

7. Learning From History

Overview: Hegel is not strictly correct that the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from it. In fact, we take many lessons from history – though often wrong, mis-leading ones. The fact is that we use history both for cognitive and rhetorical purposes; and every group wants a useable history that furthers its purposes. Though historicism can be dangerous, and as 'impoverished' as Popper argued, worthwhile theories of human history are possible – by focusing on the issues and games in play more than the narrative of events; by great caution in the use of historical analogy; and by recognizing that it is often appropriate and sensible to anticipate and take precautions against events not likely to happen. The chapter concludes with an introduction to David Christian's suggestion of 'big history,' in which our merely human history is interpreted as a stage of some significance in the history of the universe.

What experience and history teach us is that people and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.

- G.W.F. Hegel

Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement; and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

- George Santayana

We understand what Hegel means, but as worded the first epigraph is flatly wrong. People and governments always act on principles learned or deduced from past experience, except when they act on solely on impulse. They can scarcely do otherwise. Unfortunately, however, the conclusions that we draw from experience and history are often mistaken, or misapplied to our current situation. In these cases, it's not that we fail to learn from history, but that we learn the wrong lesson – a misleading analogy or a self-serving one, appropriated for some political purpose.

A gross misapplication of this kind within my generation's memory was the use of [the European situation in 1938](#) as a guide for US policy in [Vietnam](#) in the 60s. It was correctly pointed out that Chamberlain's [appeasement](#) of Hitler at Munich was a disastrous choice. It did *not* follow that the decision of Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson 'to resist the spread of communism' in Vietnam was justified or wise. [Ho Chi Minh](#) was nothing like Hitler and post-World War II Vietnam was nothing like Germany after World War I. The whole of In-

dochina had been resisting absorption into the Chinese empire for many hundreds of years. It wanted independence – from the French, from the Chinese, from the Americans – and could have used some friendly help in that direction. A more accurate precedent for Ho's Vietnam would have been 1776, and the American Declaration of Independence.

Thus, our problem is *not* to start learning from history as if we had never done so. Rather, we should think about *how* to learn from it – shrewdly, relevantly, wisely, instead of the reverse. As it stands, we tend to use history ideologically: as a cognitive weapon, to defend the policies we favor and attack those we do not. We use it too as existential myth, to bind our groups together, and inform members of their shared identity. We also have professional scholars of history, who labor as objectively as they can to reconstruct the past from its surviving texts and artifacts. These historians and historiographers provide invaluable compilations of detail, and an assortment of narratives of the past from which their readers can pick and choose. None of these approaches is conducive to the sort of learning that Hegel wants: a valid *theory* of history to guide statesmen and ordinary citizens in making their practical choices.

Now, the search for such theory and the idea that history might have such guidance to offer is called [historicism](#); and after the grandiose claims of Hegel and Marx (at their worst), appropriately criticized by Karl Popper, it has a bad reputation.¹ Yet the historicism that Popper attacks is something of a straw man, influential as his targets have been. There is no reason to let Hegel and Marx have the last word on the interpretation or theory of history – if such theory is possible. There is no reason to see the possibilities of historicism as limited by their work. They were pioneers; and like most pioneers they made mistakes.

Also, human history is not like classical mechanics. What we might hope from a sound theory of history *cannot be* a prediction of how things will turn out, because too much complexity and randomness, and too many [butterfly effects](#), supervene. But we can hope:

- first, for some useful ideas about how human societies work;
- next, for a balanced, politically neutral interpretation of how we got to where we are;
- and finally, for some intelligent way to think about a current situation, anticipate its likely possibilities and make sensible collective plans to deal with them.

To these ends, this chapter will argue that the idea of groups and societies as minding systems may be of help. But the first step is to be clear why we will never have a theory of the evolution of human society such as Hegel and Marx imagined.

¹ See also this review of [anthropological historicism](#).

7.1 Toward a Worthwhile Historicism

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.

- Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)

We are social creatures to the inmost centre of our being. The notion that one can begin anything at all from scratch, free from the past, or unindebted to others, could not conceivably be more wrong.

- Karl Popper

Whatever their differences on other points, Marx and Popper are in complete agreement that human beings are social creatures who do what-ever they do in some historical and social context – who always act within existing circumstances. Marx sees much more determinism in the social process than Popper would accept; but in rejecting Marxist historicism, Popper's thought seeks implicitly for a historicism of its own. For it raises exactly the same question that Marx does about the causal role of history: If we are always thinking and acting within circumstances transmitted from the past, then how exactly does this contextual influence work? Precisely how do our circumstances constrain us, and to what extent do they leave us free? What could we learn from past and present about the future, if we really set our minds to it?

Suppose we start by granting that both were right up to a point: Marx, that history establishes a powerful context which displays intelligible patterns and strongly constrains the human actors who make it; but that Popper too, was correct that Marx and Hegel and their followers badly over-stated their case, and that history is not predictable as they imagined. A first conclusion of our theory of history is that we must *expect* to be surprised. With these points granted, we can set out on a historicism of our own: to think of history as humanly meaningful, with some historical developments more likely than others, but without the idea of 'historical necessity,' which Popper correctly trashed.

- To understand how societies work, we will use [abductive reasoning](#) – the usual approach of any science – to frame generalizations from historical experience, and test their validity as best we can.
- To explain and interpret a given situation, we will rely on our concepts and theories, and on rigorously selected historical analogies to justify or discredit our understandings of them.
- To think and plan sensibly, we will rely on a clear grasp of the twin concepts of prediction and anticipation, and of the distinction between them.

Along these lines, it may be possible to learn some useful lessons from history, not just to kid ourselves and others that we understand what is happening and are in control.

7.1.1 *Abductive Reasoning*

Abduction is guessing. [It] is very little hampered by rules of logic. Even a well-prepared mind's individual guesses are more frequently wrong than right. But the success of our guesses far exceeds that of random luck and seems born of attunement to nature by instinct (some speak of intuition in such contexts).

- Charles Sanders Peirce

At least from the time of [John Locke](#), it became an intellectual problem to give the brilliantly successful logic of science a solid philosophical foundation. This turned out to be a surprisingly difficult question which exercised a number of important philosophers for several hundred years. As [Peirce](#) and the [pragmatists](#) eventually came to realize, scientific reasoning is neither inductive nor deductive by nature, though it makes use of both; rather, it is [abductive](#) – a method of conjecture, testing and *dis-confirmation* which Peirce was first to describe:

- you begin by framing a [hypothesis](#) (a proposed [theory](#)) which seeks to explain and predict the phenomena that you are trying to study;
- then you test your hypothesis with experiments which seek to disprove it;
- next, with the experimental data thus collected, you revise your theory as needed to fit the new findings,
- and then proceed to test this new hypothesis. Finally,
- you accept – provisionally choose to believe and rely upon – a 'best' theory which best stands up to such destructive testing.

One must admit that some of the concepts in this sequence are far from clear. We could ask, What counts as an [explanation](#)? What does it mean to 'explain' something? We could demand some further precision on what it means to 'test' and 'disprove.' We could point out that the notion of a 'best' explanation is ultimately subjective. What seems best to one theorist for one purpose may not seem so to another for a different purpose. In the hard sciences (like classical physics and chemistry) such objections may seem pedantic for the work of a bench scientist. But in the social sciences they are anything but superfluous. They cut to the core of what these disciplines can hope to achieve. They call in question their claims to be considered 'science.'

Let us concede straight away that the social sciences cannot be sciences in the same sense that classical physics was one because it cannot test hypotheses in the same way: anthropology, economics and political science can never do controlled experiments. In psychology, these are only sometimes possible. But even fundamental physics has now gone beyond the limits of what can be tested experimentally. The upshot is a need to re-think the abductive method and to revise its concept of 'testing.' We still want to frame hypotheses. We still want to say that some of these are better than others. But we must now test, compare and judge them in a more general way. And we must test, compare and judge some other things – e.g. concepts, paradigms, re-

search methodologies, interpretations of the data – which are not hypotheses (i.e. proposed theories or explanations). We must enlarge and generalize the abductive method to keep up with the advances in science itself.

First, I would suggest that we generalize the concept of a 'hypothesis' and speak instead of different types of cognitive *venture* – an attempt of whatever kind that involves minding or mindset. A hypothesis is certainly a venture in this sense, but so are:

- the unproved conjectures of a mathematician;
- the novel experimental setup of a bench scientist;
- the novel business venture of a firm or '[venture capitalist](#)';
- the novel concepts and usages of ordinary language speakers;
- the novel dress or hair style of a fashion designer;
- the critic's interpretation of a literary text; and
- the judge's interpretation of a law.
- etc.

In fact, a 'venture' can be a novel suggestion or deed of any kind. Its essential features are that it is not yet generally accepted, that it involves some element of uncertainty and risk, and that it is still untested by experience. Thus we have interpretive (or hermeneutic) ventures, theoretical ventures (i.e. hypotheses), financial and military ventures and so forth. Of course, the different types of venture will be subject to different types of test – to different testing methodologies and differing criteria of failure. By the familiar abductive process, our confidence will increase in ventures (of whatever kind) that survive their testing. But in ventures that fail their tests, our confidence will dwindle and vanish. This generalized abductive method will work and be applicable for any kind of venture that gets tested in some way.

Of special interest for this chapter are the policy-making ventures of a group which stakes its fortune and future on the outcome of a political process. That we can think of the group's politics as a collective *minding* process, a clashing and conciliation of competing desires, beliefs and suggestions, affords a way of testing its policy ventures. We can assess the policies of a group much as we do for the choices and intentions of individual persons. We can ask:

- Are they feasible – that is to say, capable of being put into effect and carried out as planned?
- Are they effective on their own terms, leading to the results that they envisage?
- Are they 'rational' – i.e. do they advance their group's objective interests?
- Are they economical? Could their intended goals be achieved in a less costly way?
- Are they ethical, either in the special sense that they do not impair the political bonds that hold a group together, or in whatever other sense?

Like scientific hypotheses, therefore, plans and policies can be seen as ventures of a sort – educated guesses, in other words, subject to abductive testing in the light of experience against the choices of other individuals and groups. Interpretations too, (e.g. of laws or poems or historical events) are ventures of understanding, and subject to their own kind of abductive testing. In sum, the logic of existence itself is abductive, rather than inductive or deductive, with extinction the ultimate test. The group (any group) can be seen as an existential venture which seeks, day-by-day and year-by-year, to avoid experiential disconfirmation. The historian, then, can be seen as an existential critic who tries to reconstruct such games, and then explain why they turned out as they did.

7.1.2 *Analogy and Explanation*

Analogical reasoning and comparison are well known to human nature. They are not safe from error. Together with forgetfulness and negligence, they sway man from his purpose and divert him from his goal. Often, someone who has learned a good deal of past history remains unaware of the changes that conditions have undergone.

Without a moment's hesitation, he applies his knowledge (of the present) to historical information, and measures such information by the things he has observed with his own eye, although the difference between the two is great. Consequently, he falls into an abyss of error.

- Ibn Khaldun

If we hope to actually learn from history, we must first recall and recount it with some accuracy. To do so, we will need to interpret and understand it in some valid way; and for that we will have to draw [analogies](#) between past and present, to perceive in what ways our situation now resembles something that has happened before. For the fact is that all perception depends on a drawing of analogies in a way that's automatic most of the time: We feel sensations – of light, sound, touch, and so forth – as our bodies are touched in various ways – [stimulated](#), as we say, by the world around us. Somehow, the pulses delivered to the brain from our eyes, ears and other sensory equipment get assembled into coherent [perceptions](#) of the world, by analogy with stimulations that we've received and interpreted before. Thus, for example, people with normal eyesight *do not* see black-and-white patches, flashing against some greenish background. They see a piebald dog running across the lawn. The raw sensations remind them of something they've seen before, something they have learned concepts for – and so they jump to that conclusion, directly, immediately, but sometimes wrongly. They don't need to think about how they do this, unless they are neuroscientists. They just look out the window, and see a running dog.

Social and historical perceptions work in this same way, except that there is always more choice and therefore more dispute about the analogies to use – the concepts to be selected and applied, and the precedents to be followed. And just here there is a way to improve how we understand and learn from history, because we do not use analogy as judiciously as we could. Statesmen

and politicians (much like everyone else) tend to use it in a tendentious and self-serving way – to justify doing what they want or intend to do, rather than think what needs to be done.

Returning, then, to the misuse of the [Munich agreement](#) as a blanket condemnation of negotiation with people that we dislike: Churchill's point – that it is bad policy "to feed a crocodile in hopes that it will eat you last" – is rhetorically effective, but not always to the point. There is nothing wrong with feeding your crocodile in a safe enclosure, as zoo-keepers do all the time. The wisdom of negotiating with dictators, terrorists and other nasty persons will depend on those persons and on the circumstances. Sometimes it will be a sensible venture; sometimes a stand on principle may work better. We will have to think, as in statistics, about [two types of error](#): the potential payoffs and costs of declining a reliable arrangement and relationship, against the pay-offs and costs of possible betrayal.

We know that analogies can be deceptive. All analogies must be tested by close observation, which is not always safe or possible. In these cases, "fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me!" is an excellent rule of thumb. And when it is too dangerous to be fooled even once, it is still possible to ask, which is preferable – a false positive or a false negative?

In the case of Hitler in 1938, would we prefer to be wrong in making policy on a (false) assumption that he would keep his promises, or wrong in doing so on a (false) assumption that he would break them? Then, by analogy, we could ask the same question about Ho Chi Minh in 1961, when Kennedy became president, and was rethinking Eisenhower's dictum against [land wars in Asia](#).

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In the use of historical analogy, our view of groups as intentional systems with collective desires, beliefs and purposes can help us to be more careful. Two historical situations are properly analogous only if the issues involved, the beliefs and desires of the players engaged, are judged to be roughly similar, and if their games have similar rules. If the issues and rules are clearly different, then the analogy is dubious.

Similarity of desires and contexts is also relevant. In the case of Hitler and Chamberlain at Munich, the context included Germany's wish for expansion and revenge after its defeat in 1918 and the Versailles Treaty that followed. Corresponding context for Ho and Kennedy in 1961 was Vietnam's desire for independence after the defeat of Japanese imperialism in 1945 and then [of French imperialism](#) in 1954. The situations were not similar at all. Neither was context: Germany in the 1940s could be effectively defeated and transformed. But what would the defeat of North Vietnam have *meant*, in the long run?

And finally, as players in a game, groups (like individuals) must be considered for their traits as negotiating partners. [Hitler's Germany](#) was not an entity that Britain could reliably deal with. It had lost a war, been screwed over

in the peace, and was then governed by an elected regime of demagogues promising redemption and revenge. By contrast, Ho's [Vietnam](#) almost certainly was a regime with which negotiation was possible.

Seeking to learn from history, we will always rely on analogies which can never be wholly rigorous or foolproof. But the judgment of similarity can be made much more rigorous than usually is done. Group desires and Contexts can be adjudged critically; analogies can then be rejected for cause when situations are not alike. When the analogy at point depends on the behavior of a group, we can use the intentional stance in rigorous fashion to estimate that group's desires and beliefs and so anticipate its likely choices, just as we do with individuals. Then we can look for precedents in which the issues and the games are parallel.

The use of historical analogy can be made more systematic with a technique already in use called [reference class forecasting](#) (RCF), which tries to predict the outcomes in a chosen set (the 'reference class') of situations judged to be similar. But, as we'll next discuss, in social situations, prediction is not really possible² and is, in any case, beside the point. In the framing of public policy, the problem is not to predict what *will* happen, but to know what *could* happen – and be prepared to handle it if it does.

7.1.3 *Prediction and Anticipation*

Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.
- attributed ([incorrectly](#)) to Yogi Berra

With the counter-factual imagination that makes us human, we are fearful of what the future may bring. Correspondingly, there is a long history of efforts to render the future knowable, in hopes that we may control it to some extent – invite its blessings, avert its evils, or at least steel ourselves to endure them. Consulting the positions of the stars, or cracks in a tortoise-shell, or the entrails of a chicken, we have tried to predict what comes next. Today we use more scientific methods, but the fundamental problem is still the same: While human society may be considered a [deterministic system](#) (in the sense that people do whatever they do from intelligible motives arising in the past or present), that system is far too complex to be predicted beyond its immediate future – and not always even then. It's like the weather in this respect: With decreasing accuracy, with the mathematical models now in use, we can [predict the weather](#), a few hours or a few days in advance with fair reliability. Beyond a week or so, we can only talk usefully about the average temperature, humidity and so forth at a given location at this time of year. But this is all we need to negotiate snow removal contracts, based on some *anticipation* of what the

2 According to Wikipedia, the first practical use of RCF was a forecast carried out in 2004 by the UK government for a project with an estimated cost of £255 million. Based on a reference class of comparable projects, the RCF estimate for this one was £320 million. A report in August 2011 estimated that the final cost would be over £1 billion, and for a lesser result than had been planned.

future might bring – with no prediction of what it will bring. The British carry umbrellas because they know it might rain – though they do not know that it will.

The point is: [prediction](#) and [anticipation](#) are not the same at all. A prediction is a statement about the future. With some degree of uncertainty (up to some estimated or calculated) probability, it says that such-and-such will happen, and thereby makes an epistemic commitment which may be vindicated or refuted by events. Anticipation, by contrast, is a stance toward the future *with no such epistemic commitment*. Here, we don't claim to know what will happen; rather, we decide which *possible* future(s) to prepare for – how to place our bets and hedge them. Where prediction is a problem of knowledge or ignorance, anticipation is an executive decision – often where no prediction can be made.

Where a sound prediction can guide anticipation, the reverse is not the case. Even when I am pretty sure what *will* happen, I still may need to prepare against disastrous events that *might* happen – even though I don't believe that they will do so, and hope very much that they will not. This is why organizations like NASA are thinking about strategies for planetary defense against [massively destructive asteroids](#). This is why people lock their homes and buy insurance.

7.1.4 Interpretation and Understanding

As Nietzsche said, "There are no facts only interpretations"; and this is more true of history than of anything else.

I think Nietzsche's dictum is basically correct, but to me it has always seemed incomplete. Quite a long time ago, I wrote a book³ to argue that on controversial matters, public truth must be a cooperative social construction, *made* (not *found*) through honest, mutually respectful discourse. We can also say, as the [pragmatist philosophers](#) essentially did, that each interpretation is a venture of understanding, subject to abductive testing through its practical results – through the cognitive 'grip' that it affords on a reality we deal with.

Interpretation and understanding are complementary in this way: Interpretation is an act of power, as Nietzsche said, but understanding is an act of *submission* to the realities and necessities of our experience. What his post-modernist followers tended to miss is that valid cognition requires a balance between the freedom and power of interpretation, against the humility of authentic experience. This balance has special import when it comes to history, the problem of learning from history, the sense of tradition derived from history. We don't want to be slaves to the past, nor to the conventional version of it, which is usually self-serving for a dominant ethnicity or religion. On the other hand, we don't want to delude ourselves nor make ourselves ridiculous – which is what happens when the power of interpretation runs wild, unchecked by lived experience.

3 [Sharing Realities](#) (2005)

This balance (to repeat) is of special importance when we seek to learn from history – to select some relevant analogies⁴ to guide anticipation. An excess of freedom makes for self-delusion, if also for politically effective rhetoric. But deficits of interpretive freedom make for stultifying failure to imagine what is possible. I don't think there can be any magic formula or algorithm to get this balance right. On the other hand, with some intellectual honesty, it is possible to recognize abuses when we see them.

7.2 Games and Issues: The Drivers of History

For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe the horse was lost. For want of a horse the rider was lost. For want of a rider the message was lost. For want of a message the battle was lost. For want of a battle the kingdom was lost. And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

– Proverb

We think of 'history' as the record, and narrative, of past events. However, when we seek to understand and learn from the historical process, then the events are secondary, because they are always partly accidental, and sometimes largely so. Many events might easily have turned out differently than they did. For this reason, history is more fundamentally an account of games in play, problems on the table and issues at stake, than of what actually happened. To be sure, actual events are important because they represent a crucial breaking of symmetry – a choice amongst the *a priori* possibilities. Before the event, *anything* could have happened. After it, we know that *only one thing* did. Quantum physicists speculate about [alternate universes](#) in which those other possibilities are realized; but in our own universe, only what happens is real.

However: When a similar situation occurs next time, there is no guarantee that it will turn out the same way. For that reason, if we hope to learn something useful from the previous situation, we must consider not just what did happen, but what could have happened. We must consider the structure and possibilities of the game in play – its likelihoods and its payoffs. Only through a calculation of opportunity and risk⁵ based on past experience can we anticipate wisely for the next time around.

For a thought experiment, imagine a perfect computer simulation of some political situation – a battle, for example, or an election. For definiteness, suppose we are on the staff of General Eisenhower, who is facing a go/no-go decision on the [D-Day landings](#) at Normandy; and we have written a really fine simulation program to predict the invasion's outcome. Run a thousand times, our program will produce a range of different results. If the frequency of some particular outcome is taken to be a measure of its probability (as forecasters usually do), then the simulation will tell bookmakers how to set the odds of success or failure; it will suggest to the general, and any other interested speculators, how to place their bets. But it will tell historians absolutely nothing

4 Now formalized in the method known as [reference class forecasting](#).

5 As discussed above in Section 7.1.3.

beyond the bare probability numbers. It will let them say whether a given outcome was likely, but not why the event turned out as it did.

Writing the simulation program, we will need to understand the values and objectives of our opponents, and of our own side too. We will want to know as much as possible about the constraints on the deployment of forces and materiel, and including the actual decisions already taken. We will take the moon and tides into account. We will reckon the players' mindsets if we can. All such factors will surely influence events, but never fully determine them. We can only make educated guesses about the weather and the players. About the choices of lower-level officers and soldiers, we can only train them well, and hope for the best. The point is: actual events are important to the historian, but only as constraints on what can happen next. The invasion could not be ordered, and was not, until air superiority had been clearly established. The liberation of Paris in late August could not have happened if the landings in early June had failed. Yet the prime concern for a historian of this battle must be the game (i.e. the war) and its state in the spring of 1944. The stakes, objectives, constraints and current situation are what give the events their meaning.

Too close attention to the minutiae of events may actually impede our grasp of history, and our ability to learn from it. There is, after all, such a thing as not seeing a forest because of all the trees! Of course, we want our knowledge to be factual – to the extent this is possible – so it is good that historians labour with their source materials to reconstruct actual events as best they can. But unless we are professional historians and specialists in a given period, we are likely to forget most of the details when we read their work. We remember anecdotes about the players. We remember a broad outline of what happened. But what is most important is that we understand the games being played and the problems, dilemmas, and contentious issues that these games presented to their players. Only then do we have some hope of understanding why these players made the choices that were actually made, and how we should think and anticipate in a similar situation next time.

7.2.1 Some Different Types of Game

In the sense of interest here, a game is a structured, [agonistic](#) relationship among two or more autonomous agents (actors and decision-makers) who pursue their own values and objectives in some constraining context. Their players make choices and do things; and they obtain happy or unfortunate results – partly dependent on what their counter-players are doing, but partly on the physical environment. How they get to the actual results may not be known, and will be partly random in any case. Relationships between the players may be friendly or aggressive. They will be politicious in any case. What makes a game is that autonomous players have their own desires, and make their choices, but are dependent on the whole group's behavior for their satisfaction. Just by living together in the same world, they are compelled to take each oth-

ers' intentions – intentions they can only guess at – into account. They are probably not aware of their whole game as such. They are aware of each other, and of specific sub-games, probably. But the whole game, the whole system of conflicts and inter-dependencies, may only be visible to historians a century or more in the future. If even then.

There are [many types of game](#). What they have in common is some structure of relationships between their players, all of whom are acting purposefully under constraints of different kinds, which include the other players' choices and their results.

Closed games have explicit rules and known pay-off matrices – schemes of reward and cost with clear functional dependence on their players' choices. But there are also open games, without clear rules that are always kept. Many games do not have well-defined payoffs. In general too, games change the agents who play them – transform them in some fashion.⁶ In particular, over time and repeated play, the agents' valuations of their payoffs may change.

7.2.2 *Conflict Games*

War is both king of all and father of all, and it has revealed some as gods, others as men; some it has made slaves, and others free. One should know that conflict is common to all, and that strife is justice; and all things both come to pass and perish through strife.

- Heraclitus

It is well that war is so terrible, otherwise we should grow too fond of it.

- Robert E. Lee

It's a truth that's difficult to accept, but Heraclitus told us something important: The world keeps changing around us, and it does so through processes of [conflict](#). In particular, the process of historical change stems from the conflicting desires and beliefs of human individuals, and the conflicting influences upon us. Thus, conflict and its resolution exist not only between minding systems, but within them; and it exists on every scale. We cannot begin to understand history without some understanding of conflict – how it works, why it is ubiquitous, and how it often gets submerged from motives of accord and cooperation without ever disappearing completely so long as its parties remain autonomous.

Conflict is a vast and multi-faceted subject, and an endless pre-occupation of humankind. As with much else of interest to this study, we cannot begin to scratch its surface. There are just a few things to say about it here:

- 1) As noted in Section 2.2.5, most human relationships are *politigious*, involving mixed bags of common and conflicting interests. The games we play, even with loved ones, are rarely entirely cooperative. Our games against mortal enemies are rarely so wholly adversarial as to involve no common interests of any kind. In practice, we need to fight

⁶ As the novel branch of game theory known as [confrontation analysis](#) (or dilemma analysis) now attempts to study.

with our mates and children, when we do, without impairing the underlying relationship. Likewise, we have to manage international conflicts in such a way as to resolve the issues at stake without doing more harm than necessary to the environment and relationships that we depend on.⁷

- 2) As discussed in Chapter 4, what looks and feels like conflict to its human adversaries is *also* a kind of thought process for the system as a whole. From that systemic perspective, the outcome and resolution of conflict is a collective decision. Before the settlement (whatever form that takes), there was uncertainty and a kind of symmetry amongst contending possibilities and positions. After that resolution, the symmetry is broken and the uncertainty ends. The terms of settlement provide a working consensus or dispensation for the minding system and its members – a basis on which they will henceforth live and deal with each other; a basis to which they are tacitly consenting and to which they will be held (by the system as a whole and by one another).
- 3) We can distinguish seven methods for the resolution of conflicts, five which avoid violence and two which require it. The peaceful methods are: *submission* (in which one party lets the other have its way), *dialogue* (perhaps with mediation), *conference* (with or without a chairman and leader), *debate* (adversarial speech-making followed by voting), and *negotiation* – adversarial dialogue, marked by offers and (possibly tacit) threats. And then, there are at least two distinct modes of violence, which I will speak of as '*siege*,' (a trial by attrition), and *battle* (a direct testing of power). From the perspective of group intelligence and solidarity, each of these methods has its uses – and its benign or pernicious features. From any one of these, or from some combination of them, a settlement may emerge. In human affairs and their history, all these methods are commonly attempted; and they sometimes produce a fairly rational decision.
- 4) As we'll discuss in the next section, games typically generate problems which can often be solved, and dilemmas which can only be sustained in some kind of balance. They also generate *issues*: matters of concern, for which no institutionalized mode of settlement exists. In this case, a violent test of strength will follow, unless novel institutions, adequate and mutually agreeable, can be devised. Unfortunately, while it takes two to draw back from violence, it needs only one to start it. For that reason, violence is always the method of default, when *either* side will not accept the verdict of a peaceful alternative, and when neither side will submit.⁸

⁷ Especially when both sides have nuclear weapons.

⁸ A paradigm case might be the [American Civil War](#), which started in 1861, following Lincoln's inauguration as president, when the southern states refused to accept the verdict

- 5) We could define *power* (beyond strong *influence*) as the capability to arbitrate conflict – to dictate terms of resolution that most people will obey. Power is typically connected to one's ability to offer credible rewards and make credible threats; and it typically belongs to the side who cares least that an agreement be reached. Badly wanting some agreement makes you more susceptible to the other side's threats and offers, and makes your own threats – especially the threat to walk away – less credible. This is the reason why workers can be exploited, why monopolists can charge extortionate prices, why real estate brokers speak of buyer's and seller's markets. It is the reason why the fields of economics and politics cannot in truth be separated – because most ostensibly economic transactions also have a power dimension, and not always a small one, when they are looked at closely.

What can the study of conflict teach us about history? It teaches quite a lot, because so much of history happens in connection with issues and conflicts, which are sure to occur when people see a situation differently and want different things from it. In gearing up to get what they want they come into competition for the loyalties of uncommitted sub-groups and persons, and for scarce resources that all parties want. Conflict typically changes its surviving protagonists, often very deeply. It certainly changes the relationship between them. It can weaken or break an existing relationship, to create a new, more hostile relationship, or the absence of much relationship at all. Conversely, it can lead to relative peace (a durable dispensation) once it has played out.⁹ Competition, conflict and open warfare are strong contexts, after all, which shape the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of persons caught up within them.

7.2.3 *Problems, Dilemmas and Issues*

About problems and dilemmas, there is little to say here. In the course of a game, specific moves and tasks may generate new problems: things that we would like to do, or like to do better or more economically, if only we knew how. Players will attempt to solve such problems by trial and error; and they may take steps to devise or buy or steal a solution from others as rational moves in their game.

Some problems are really dilemmas, which cannot be solved in an any permanent sense, but only kept in some kind of balance. For most groups, the trade-off between centralized coordination and local autonomy is a typical dilemma, as is the trade-off between progress and stability. Modern societies accept high levels of instability – with 'creative destruction,' as Schumpeter called it – in hope of getting better products and processes as a result. There is a built-in assumption, however, that the collateral damage of such advances can be contained and absorbed, somehow. Failing the group's ability to this,

of the election and the compromise that Lincoln was proposing, after a long series of similar attempts had failed.

9 As Edward Luttwak pointed out in a notorious paper, [*Give War a Chance*](#).

rapid, drastic or perpetual change may be too much of a good thing, however great its prospective, long-term benefits.

Issues, now, are something else again. An [issue](#), in the sense meant here, is a question that overflows or baffles the existing institutions of governance – a question for which these institutions fail at their task of producing an acceptable answer. In the ante-bellum South of the US, the question of slavery was an example. Benign neglect of the matter was not possible; legislated compromises failed; a Supreme Court decision, hoping to turn the political question into a matter of settled, constitutional law just made it still more divisive.¹⁰ In the end, only war could answer this question. [And the war came.](#)

Groups and their individuals are constantly responding to questions, problems and minor conflicts as they arise, dealing with these in customary, and well-precedented ways. Typically, a group will provide rules for dealing with routine cases, and institutionalized means for dealing with the non-routine – for taking necessary decisions in line with the existing precedents and policies. There will be a designated authority, executive or ruler who consults, deliberates and issues orders. There will be a counsel, committee or parliament to discuss and take a vote. In a large, modern group, there may be elections to choose representatives; and there may be plebiscites on the issues themselves. Once a law or regulation is on the books, there may be judicial procedures to hear particular cases, and render verdicts upon these. The questions dealt with and the choices made in these ways are not issues in our sense, however difficult they may be.

True issues are those questions and choices which not only surpass routine, but stump all established procedures for the non-routine. True issues cannot be fudged or postponed or 'studied' into oblivion. Though attempts are made to handle them in such ways, this is done at political costs which accumulate month-by-month, year-by-year until a tipping point is reached. True issues demand response, but receive none that is adequate. There can be no adequate response because the question is too unfamiliar, too divisive, or both. Prolonged and skillful negotiation might bring the stakeholders to some agreement, but such negotiations cannot be held for some reason. Only time, very possibly with a trial by violence, may bring some generally accepted arrangement – some *dispensation*, as we say.¹¹ As states' rights and slavery were issues in the United States before its Civil War, so a growing [social divide](#), and [cultural divide](#), are issues in the world today. More specifically, the need for endless economic growth without dire stress on the Earth's ecosystem is a fateful issue of our time.

By definition, then, real issues provoke conflict – not necessarily violent conflict, but very often so when passions run high and patience wears thin. A real issue cannot be resolved at law, or at the ballot box, or by writing a cheque. It survives all such expedients. In due course, some issues fade away

¹⁰ In the notorious [Dred Scott case](#).

¹¹ See Section 3.3.3.

by themselves, and some are resolved by new institutions invented for that purpose. But for some questions, a test of power will be needed, often a test of determination to endure loss and suffering. This test need not *always* come to open warfare, but it will often come close.

Because they can neither be avoided nor handled by existing institutions, true issues make us who we are, and they remain the central questions of historical interest long after they have faded from contemporary politics. Conflict is father to all social facts, as [Heraclitus](#) saw long ago.

7.2.4 Ordinary Life

Two perennial matters, (*not* issues, because every society provides an array of institutions and mechanisms to address them) are on almost everybody's mind almost all the time: how to make a living and how to make it through the day. Such questions get handled in some fashion by the society's mindset and its physical arrangements – not always satisfactorily, often cruelly to many people, but well enough for the society to limp along. Groups which do not meet this minimum standard of routine togetherness and competence cannot last for long. Just to survive, groups and individuals fall into recurring patterns, which form a sort of [basso continuo](#) for human existence.

Until recently, historians were not much interested in ordinary life. They studied political history, intellectual history, economic history – in general, the doings of great and important men, with a few great women among them. Beginning around 1960, however, the [Annales School](#), a group of French historians, began to take an interest in long-term social history: the evolution of social structures and processes and thus of customs, manners, and ordinary life. By now, [social history](#)¹² is an established academic specialty – sometimes viewed negatively as "history with the politics left out," but also defended as "history with the people put back in." Its great achievement, at least for persons who take some interest in it, has been its giving of historical significance to the ways that ordinary people meet those twin challenges of existence: making a living, and making it through the day. As it turns out, the ways we do this touch the other history, that of big issues and events, at several points.

To begin with, any people, living in some given physical environment, must not only wrest a livelihood from it, but must defend it too against rivals who covet that bit of geography for themselves. This is the first way that the ordinary life of a group will have a bearing on its politics.

At the same time, local conditions will have strong bearing on the group's mindset and social patterning. To be viable, these personal and social patterns must be good enough to maintain that group in existence. Whatever else they do, they must serve the needs of ordinary life more-or-less well. Typically, their ability to do this will have limits. There will be deprivation and discontent, usually quite a lot of it, because not everyone will have all of their needs met, all of the time. This is an understatement, of course.

12 See also Raphael Samuel's paper, [What is Social History?](#), available on the Web.

The amount, specific nature and shape of this discontent will be a key factor in the issues that develop and on the politics that surround them. Discontent will be expressed (to whatever extent it can be), and it will stimulate political entrepreneurs to organize political action. This is a second way that ordinary life touches high politics.

Ordinary life also exerts a brake on social change – a very powerful brake, because every change, every attempt at change, disrupts the existing order in some way. If it doesn't actually kill people, it distracts them: interferes with their productive labor and profitable commerce. For this reason, the discontent that stimulates political action is self-defeating to some extent. Whatever long-term gains are achieved, the first effect of political action is usually to make people rather worse off than they were before. As political idealists often learn too late, a group's mindset and arrangements cannot be changed abruptly without causing endless suffering and provoking tremendous resistance.

In sum, ordinary life touches politics by drawing a distinction between the '[silent majority](#)' that eschews political action and those actively discontented persons who desire it and offer themselves to it – as a raging mob or an army, if it comes to that. And it separates the great mass of ordinary people (whether enraged or silent) from the political players, [thymotic](#) types, who want recognition and power more than they want peace, quiet and a good night's sleep.

* * * * *

One possible conclusion of this chapter might be that human groups are much too complicated to be understood by human individuals – that, for the most part, we have all we can do to live each day as it comes, cope with each situation as it presents itself, and find a few friends and allies where we can; that the tangle of issues and conflicts in any large group is too complex for human comprehension. From that perspective, our project may seem futile: to understand human groups as minding entities with intentions of their own. To the contrary, it can be urged that most of us do have some vague sense of what is happening in the world around us, and that with some care and a sharpened paradigm for discussion of social phenomena, that sense could be improved. We cannot predict the future but can anticipate it wisely. We cannot be sure that our historical analogies are valid, but could become more rigorous and scrupulous with those we use. We can learn to recognize historical analogies that are only self-serving rhetoric. Just to respond to what happens, we must frame every situation in some imagined context; but we can learn from experience that some contexts afford more useful understanding than others.

7.3 In a Big Context

Until quite recently, the ultimate context of human thought could only be religious and supernatural. When so little was known about the workings of nature, there was no other possibility. But this is no longer the case. Today we know enough about the evolution of physical, biological and social complex-

ity, to imagine and frame our lives in an entirely natural setting. This is currently being done. Watch [David Christian's](#) TED talk on "[*the history of our world in 18 minutes*](#)," and then check out the [Big History project](#) if you are as impressed with it as I was.

'Big History' is a Creation story – a huge, modern improvement on the magical speech-acts with which the Bible opens – in which a Deity summons the world into existence, creates things and makes things so just by saying "Let there be . . ." Today we can tell a much deeper story, with better empirical support.

As a modern tale of cosmic self-organization, Big History is certainly a kind of historicism. It frames our historical present as a threshold moment, the latest of eight that we can discern, presenting novel possibilities of self-organized complexity that did not exist before.

- The first of these moments was the so-called '[Big Bang](#)', a cosmic event almost fourteen billion years ago.
- A second was the congealing of the raw energy into discreet particles, eventually forming hydrogen atoms which condensed (heating up as they did so) until stars were formed. Stars exist by fusing hydrogen atoms into helium, with several other elements formed along the way. Heavier elements were formed only in [supernovas](#) – in the explosions of dying stars.
- In a universe teeming with stars, all the elements – the whole periodic table – were formed in varying quantities, and a rich chemistry became possible, This was third threshold.
- At a fourth threshold, some stars acquired planets, much as our own sun did. On at least one of these, but probably many more, the temperature was neither too hot nor too cold and liquid water was plentiful. With these, and some other conditions 'just right,' some molecules acquired a capability to replicate themselves.
- Under those 'Goldilocks conditions' and with self-replicating molecules, living cells became possible at a fifth threshold, and living creatures of all kinds [co-evolved](#) in an increasingly complex ecology.

From here on, the story becomes rather anthropocentric – focused, perhaps unduly, on capabilities of special interest to us:

- Certain peculiar animals became specialists in social life and collective learning; and with these, what we call 'culture' became possible. Such collective learning was the sixth threshold.
- The seventh was agriculture, which made the capture of solar energy for human use vastly more systematic and productive than it had ever been.
- And the eighth is the threshold we are at now: an acceleration of collective learning and cultural change in what has become a single human society.

Today, what with computers, electronic communications, [the Internet](#) and the [World Wide Web](#), we have something much more than an explosion of collective learning. We have the beginnings of a [global brain](#) which the world's collective mind is now constructing, to enhance its functioning.

Beginning 500 years ago, in '[the Age of Discovery](#),' the numerous societies and cultures which had evolved more or less independently, in relative ignorance of each other, began to knit together into a single pan-human society with a collective mindset. Its facilities were relatively primitive at first: sailing ships and horse-drawn wagons for transport; spoken language and printed paper for the storage and transmission of information. But in the 20th century, largely within my own lifetime, the physical facilities of this global mind became vastly more sophisticated. The [ICT network](#)¹³ that has been a-building becomes brain-like ever more literally. Where this ends, no one can say.

I want to suggest, as this whole book has been preparing, that this global brain, with its mix of electronic and human components, has collective thoughts and intentions of its own – and that it ponders collective issues, even some that we humans may not see as yet, in the wars, business deals, electoral campaigns and other political dealings that we watch on TV and read of in the newspapers. And further, that we ourselves, individual human beings, exist as creatures of this global mind which is, at the same time, our joint creation.

13 Information and communications technology network.