

THE SENSE OF HISTORY

The conference addressed the role that history plays in the present. In a world where history is, in some ways, increasingly eclipsed because of the inadequacy of teaching in schools, an uncertainty as to what skills the study of history imparts and the sheer pace of change and technological innovation, the place of history in modern cultures was at issue. The conference brought together leading historians, public figures and journalists who brought different angles to bear on the matter.

SESSION I

In the first session, a series of questions dominated the discussion: what was the role of historians in the modern age? How was history used by non-historians (especially politicians), and could it be misused? Was history useful to politicians and if so in what way? Would a knowledge of history help politicians to make better decisions? Could history be used as a guide to the future?

Societies with too little memory and those with too much were both deemed to face problems. We seemed to live in a world that was either almost completely ignorant of the past, or else remembered it all too selectively. But the past did, nonetheless, exercise a profound influence on the present and on the future.

A Rankeian view that historians were capable of providing some kind of objective truth about the past still exercised some influence, but we now lived in an age of relativism. It was ironic that just at the point when post-modernists were telling us that there was no such thing as truth (that historians can never do truth, only speculative truth) that they were being turned into purveyors of authoritative truth. Shared history - and truth and reconciliation commissions - were deemed to be fraught with complications. Historians, it was said, would inevitably be guided by contemporary preoccupations. Much was made of the way the Vikings were now seen by schoolchildren as great bead-makers and innovators, whereas fifty years ago, their story was one of rape and pillage.

Many echoed the point that all history was contemporary history – and the interplay (the rhyming) of the past and the present gave certain experiences and events a particular resonance. Historical interpretations could certainly come to influence the present: the influence of history on politicians and the decisions that they made was much discussed. Eden's sense that Suez represented a replay of the Munich crisis led him to the action he took. But in some cases, a misreading of history helped to make decisions that were not necessarily bad. Mrs. Thatcher's historical interpretation of the British spirit was mentioned; John Gaddis' interpretation of Bismarck's second stage of power was said to exercise its influence on George Bush, and Tuchman's "Guns of War" on President Kennedy. But it was also suggested that in some cases the use of history by leaders was more a rhetorical or incidental device for making a point rather than through a profound historical conviction.

It was pointed out that sometimes politicians have bravely and rightly chosen to forget history (Schumann and Adenauer in 1950 for instance). Many countries have chosen to

evade their violent past – and in some cases (notably Spain and the Soviet Union), this has been a good thing, whereas America (over slavery) and Germany (over the Nazi era), could be seen as being overly dominated by memory. The British too were criticised for being unable to forget their part in the Second World War. Amnesia had its part to play.

The best historians were those whose antennae are sensitively attuned to the world around them. (In Session II, this was to some extent contested by the way that the present can at times hijack the past, as for instance when the D-day debate in Northern France on the 60th anniversary was coloured by the Iraq war, such that young French people were asking whether the Americans had invaded or liberated in 1944.)

But it was suggested that history offered very few signposts to the future, and that historians should not try to be prophets. They could, however, challenge the assumptions of exceptionalism or of ‘temporal parochialism’. They could also map the roads not taken and provide pictures of alternative worlds that widen the human experience. There was a view that history didn’t necessarily help people make good decisions but it did make good the context in which those decisions were made. (This was taken up in Session III)

But the historians’ main role was seen as that of demythologising the past. Some thought that this was optimistic because as many noted, entrenched myth is very hard to shift even when historians provide ample evidence to the contrary. Even in Ireland, a popular view of the Irish troubles (based mainly on bad history) has remained unaffected by the more sophisticated interpretations in Irish schools and amongst professional Irish historians. It was suggested that in such situations, facts should be emphasised over interpretation. Myth can also be created as events happen: a journalist present spoke of the Serbian war and Bloody Sunday and the way certain facts became true though in retrospect it was clear that memory had played tricks with reality. Writing official histories for immigrants, one spoke of the interplay between myth and the attempt to write something like an acceptable truth. And then a novelist present spoke of the importance of legend – and of subjective truth: truth didn’t matter so much as essence.

There were calls for a wider focus, rather than the ploughing of the same fields.

SESSION II

What sort of history should be taught in schools? Was history being eclipsed in the curriculum and why? What of history on television? Did it make it popular? Could history teaching help to promote the integration of immigrant communities and how? And did greater knowledge of history allow for better international relations, or quite the contrary?

There were thought to be particular problems with provincialism and selection, and this was true of Universities as well as television programming and publishing, but more especially of British schools where the only history taught (if it was taught at all) was Hitler, Hitler, a bit of Stalin, followed by more Hitler.

Representatives of an American school suggested that demography changed the nature of history teaching altogether and eclipsed the need for national history: global history had to

encompass the history of all sorts of races. A political philosopher and biographer strongly disagreed and said that it was national history (if mindful of multicultural dimensions) that provided a sense of belonging that was important. A German spoke of the way integration and history stood in opposite camps, and referred to a recent incident in Düsseldorf when a group of Arabs tried to burn down a synagogue. There was outrage, until it was discovered it had been done by Arabs, upon which they were quickly forgiven - being, to some extent, outside the historical consciousness of Germany.

It was suggested that 'international' history was a safer term to use than global history because not every part of the globe is relevant to every national history or every stage of history. There were other appeals in defence of international history which was being downplayed in favour of more introverted versions of cultural history, which had no sense of public obligation or public audience in terms of what ought to be taught. The replacement of people who taught about power and politics and war by people who taught about Hamburgers in Nebraska if not necessarily doughnuts in Ontario was thought worrying. And the divisiveness between different faculties and historical specialities was also lamented.

There was discussion of the skills history can teach – especially how to ask questions – and how to sort out good evidence from bad evidence. History could also encourage a sceptical frame of mind, and that is why the teaching of history was important. (There was evidence that there had been a decline in asking questions). The eclipse of history in schools was true outside the UK too – you had bits of it in lessons about 'civics' (in Canada) or 'Ethics and Society'. In the UK, teachers teaching citizenship classes often found that they were in reality teaching contemporary history.

In an analysis of history programmes on television, it was thought that one of the reasons that history was popular was because it had a clear narrative certainty; it was good storytelling. To that extent, it was old-fashioned. And the idiom of the academy could be handed down to audiences in this way. Sometimes it was the same history cut and explored in different ways – there were endless classic tales of the Nazis or the Tudors. But in general, they were usually firmly British stories.

Oral history had been used exhaustively to tell the story of the two world wars – but that is now changing, as those generations involved in the war die off. There have to be new ways of retelling the story. It was also suggested that for the period after the Cold War, people are much less willing to be interviewed, to provide oral history. There was also a sense that contemporary politics were not explored in their historical context, and indeed that there was very little contextualising of geopolitical issues. There was a danger that history had become a comfort zone of nostalgia – a pastoral idyll, or "the new gardening" to get away from the harshness of modern life.

There was talk of the popularity of programmes amongst younger audiences of putting contemporary people in miserable iron age camps and other demanding historical settings. There was also talk of the influence of Hollywood films on the television output. Some spoke of the range of plays, films and TV serialisations in historical periods being evidence of the abundance of history in our midst, and that the pervasiveness of history was in some senses unprecedented. There was a boom in family history researches at public record

offices. Others (this point was taken up in Session III) spoke of the perniciousness of some versions of popular history, such as “Braveheart”, which endorsed a twisted version of the truth and led to all sorts of ignorant political movements for independence.

Even in spite of the popularity of such programmes and such apparent historical pervasiveness, there was evidence of an increasingly “historyless” European culture, in which over 50% of people (in the UK) had apparently never heard of Auschwitz, and had no interest in recent Italian history (in Italy). There was no easy solution to these problems. Amongst those who did know something of history, the absence of a contextual historical knowledge seemed to be the real problem.

The question as to whether the study of history allows people in different countries to understand each other and therefore love each other more (and might lead to the British ratifying the European treaty) was answered in various ways. In some cases, good history encourages people to hate each other because the harder truth emerges. But others said that on the contrary, history was a means to help bind the peoples of Europe together, to emphasise our common European ancestry, and the naturalness of the British in Europe. This led to some argument as it was also suggested that history teaches the opposite and we had to understand the specific historical reasons for the British to feel differently about Europe.

It was also suggested that one of the reasons for the popularity of Hitler stories was that it was a story with a “happy ending”, in the sense that victory stood at the end of it, and of good overcoming evil.

SESSION III

In spite of the words of caution from many eminent historians about the inability of historians to predict the future, those injunctions were ignored by economists, soldiers and strategists who take many of their inferences from history: their professions were such that they had to learn from specific historical examples. This was especially the case with economics.

But it was asked how that learning from history could be made more rigorous. The casual analogy could be used all too scrappily. Things like sample size were all too often ignored. What were the counterfactuals? We needed to get people to think about non-linear relationships in the past before they leapt to conclusions about future trends. And one of biggest problems in drawing inferences from the past was in forecasting worst-case scenarios.

Politicians (said one politician) were however *not* rigorous. Taking up the points made in the first session about politicians bravely ignoring historical events, he cited various instances. These included Mladic’s references to the battle of Kosovo in 1389 which were ignored by those advocating the action in Kosovo, and Tony Blair’s evasion of the Battle of the Boyne and Northern Irish history, of whose ignorance Blair made a virtue. Indeed, in the case of Northern Ireland, it was possible that it would have been difficult for the Tories to have made the Good Friday agreement because of the way that so many Conservative

colleagues had been murdered by the IRA. Those memories made it difficult to move on. But it was said that politicians were not just ignorant of history – they were generally ignorant – of chemistry, music, of other things too.

It was suggested that Blair and many modern politicians were less interested in history as a question of raking over the past, but as a matter of the future, Blair being determined to make his own mark on history- even though it was true to say that Blair was influenced in his decision to go to war in Iraq by the need to stand by America after the extraordinary support she had given Europe during the Cold War and the two world wars.

But it was also the case that the instrumental uses of history in many fields, other than politics, had never been greater. In law, especially constitutional law, there were constant references to the framing of certain statutes at particular points in history and what they meant. Historical interpretations were an intrinsic part of the legal process. And constitutional law persistently required an analysis of what the intentions of the original ratifiers of the US Constitution would be in certain situations.

To some extent, in business, historical references were an important assistance in helping to provide alternative worlds and counterfactuals (the events that might have happened but didn't) which have helped in the construction of scenarios (which are not prophecies of the future, but which help businesses plan for possible outcomes). It was suggested that though history can never provide a clear map of the future (which will always take surprising directions), it may be the *sense* of history rather than history itself which is important. It could be that by lengthening our experience to places to which we haven't been and cannot go, we provided a way of coping with the "non-linearity" of historical processes.

It was thought that there were sometimes problems with historians making inferences about contemporary politicians, without taking into account that there are a radically different set of circumstances to those that they may be familiar with in their area of research. A story of the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead discussing New York public education was used to make this point. A man protested to her "the more you talk about New York, Margaret, the more I begin to wonder about Samoa".

It was said that the military does, for better or worse, use history. Soldiers have had to study the past and have had to use such of it as they can. But they haven't always got it right because every now and again, people from Napoleon onwards will tear up the rules and announce that they will do things differently. So, history is not always of such use.

The revolution in media affairs and the effects that that has had on the concoction of evidence in history was also discussed.

The role of myth remerged at the end: on the one hand, it was a dangerous toxic substance imbibed by petty nationalists and ethnic minorities. Another view was that myth had some constructive role to play. But it was then contested that people had thought for too long as historians that nations could be built with myths and the educational system that propagates them: this was becoming unravelled, and we should be more interested in ways that Empires legitimise themselves.