and critical journalists.

Instead of reducing state repression, globalization has allowed these regimes to create informal coalitions of autocratic regimes. China, Russia, and Iran have all internationalized their authoritarianism by pumping financial aid and investment into the developing world.

Venezuela has done the same by subsidizing oil for Caribbean and Latin American countries. Those countries have reimbursed Venezuela's favor by providing diplomatic support. The regimes help each other attract international allies and secure seats in strategic geopolitical entities. It's not a coincidence that Venezuela has a spot on the U.N. Human Rights Council.

These authoritarian regimes have been effective in turning their own international media networks into propaganda machines (China's CCTV, Russia's RT, Iran's Press TV, and Venezuela's telesUR), creating an international ideological coalition that attempts to veil strategies of oppression. This explains why, at the same time there is a shortage of toilet paper in Venezuela, the state owns and manages two satellites in space (and will launch a third in 2017).

The NGO Foro Penal Venezolano has registered 2,030 political detentions in Venezuela during the first half of 2016, and the majority of the population supports a recall referendum against Maduro. Despite more than 3,000 protests against the shortage of food and medicine, the government claims there is no humanitarian crisis. Precisely because of this official denial, it is vitally important to pull back the curtain and reveal how these regimes have historically used the façade of rule of law to commit human right abuses.

This is a historical lesson from the playbook of dictators that the world has forgotten. Venezuela is just another example.

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