

The Past Is Dead. Long Live the Past! A Manifesto for (Teaching) Social Change

Written by Maïa Pal

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MAÏA PAL, JUL 17 2015

History has to be rewritten in every generation, because although the past does not change the present does; each generation asks new questions of the past, and finds new areas of sympathy as it re-lives different aspects of the experiences of its predecessors.^[1]

This advice might become more and more difficult to enact, yet more and more important to attempt. As celebrations over Magna Carta show, our generation is indulging a fascination with anniversaries and history-based TV documentaries – pop history fixates mostly on Nazis, Ancient Egyptians, and the consolidation of the English throne. With a few exceptions, such as an academic conference, an LSE blog, or a play commissioned for the 750th anniversary, British triumphalism over England's role in the rule of law seems more and more present in an age where 'British values' are becoming legislative categories. Thus, our interest for the past is not the problem; but the questions we ask of it are. This also applies to research and teaching in IR.

In the discipline, some (e.g. critical scholars) believe it is time to concern ourselves more with the history of individuals and their daily lives – as subjects and agents of power. Others remain loyal to the more restricted history of nations, either starting from a theoretical assumption of anthropomorphism to build structural patterns and systems of state behaviour (e.g. neorealists); or forging ahead unashamed of treating history as a mere servant of policy, albeit one that is trusted and relied on (e.g. realists). Aside from this debate, some scholars such as David Armitage in the field of History are loudly reasserting 'why politicians need historians'. Armitage and his co-author Jo Guldi wish to alert governments to the complexities and 'megatrends' of our generation and thus, to the need for big data history aimed at the wider public. IR scholars need to reflect on and engage with this debate on the purpose of history, and this essay hopes to provide some steps towards this task.

IR broadly continues to neglect the past, despite 1) its origins as a historicist discipline; 2) the influential work of the English School and critical approaches; and 3) the 20th Century waves of scholarship in historical sociology and IR's contribution to its third wave. We see this, firstly, in the difficulties for the mainstream to conceptually draw the full consequences of the discipline's revisited origins. This difficulty is observed in textbooks and general scholarship, but mostly in work that reaches the general public and influences policy. This work might not be the concern of the IR academe, but if we want to engage with Armitage and Guldi's call for widening the reach of history to politicians and the public, we must engage with these issues.

Work by critical approaches – mainly postcolonial and Marxist, but also from other scholars concerned with the history of the discipline – shows that the dark side of imperialism cannot be washed away by time. This dark side is embedded in the structures and mechanisms of the modern international order and refers to Eurocentric notions of the state of nature as well as the violent eradication of non-Western cultures, languages, legal systems and modes of production. Whether through capital accumulation, cultural 'othering', or institutional assimilation, European life became the standard of civilization. A practical consequence of the reluctance to fully integrate this past is the unwillingness of states to acknowledge state crimes and responsibility for colonial acts. Although many states have issued apologies and compensation, these remain bitter struggles and do little to change the general narrative of the benefits of Europe's imperial past. This narrative has been reinforced recently by a wave of books on the British

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Empire by authors such as Niall Ferguson and Jeremy Paxman. More than shaping the general public's curiosity, this quasi-scholarship has influenced British schools curriculum to, again, enhance British values and progress.

Secondly, in spite of – and to some extent because of – the influence of Foucauldian approaches to power, IR has generally bypassed the historical sociology turns^[2] and concentrated its critical gaze on the field of security studies.^[3] Foucault's work has been fundamental in disseminating the Nietzschean insight that since the Enlightenment 'we have been trapped in our own history'.^[4] The philosopher-historian should not be bound by socially constructed temporality and its rationalisation of society. However, Foucault's work has also shifted the focus away from historiography as a method of political enquiry, towards a focus on the subjectivities and struggles of the ethico-political self. This has tended to emphasise how power relations – through governments, elites, institutions, events – have a direct impact on individuals, and vice-versa. The cost of this emphasis has been to neglect historical materialism, including concepts such as Trotsky's 'uneven and combined development', Braudel's *longue durée*, Brenner's 'social property relations', or Tilly's 'systematic constructivism'.

For example, 9/11 has been quasi-unanimously accepted as the historical marker for a new world order. This order has fuelled policy-driven IR; however flawed was Fukuyama's 'end of history' concept, at least it forced scholars to discuss the relationship between theory and history. Instead, 9/11 and the consequent War on Terror embody both a return to pre-modern forms of power, civilizational and crusadist – 'us against them'; and a jump into an unknown future – the end of the 1990s globalisation euphoria. Faced with this vision of a no-man's land, IR seems stuck in reinventing the wheel. Rather than learning from the conceptual mistakes of Realist Cold-War scholarship, policy-driven IR has jumped onto the 'New Cold War' wagon pitting the U.S. and Russia as opposite players, respectively seconded by the EU and China. As Mearsheimer predicted in 1990, we have been missing the Cold War. Worse, David Cameron recently compared the war against terrorism and extremism to 'the battle against communism during the cold war'. Assertions of new cold wars are trendy in the political press, on either side of the spectrum – from The Wall Street Journal to Le Monde Diplomatique. But more serious scholarship tends to caution against such reductive comparisons. More importantly, these assertions tell us something about the education of political history; or how we lack the necessary combination of imagination and knowledge of the past and thus routinely succumb – as manufacturers or consumers – to endless sequel scenarios.

Historical markers and their eternal returns are not only problems for the mainstream. The signification of 9/11 has comforted critical scholars in their concern for governmentality and the biopolitics of neoliberalism, to the detriment of political economy and sociology. Terrorism has simultaneously become the beginning and end of history. If critical security studies have become a rich field of enquiry, they have also left the field of mainstream IR, specifically its history, to policy-makers and their academic aides. The focus has become to identify rogue enemies and failing states, and predict potential threats rather than understand what is actually threatened and why. To do so, IR should continue to drift away from its sister Political Science – as it began to do in the late 20th Century. It should explore the richness of the other social sciences and humanities and actively return to history.

The origins of the discipline are much indebted to historians. The English School pioneers who registered its name in the early 20th Century were strongly influenced by a historicist tradition. However, they also sought to distinguish themselves from the continental historicism that drew heavily on nationalist aspirations and devotions. Many of them were international lawyers, a new profession emerging at the end of the 19th Century. They looked to the future, to the need for peace, with the hope that the 'benefits' of imperialism would soon outlive its costs. The international society that was carved out of the bloody flesh of the colonies by European rulers needed a clean face. The rule of law and state sovereignty, as embodiments of the standard of civilisation, were to be the foundations of a world of free and self-determined peoples. Such was the dream of early liberal internationalists, who thereby failed to look history in the eye and reproduced a stagist, Eurocentric and linear conception of development concurrent with scholarship in natural sciences, sociology and anthropology.

Two world wars later and the fall of the European Empires simultaneously accelerated dreams of self-determination while shattering illusions of freedom and emancipation. Poverty, migration, and structural debt came to redefine the relationship between the G-20 and the rest, metropolises and provinces. New scholarship will hopefully contribute to reignite debates over basic concepts and categories.^[5] From 'civilised' to 'developed', what has changed in how we

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accept and reproduce hierarchies between peoples? Although these categories became institutionalised and codified in international law during the 19th Century, this period has been largely ignored, and will benefit from a renewed interest. Central to the definition of sovereignty and to debates on a post-9/11 order, the civilised/barbarian dichotomy remains, albeit in disguise, a 'legitimate' excuse for military interventions, surveillance laws, austerity, and structural adjustment programmes. Through the example of the legalisation of 'British values' to counter extremism and terrorism, but also in the debate against immigration, the civilised/barbarian dichotomy is rehearsed in cultural and economic terms. One must be culturally similar and contribute economically to European society so as to benefit from the advantages of that society. Never mind that these advantages were achieved from the blood and resources of others who were culturally different and economically disadvantaged. Yes Marx, history repeats itself: 'the first time as tragedy, the second as farce'.^[6]

In light of these continuing problems affecting all scholars in the discipline, why is teaching the history of the modern international order not compulsory in most IR undergraduate programmes? Along with International Political Economy, History remains tragically optional in UK curricula. The conclusion here is that making history compulsory could be justified by understanding history as social change. This implies framing the study of history – not as a catalogue of dead white men failing to produce heirs or riding tanks – but as a set of methodologies for conceptualising and archiving instances of social change. Historiography thus becomes not only a valuable object of study, but also a crucial reminder that every present has its own version of the past, to return to our opening quote from Hill. For this task, historical sociology must be given more voice, defined as "a critical approach which refuses to treat the present as an autonomous entity outside of history, but insists on embedding it within a specific socio-temporal bloc, thereby offering sociological remedies to the ahistorical illusions that chronofetishism and tempocentrism produce."^[7] This approach reveals a set of mechanisms – such as chronofetishism and tempocentrism, at play in the eternal return of historical markers discussed above – that renders this past-present dialectic invisible. One solution to address this invisibility in the general study of IR is to teach history not as a succession of events, but as historiography and social change.

Notes

^[1] Hill, C. 1991, *The World Turned Upside Down. Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* London: Penguin, p15

^[2] For summary of these waves and a review of recent scholarship, see Tilly, C. 'Three Visions of History and Theory', *History and Theory* 46 (May 2007), 299-307

^[3] I am referring here to the focus by IR scholars on Foucault's later work, the recently translated lectures at the *Collège de France*. See Foucault, M. *Security, Territory, Population* (St Martins Press, 2007). I am not denying Foucault's work as an historian, merely the tendency to not discuss it as such in IR. Foucault has influenced a more recent vision in historical sociology Tilly identifies as 'cultural phenomenology' (*op. cit.* p304-307). Examples of this vision are found in *Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology*. edited by Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

^[4] Foucault, M. 'The Subject and Power', in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Vol. 3, James Faubion (Ed.) p329

^[5] Examples of this scholarship and of IR's contribution to the third wave of historical sociology are debates on John Hobson's Eurocentric Conception of World History (2012), Alex Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu's How the West Came to Rule (2015), George Lawson and Barry Buzan's Global Transformations (2015), and Sam Knafo's The Making of Modern Finance (2013).

^[6] Marx, K. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, (1852)

^[7] Hobson, J. M. 2002, 'What's at stake in 'bringing historical sociology back into international relations'?

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Transcending 'chronofetisism' and 'tempocentrism' in international relations' in John M. Hobson & Stephen Hobden (eds.) *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 13

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