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A History of Learning from History

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Can we learn from history? Can we not learn from history? Assuming we can learn from history, do we? And if we do learn from history, do we learn what we want to learn? Need to learn? Hope to learn? What we should or shouldn't learn?

To answer these questions, philosophers, historians, psychologists, and others often point to the very fact that there is history transmitted through the oral, visual, and written traditions. Why else would there be a history, if not to learn from it in some useful way? Merely as a monumental human narcissism? For some humans to make a living through a commodity as intrinsically valuable as a hula-hoop or a pet rock? To kill the pain of existential anguish or fill the void of nothingness?

Matters would be easier if a definitive history were developed, established, and maintained. New stories would be added and the edifice would become higher and higher, though no less sturdy through time. (One would not have to worry about higher and higher becoming closer to closer to God--the ultimate hubris--as long as one assumed God as already everywhere or nowhere.) However, the edifice that has been built is much like the Tower of Babel. For there are many competing histories--conservative, liberal, revisionist, reactionary, revanchist, postmodern--whirling in a vortex of babble masquerading as truthful discourse. (In fact, it seems more and more that history seems to be less and less about the past. This can lead to unfortunate tragedies such as Hindu fanatics destroying the Babri mosque, which had long been a symbol of Mughal accommodation making Hinduism in northern India possible--e.g., the renaissance in Krishnaite theology and the writing of the Ramcharitmanas.) This state of affairs yields an additional question to the ones above--what history can or do we learn what from?

In this context, let's look at one position on the learning from history issue--that there is nothing to learn from history because every situation is unique; that seeking to learn or believing one learns from history and actually applying the past to the present or planning for the future is sheer folly. Purveyors of this position cannot possibly believe in it: their own lives give them away. Throughout any day, they seem to think and feel and act depending on learned consequences--either through direct experience, the observed experience of others, or perhaps even some residual wisdom--e.g., some collective unconscious, some primeval penchant through heredity to perceive adaptively.

The studies of philosophers and psychologists support the position that we can learn from history, in fact, we cannot not learn from it, so we do learn from history. These studies also support the position that at times--at what times may be unpredictable or unknowable--we learn what we want, what we need, what we should or shouldn't.

Did Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State-designate, have all this on her mind when she wrote in 1991 that "...History is a strange teacher...It never repeats itself exactly, but you ignore its general lessons at your peril..."? Did her own learning from history lead her to this opinion about the learning of history? Perhaps in the future, historians will tell us. (See Albright, M. (1991.) The role of the United States in Central Europe. Paper published by the Academy of Political Science; Ankersmit, F. R. (1989.) Historiography and postmodernism. *History and Theory*, 28, 137-153; Hall, J.R. (1980.) The time of

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

history and the history of times. *History and Theory*, 19, 113-131; Lessons from history: Essential understandings and historical perspectives students should acquire. Los Angeles, CA: National Center for History in the Schools; Megill, A. (1994.) Jorn Rusen's theory of historiography between modernism and rhetoric of inquiry. *History and Theory*, 33, 39-60.) (Keyword: History.)