



CIARI – Centro de Investigação e Análise em Relações Internacionais

www.ciari.org

What is history, and how, if at all, is it relevant to the study of International Relations?

Daniel Guilherme Alvarenga Rodrigues

Estudante da licenciatura em Relações Internacionais e Ciências Políticas
School of Social Sciences and Cultural Studies
University of Sussex

Introduction

Starting from a qualitative approach to history this essay moves then into a very brief history of History. After that we take a look at this social science as a powerful tool and as an instrument of power.

In the second part, this essay treats social scientists as “alchemists” and “oracles” searching for answers to their problems in the past and we take a closer prospective look over some possible future challenges for the discipline.

The third part of the essay establishes the final link between History and International Relations (IR) and tries to explain it.

The essay basically tries to transmit the idea that having an historical knowledge of today’s reality is a crucial pre-requisite for our individual and collective political conscience.

Engulfing into the Historical puzzle

History has and is still growing, but today our possibility to live in an infinite present has led men to try and discard the past. We are, in some extent, in an era where all the emphasis is put on the “now” instead of the “then”. Henry Ford (1916) in the beginning of the century believed that “History is more or less bunk. It is tradition (...) all we want is to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today”. This can indeed be seen nowadays in some people's attitudes and preoccupations but cannot be accepted as the unavoidable defeat of this social science at the hands of the “end of History”. In fact, the future may someday recognize History as the supreme science that explains and comprehends all the others.

Before Herodotus, History (if we can call it that), was more based on myths. Orally traditions were kept and this gave the ancients the idea of sacred and a sense of identity. They basically felt the need to: confirm their identity; communicate it; share and know what rose from the mundane.

With Herodotus came the written history that relied on inquiry and analysis. A science was born which would forever change the knowledge that man has of itself. Jumping to the beginning of the century, Carr (1961) describes a duel that occurs between two schools of thought: positivism and scepticism. The positivists believe they show things how they really are, valuing facts above everything else and seeing them as “sacred”. Scepticism defends that history involves personal judgements and points of view so they will never be truly objective and cold-blooded.

This “battle” that has been carried into the present does not prevent History from necessarily relate itself to two concepts: History as everything that happened in the past and History as the form of narrative that lets us access that past. We can look at this subject then as somehow connected with memory as it works for society in the same way memory works for individuals.

This social science is a powerful tool that can be used either to good or to bad purposes. Butterfield (1951) alerts us precisely to these dangers of history that time has proved as real threats in so many occasions (Nazi regime; Stalinist oppressive regime, etc.). Hobsbawn (1997, p.3) concludes that “history as an inspiration and ideology has a built-in tendency to become a self-justifying blindfolding myth”, it is then up to the historian to “try and remove these blindfolds”.

It is recognized that the modern world state educational policies try to establish the *modus operandi* of people and try to do this through history. Even Liberal countries take into account political purposes in the way history is studied at schools, as states try and influence the way people perceive themselves. Butterfield (1951) was even carried to think that maybe “it would be better for the world to forget all the past, better to have no memories at all, and just face the future without ever looking back”.

This can be proved in one simple and chilling moment in World War One that perfectly exemplifies this belief. At a certain time at Dinant, General Von Hausen’s Saxons shot over 600 men, women and children and among them a three weeks old child. When questioned by a staff officer about how this deed would be looked in history, the general promptly replied: “– We shall write the history ourselves.”(BBC, 1964)

The chase for the Holy Graal and the future

Social scientists have always recurred to History when chasing the Holy Graal of finding transhistorical universal laws (laws that can be applied right across history). Social sciences are based on a constant dialogue between empirical material and explanatory frameworks. Only through History humanity was able to collect and store a stockpile of knowledge that has proven itself as incredibly precious and useful as well as dangerous and devastating.

Debate, disagreement and arguments have always been the living soul of this subject as different ideas, schools of thought and minds clash with each other in a battle ruled by the criteria of evidence. Kant (1963, pp.15-19) defended this strongly when he said that “antagonism in society is, in the end, the cause of a lawful order among men.”

In the end, even if you engulf into the puzzle that History is, you cannot forget the present you live in. We cannot at the time being go beyond palpable language and reality and it does not matter if you are a strong fan of chaos theories or not, no one (unless for prophets) even tries to refute the fact that the future will forever remain to some extent unpredictable and uncertain. History is, however, a remarkable way with which we can try to contain and fight some of this unpredictability.

We can argue that the future awaits History with a very difficult (if not almost impossible!) task; the ever-growing complexity, pace, interconnectedness and surreptitious factors of today’s world gives the Historians amazing challenges and they will need great adaptability and cunningness if they want to keep on fulfilling with their vital role in society and on the eternal unfinished present. The future will tell us if it demands for a written global history relied in “specific, empirical data and carried out in historiographic terms that are traditional, if sophisticated” (Mazlish,

p.5), or if it will drive humanity to reinvent and rebuilt entirely the mechanisms and the foundations that support History itself. We can even be driven to have an extreme position and argue that history can be a hindrance; if we had gotten too stuck in History maybe inventions like cars, internet, writing and the wheel would not exist today. It's up to human beings to know History and their foundations so they are also able to question them.

A profitable Alliance

The connection between History and International Relations (IR) is quite a delicate matter. As Ernst Schulin (quoted in Mazlish, 1993, p.93) puts it: "The concept of 'universal history' or 'world history' elicits the most contradictory opinions in response". When we look at IR we need to distinguish between aggregational national histories against different kinds of phenomena and to know clearly what counts as international and what does not. When focusing on International History, historians must bear this in mind and serve International Relations purposes through a selective and critical approach.

Although we can consider it a cliché, it's not incorrect to start by stating the fact that we need to know History in order to understand the present. As Kierkegaard (1995) puts it "life must be lived forward but understood backwards". What happened behind may affect the way and the path we follow afterwards; there is an undeniable connection between the knowledge of what happened and the way we behave upon the present. This perfectly applies in the historical approach to IR.

Although it does have a great connection with History, the discipline of International Relations rebels itself, very often, from this subject. The “raw materials” it deals with are of an incredibly fast-moving nature and this encourages more of a forward-looking attitude than a backward-looking one. Besides, IR specialists find “the lens provided by the historian” limited. In fact, historians “rely on the persistent accumulation of facts” to approach and analyse events, while social scientists of IR try to develop theoretical explanations “through a constant distillation of the available facts.”(Buzan & Little, 2000)

Despite this, IR scholars need a constant rethinking of the reality that surrounds them and in order to understand the “how” and the “why”, they first need to understand the structures they are dealing with, and these structures necessarily have a past behind them.

History is, in the end, the “evidence”, the “identity card” of today’s world and of today’s International System. By grasping a history book we can not only create a sketch of the past but also create a profile for today’s actors in the international scene. By knowing the preceding events we gain the ability and the access to wiser actions, analysis, decisions and predictions. If not, we would have an increased difficulty to achieve these qualities as we would be blinded by a “veil of ignorance” and forgot about the past. Hobsbawn (1997, p.47) supports this, saying that “historians are the memory bank of experience (...) and are constantly foreseeing, if only retrospectively”. The past will therefore be a potential “model for the present and for the future”.

By finding patterns, theory building becomes more solid and has something with which to fundament itself. A good historical approach makes the IR scholar more easily aware of impacts, consequences and causes of international events. When

studying History we are studying the roots of countries in the form of their past. We study the behaviour of sociological, economical and political forces and energies of certain times and we can then transport that knowledge to the present and into new decisions.

We “dive” more deeply into the process that culminated in today’s cobweb International System that no one can escape from. To study the changes that drove humanity into one single world interconnected “spaceship earth” system is crucial if we aim to reach intellectual freedom on the individual level and a better future on the collective level. History is a fundamental catalyst for these achievements.

As Nevins (1962) puts it “History is the sextant and the compass of states, which, tossed by wind and current, would be lost in confusion if they could not fix their position.” Here is something that should not only be applied to states but most importantly to humanity itself.

Conclusion

Although obvious, it is of utmost importance to remember that everyone and everything has a past and that “nothing is completely new”¹. History adds therefore an important 4th dimension to an analysis and gives theories an ultimate coherence. The dimension of time gives us the depth of feel and a powerful know-how that proves itself precious in decision-making situations.

In International Relations we extract from History an intellectual criterion to judge and understand things as well as to improve our prediction abilities. We also

¹ Mazlish, B. 1993

gain the attributes that protect us against the dangers of and gain the in depth knowledge of essential foundations for theory building.

History is finally the narrative of the human adventure and offers International Relations the possibility and the challenge to study it globally while aiming to relate facts with theories and ideas. It will always allow us to appreciate the fact that actors in the past were not just “good” or “bad”, but motivated in complex and not necessarily consistent ways, just like us.

Bibliography

Butterfield, H., *History and Human Relations, The Dangers of History*, London 1951

Buzan, B & Little, *International Systems in World History* Chapter 1 Systems, History, Theory, and the Study of International Relations pp.18-24, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000

Carr, E.H. *What is history?*, chapter 1: “The historian and his facts”, Macmillan, London 1961

Ford, H. *Interview*, Chicago Tribune, May 25th, 1916

Hobsbawn, E. *On History*, Abacus Book, London 1997

Kant, I. *On History*,. Bobbs - Merrill Educational Publishing, Indianapolis, 1963

Kierkegaard, S. *Works of Love*, Princeton U.P, 1995

Mazlish, B. *Conceptualising Global History*, Westview Press, Oxford 1993

Nevins, A. *The Gateway to History*, Doubleday, 1962

Audiovisual resources

BBC. *The Great War*. This business may last a long time. Tape 1, part 1, episode 3, London 1964