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# A Whig Interpretation of History?

*James Kennedy*

Since last year (2012) I have been involved in a European Commission research project that seeks to discover which measures aimed against corruption actually work. This research includes a relatively modest historical dimension, in which "lessons learned" from the past is one of the main aims. In other words, the project seeks to discover how some governments or societies learned to break the cycle of corruption and achieve a legal and political system where public integrity is the effective norm. In more concrete terms, it's about how Romania or Bulgaria can learn from the history of Denmark – a country that has come to serve as a metaphor for impeccable administration, a kind of international gold standard for public integrity.<sup>1</sup>

## **Finalism**

Like all interdisciplinary projects, this one generates the necessary intellectual tensions. One of the issues for the historians in the project is the tendency of some participants in the project, including political scientists, to see the history of public transparency and accountability in nearly teleological terms. To be sure, there is some allowance for the unevenness of the process, even to credit "medieval" arrangements with notable success and "modern" ones with failure.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the vicissitudes of place and time modify expectations; political scientists are more aware than ever of the dynamics of cultural influences which make straight lines to anywhere problematic. But if teleological commitments are made more nuanced, they are not dismantled. The focus remains on the emergence of a particular kind of political and administrative system that learned the right lessons and managed to break out of the corruption trap.

1 For the use of Denmark in this way, see L. Pritchett and M. Woolcock, "Solutions when the Solution is the Problem. Arraying the Disarray in Development," *Center for Global Development, Working Paper Number 10* (2002). [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PCAAB071.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PCAAB071.pdf) Retrieved 1 June 2013.

2 Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, "Becoming Denmark: Historical Paths to Control of Corruption," APSA 2013 Annual Meeting Paper, [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2301329](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2301329). Retrieved 1 October 2013.

And for some in the project, that success is linked, in a rather classic way, to the advent of Weberian rationality in the organization of the state in particular.<sup>3</sup>

This view of history – the emergence of most just commonwealth and of a more accountable form of government – is akin to what we see in Maris' and Jacobs' book on the development of legal philosophy in the Western world. Though they emphatically eschew metaphysics, and though they leave the future open to new and different developments, they see the current situation, at least in the Netherlands, as having resulted in a pretty good balance between law, order and freedom, a positive evaluation that, as far as I know, they do not grant to any other period of history. This balance is due to choosing for a "small ethics" which repudiates absolutist claims about the good society in favour of one that leaves room for personal choice and mutual toleration. They moreover hope that this arrangement will have a universal appeal, though they are doubtful that their argumentation will be able to persuade visceral opponents. But above all, they are, for all of their cautiousness, convinced that "the West" (nowadays a strongly contested concept) drew the right lessons from history and that current arrangements must also be defended vigorously.

Finalism – the tendency to understand, and value, history for the way it leads to our current situation – is an adversary of which many historians are wary. The nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke was famous for saying that "Jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott," by which he meant that each age is of equal value and needs to be understood in its own terms, and not those of the present. It was a plea for empirical research of the past, and one against an abstract and speculative kind of history that saw it all heading toward one point in time. It must be said that Ranke was not free of metaphysics or of interest in the wide sweep of history – just like many top historians today are not – but his love of the past for its own sake made him keen to avoid seeing that history merely, or chiefly, in today's terms.

The classic historical work warning against a morally-laden finalism was written about a century after Ranke's dictum by the British historian Herbert Butterfield in his slim volume on *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931). For understandable reasons, Butterfield is better known in the Anglophone world than in the Dutch. Butterfield's charge was that British history had been interpreted by Protestants and political Whigs as the ultimate triumph of progress over benighted and obstructing forces that they associated among other things with Roman Catholicism, Toryism and, in the popular mind "the view that the Middle Ages represented a period of darkness when man was kept tongue-tied by authority." He continued: "The total result of this method is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present." In this way,

3 For the Swedish case in particular, see Bo Rothstein, "The Indirect 'Big Bang Approach,'" *Review of International Political Economy* 18 (2011) 2, 228-250.

the "whig historian stands on the summit of the twentieth century, and organized his scheme of history from the point of view of his own day."<sup>4</sup>

Butterfield was a Christian, but he did not think that Providence could be read so facily into history: "We may believe in some doctrine of evolution or some idea of progress and we may use this in our interpretation of the history of centuries; but what our history contributes is not evolution but rather the realization of how crooked and perverse the ways of progress are, with what wilfulness and waste it twists and turns, and takes anything but the straight track to its goal, and how often it seems to go astray, and to be deflected by any conjuncture, to return to us – if it does return – by a back-door." (Butterfield, p. 16-17). Nor did he think that the study of history could or should serve as the basis for asserting universal moral norms. Students of history might well legitimately "be driven now to watch the story of men's growing consciousness of the moral order, or their gradual discovery of it." But he added that even then morality "even though it be absolute, is not absolute" to the historian (Butterfield p. 68). To claim moral truth from history – to claim to have learned its fundamental lessons – is to deny what the historical record actually reveals, or perhaps better stated, does not reveal. Simply said, history does not offer a basis to proclaim the universal.

## Learning lessons

Maris and Jacobs may suppose that such critique does not apply to them: they do not claim Providence as an underwriter of history. Nor would they deny that history often offers a bumpy ride, just as they are mindful that current conditions are not necessarily and invariably favourable to the continuation of a legal order that gives all of its citizens the rights and the room that they have coming to them. Moreover, they might claim that their own disciplines allow for a more normative view of history, however much historians might deny themselves such license. And to be fair, it seems to me plausible enough to suggest, as they do, that there is an intellectual discussion over important issues that develops over time, and that certain communities learn from their experiences in the light of this discussion.

Nevertheless, I find it hard to escape the impression that they believe that the philosophical framework of our current legal order had such a resonating logic and such a moral superiority that any other outcome than its eventual emergence would have been learning the wrong lessons from history, and perhaps also drawing the wrong inferences from the legal-philosophical discus-

4 Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, [http://cdn.preterhuman.net/texts/literature/general/Butterfield%20\(Herbert\)%20The%20Whig%20Interpretation%20of%20History.pdf](http://cdn.preterhuman.net/texts/literature/general/Butterfield%20(Herbert)%20The%20Whig%20Interpretation%20of%20History.pdf), 11-12. Retrieved 11 October 2013.

sion of "the West" that developed itself historically. The ultimate trajectory of the Western philosophical tradition, identified by these scholars in this book, pushed history in the right way. The Whig interpretation offered by these authors, in this case not Protestant but secular, seems insufficiently mindful of the contingencies of history, in which the ideas they discuss, and the historical context in which they were made, might have had a very different outcome. It creates too much the impression that the current legal order, at least for blessed Western countries, is the result of the proper lessons learned from the past. That other outcomes might have been the result of having learned other lessons does not seem to have been given sufficient weight.

This criticism touches directly on a second point – whether people in the past actually learned the lessons the authors impute to them, or whether these lessons are imposed on them by the authors themselves. Historians can profitably follow what people in the past said or wrote down about the lessons they thought they had learned, but Maris and Jacobs go further by placing "lessons learned" in a strongly ideological framework that does not always do the past justice. The best example – both because they forefront it and because it is part of a larger scholarly debate – is their assertion that the "religious wars" of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries prompted Europeans to learn that reciprocal tolerance was a better way to organize state and society than to base it on an absolute religious or metaphysical truth. In subscribing to this "myth of religious violence" Maris and Jacobs are not alone, as the theologian William Cavanaugh has shown. Cavanaugh notes that it has become a persistent master narrative that tolerant states emerged as a reaction to the religious wars. But in fact the situation is far more complicated than this. Cavanaugh argues that definitions of "religion" have been elastic over time and have been defined by friends and foes in self-serving ways. So, too, the assignation of the early seventeenth-century conflict as "religious," whereas in reality the aims and motivations in the Thirty Years' War were diffuse, and only at times triggered by religious zeal. On other occasions, co-religionists fought each other for political or economic aims.

Indeed, what Cavanaugh says is missing from the master narrative is the rise of the absolutist state, a state that sought to control religion more rigorously for its own ambitious purposes.<sup>5</sup> It is possible to argue that in the long run the rise of powerful states helped create the conditions for liberal democracies with extensive rights for all citizens, but this was not the intent of rulers, or most political theorists, in the seventeenth century. Controlling religion was not about exercising tolerance toward subjects, but about *raison d'état*, including the extensive violence used by centralizing states to attain their own aims. Religious toleration was also quite slow in coming to most parts of Europe, and in places like France and Austria it only appeared in the 1780s, a century and a half after

5 William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford, 2009), 123-180.

the so-called religious wars. Tolerance, even during a long period of Enlightenment, was not the leading hallmark of the *ancien regime*, as Maris and Jacobs show in their book.

### Sweeping judgments

The Dutch Republic might be considered an exception in this, given that by and large it granted a fair measure of freedom to its denizens. But the rights granted, and the tolerance practiced, was not for the most part based on a capacious political theory based on Erasmian insights as the authors suggest, but out of practical considerations. Religious freedom, for example, was not really established until after the French invasion in 1795. As elsewhere a more principled commitment to tolerance grew in the Republic in the course of the eighteenth century, but this stemmed less from the need to solve a political problem as from changes in both the intellectual and religious environment, which defined "religion" in new ways. It might be added that the Dutch state's more effective control and direction of religion after 1795 was accompanied by the most autocratic regimes in modern Dutch history, the Bonapartes and Willem I.

In any event, "religious violence" was not something the new states of Europe entirely solved in response to the Thirty Years' War. A new round of "religious wars" over the desired nature of the modern state would later occur, most violently in Europe the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the Spanish Civil War, which pitted secularists against forces associated with the church. In each case, proponents of a new legal order which championed equal rights for all citizens proved at least as violent and ruthless as their clerical opponents. In many parts of Europe, the path to equal rights for all, and away from religious authority, was not a path away from violence and autocratic rule, but through it.

But all this presumably is not historical material for the lessons that Maris and Jacobs think we have learned, or need to learn. They admit of an Enlightenment tradition that led to violence, but they seem to treat it as a dead-end path. Their master narrative is that we learned (apparently rather bloodlessly) through the Enlightenment to replace religious obscurantism with a tolerant legal system that eventually through lessons learned granted universal human rights. The problem is not only, as Cavanaugh observes, that in consigning "religious violence" to our past our assessments and actions in the Middle East are misinformed and mischievous (Cavanaugh, pp. 210-225), but more broadly that we are too self-satisfied about our own past, too inattentive to the tensions and violence that have come with the transition, and perhaps too little alert to the costs it yet asks. The problem, seen this way, is not only that it is questionable whether lessons can be derived from the past, but whether historically-informed lessons are actually being taught.

Related to this is a brief final point: it is important to keep in mind that big “lessons” learned from history are very much dependent on the big frame in which it has been seen, at the cost of a more balanced, and sober account of history. In 1913, many European assessments of the past century or centuries were optimistic; it was not difficult to see the progress that had been made. In 1945, that was much less easy to see, and the lessons learned then were accordingly different. Today, we are also less tempted to see the triumph of liberal democracy as the end of history than some were in the 1990s. Rather than jumping to sweeping judgments of the past it is better in any case to see history as a place where lessons are both learned, and where they are un-learned, and where they do not always result in giant steps for humankind but are often wrongly conceived and imperfectly applied. In the intensity of modernity, lessons learned are not infrequently bound up in irony: unforeseen consequences result from good intentions. The historian Bernard Wasserstein noted in his history of the twentieth century that “civilization and barbarism walked hand in hand in Europe in the course of the past century. They were no polar opposites but, as Walter Benjamin maintained, locked together in a dialectical relationship.” Wasserstein saw “the green shoots of barbarism” in “the coarseness of much public discourse and the vulgarization of many forms of aesthetic expression.”<sup>6</sup> My point here is not necessarily that Wasserstein is correct in his particular assessment, but that it rightly illustrates the problems of a straightforward “lessons learned” narrative of history.

Can we learn lessons from history? Of course. In all manner of ways people have done so, revising techniques or critical insights in response to shared experience, or in this case, in the on-going dialogue of an intellectual “tradition,” however, tenuous such claims to a single tradition are. And there is no gainsaying that on the basis of scientific insights human beings have learned to progress. Also, societies have found ways over time to curb corruption. But the larger and more expansive the claims of “lessons learned” are, the more dubious they necessarily must be, and the more likely its authors are to “abridge” history (to use Butterfield’s term) in untenable ways. In this perspective, a heightened wariness of narratives that seem particularly interested in justifying the existing status quo may be especially justified.

### **Over de auteur**

James Kennedy is hoogleraar Nederlandse geschiedenis sinds de Middeleeuwen aan de UvA.

6 Bernard Wasserstein, *Barbarism and Civilization. A History of Europe in Our Time* (Oxford, 2007), 793; 786.