

Understanding the World 50 Years Hence

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, JUL 17 2012

These past few weeks, I've been writing a chapter for a school text book. It has damned near killed me!

Not that I've not understood the topic – which was “the End of the Cold War” and all that has followed. No, on this topic, and its implications for southern Africa, I've published several pieces, especially after spending a stimulating four months at the (alas, now late) International Centre for Advanced Studies (ICAS) at NYU. And for several years, I co-taught a post-graduate class on the topic with my Rhodes University colleague and friend, Gary Baines.

What has brought me to my knees these weeks past has been the rigidity of the syllabus and the fact that (mostly) I have had to shed the jargon which we all hide behind. The latter has been particularly painful and it has made me realise how absolutely dependent IR is on the coded words we pass between us.

Actually, thinking about it, the piece was less IR than it was Contemporary History: either way, there is way of speaking about the world that makes it readily comprehensible to those of us within the 'chosen circle'.

As I was writing, I was also struck by how much economic history and history of economic thought was needed to make these things intelligible. Surely, IR easier in bygone days when International Politics was...well, it was about inter-state politics!

So, I've genuflected towards John Maynard Keynes and, oh dear, yes, to Milton Friedman, too. Of course, Francis Fukuyama (The End of History) and Samuel P. Huntington (The Clash of Civilisations) had to be drawn closer to the argument. The strict requirements of the syllabus didn't ask for the names of these leading lights, to be sure, but I didn't think that pupils would understand how the Cold War ended (or how what happened afterwards) without appreciating Hegel's notion that ideas, not events, make history.

It was very difficult to do all this in plain language, as you might imagine, and what the editors will make of all this near-theory I don't know.

What I do know is that my Research Assistant, Estelle Prinsloo, has trawled the web and found a slew of great illustrations for the chapter. Cartoons work the best, of course, but in the 30-odd illustrations we've sent to the publisher, only four cartoons were included.

Why did I write this chapter?

A good question, this: several times during the deep despair of my writing I ask myself for an answer.

I was moved, as I am daily, by the gratitude for the labour of successive history teachers – those wonderful folks who inspired me. They were such passionate people, such consummate professionals, and they left an indelible impression on me and, I hope, on the thousands that they taught. True, that was a time when public schools were regarded as institutions which were essential for the common good, when the teaching profession was held in high esteem, and when different forms of nationalism underpinned the intellectual project which called history.

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Today, all this seems to have changed. It seems that fewer and fewer pupils want to study history. I can't help wondering how they will know where they are, or, infinitely more important, who they are?

But, undoubtedly, vanity was also big factor in why I accepted the invitation.

You know, the old idea that teachers know nothing and that academics have a better grasp of an issue and, besides, they write more fluently. This was plainly a big mistake: as already suggested without the trade-language, we're a little like the Emperor with no clothes!

More, possibly, I was driven by the idea that fifty years hence – possibly, in some fly-blown corner of this planet – a person of roughly my present age will dimly try to remember what the Cold War was, how it ended and what happened next.

As s/he does, they might remember reading it first in the chapter I send off this very afternoon!

About the author:

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