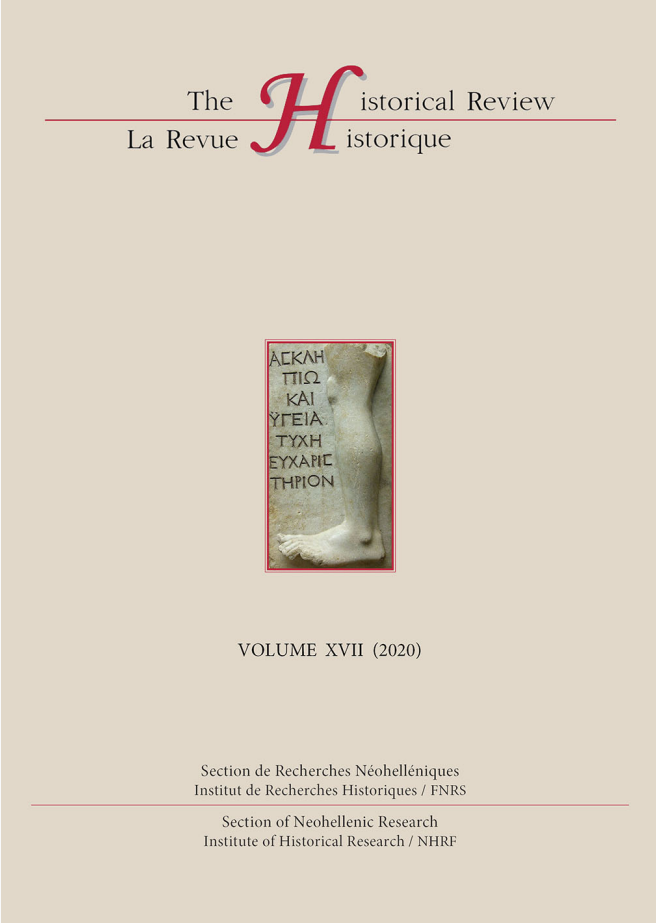
ePublishing

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 17 (2020)



Lessons of History: An Impossible Equation? Towards New Perspectives on Historical Learning

Klas-Göran Karlsson

doi: 10.12681/hr.27075

Copyright © 2021, Klas-Göran Karlsson

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0.

To cite this article:

Karlsson, K.-G. (2021). Lessons of History: An Impossible Equation? Towards New Perspectives on Historical Learning. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, *17*, 351–382. https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.27075

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 12/10/2024 06:06:03

LESSONS OF HISTORY: AN IMPOSSIBLE EQUATION? TOWARDS NEW PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORICAL LEARNING

Klas-Göran Karlsson

Abstract: Lessons of history are two-sided cultural products. They serve as active instruments of temporal orientation in a society in which historical trajectories seem obsolete and the future open, but they are also passively framed within historical cultures that often have prefigured them. Thus, lessons are seldom arbitrarily constructed. While lessons of history for many centuries were highly esteemed as guides to the future from the viewpoint of a practical past, and still are among economists, politicians and social scientists, few professional historians have trust in lessons. The distrust is explained from the lessons' lack of congruence with traditional professional standards, but also from a frequent use of historical lessons for ideological and political purposes. The purpose of this essay is partly to discuss the theoretical assumptions behind lessons of history, partly to argue in favour of a more constructive use of lessons that can meet reasonable scholarly requirements.

In the 1990s, when communism had lost its appeal everywhere in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia had disintegrated and the Cold War had disappeared from the horizon, but no one knew where the new, post-Soviet and post-communist world was heading, the time was ripe for looking for lessons of history. Although there were no immediate precedents to the events of 1989–1991, the historical perspective of the so-called transition process – from dictatorship to democracy, from the planned economy to capitalism, from the state of power to the state of law, from empire to nation-state – was conspicuous. New outlets opened for historians of an international orientation. Nevertheless, the two most influential lessons of the transition were not put forward by historians, but by political scientists, of American origin.

Looking back at the failure of communism in postwar Eastern Europe, and before that the bankruptcy of Nazi rule in 1945, Francis Fukuyama laid down the lesson that the door to the future was open for the only remaining ideological alternative, liberal capitalist democracy. With this victory, history has come to an end, if not in a chronological sense then at least as a struggle between ideological systems, Fukuyama concluded his historical lesson.[1] Another lesson that he

[1] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

The Historical Review / La Revue Historique
Section of Neohellenic Research / Institute of Historical Research
Volume XVII (2020)

naturally kept from us was that the one that he had drawn, about the inevitable and conclusive triumph of "his" ideological system, had some similarities with lessons drawn by proponents of the ideological systems historically defeated by liberal democracy, that is, Fascism/National Socialism and Communism. Historical lessons proposed by traditional liberal-democratic interpreters such as Karl Popper rather indicate that historical "victories" are never and should not be absolute and unconditional but have a "piecemeal" and provisional character.

A few years later, when history was already on the move again, Fukuyama's colleague Samuel Huntington provided the world with vastly different lessons from the 1991 historical turning point. He observed that in the vacuum created by the end of the Cold War, power politics was increasingly expressed in terms of civilisation and cultural identities, which led him to conclude: "In this new world the most pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities."[2] In particular, Huntington's historical analysis singled out Islamic civilisation as a serious threat to Western liberal democracy. The conflict between liberalism and Communism "is only a fleeting and superficial historical phenomenon compared to the continuing and deeply conflictual relation between Islam and Christianity", he concluded, possibly with an indirect criticism of Fukuyama's idea, and suggesting that lessons travelling a long way, that is, derived from early history and in longues durées, are more thorough and reliable.[3] Several other well-known political scientists gave strong support to Huntington. One of them went as far back as to the Book of Genesis to support the idea that the breakdown of Communism would end up in what he calls "a new world disorder".[4]

No doubt, despite their different historical perspectives, Fukuyama's and Huntington's theses both qualify as historical lessons. The late 1980s and early 1990s was a period when these lessons, predicting everything from illusory utopian to dark dystopian futures, were extremely frequent and penetrated the world views of politicians, authorities, public opinion as well as the scholarly community. It was a rare borderline time when in lessons of history historical experiences and memories tangibly met and influenced the expectations of and fears for the future, a time when people made use of their historical consciousness to both literally and metaphorically make history. The fact that it soon became

---

[2] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 28.

[3] Ibid., 209.

[4] Kenneth Jowitt, "After Leninism: The New World Disorder," *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 1 (1991): 12.

apparent that history was not gone, but rather that old conflicts and tensions had remained in the frozen soil of the Cold War to rapidly emerge again in a warmer post-Cold War climate, did not decrease the attraction of lessons of history. Rather the reverse. The lessons of this era answered well to what the American couple Will and Ariel Durant earlier had concluded, after having spent 40 years writing 11 volumes of *The Story of Civilization*: that lessons of history are about bringing out carefully constructed conceptualisations intended to represent some domain of interest, connected to "present affairs, future possibilities, the nature of man, and the conduct of states".[5]

Lessons

History is used for many purposes. It can serve as a foundation for existential grapple and identity-building, for developing moral attitudes, for mobilising for "historical" tasks, for making claims to territories based on a "historical" right, for establishing political legitimation, for protesting "historical" marginalisation or injustice, for constructing ideological convictions, for providing pleasure and recreation, and even for commercial gain. All historical work, scholarly or extrascholarly, has some object or aspiration in view. The classical idea of liberal education is that historical understanding is a distinct and necessary part of our understanding of ourselves, of our self-awareness. Thus, history provides us with lessons, of which the most important probably is that every human being is part of a larger temporal context than our own, delimited life lines. Such a broad historical lesson, which historians often argue in favour of, may not offer any precise recommendations on how to live our lives, but rather a modesty and a responsibility that reaches outside the lives we live right now, to generations to come. Historical understanding can hardly be specified in terms of subject matter, since what is to be understood is determined by the conditions of understanding. Specific lessons of history are less interesting than the lessons of these lessons. The question in this article is if and how we can reach beyond this very general understanding of lessons of history within an analytical framework that is still open-ended, pluralist and in reasonable accordance with scholarly norms and standards. Thus, the article is a reflection on the analytical qualities of a perspective of historical lessons as well as a plaidoyer for the use of these lessons in professional scholarly work.

Historical lessons are products of an analytical and reflective enquiry, in which history is consulted, structured and learned from a posterior position

[5] Will Durant and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), preface.

for the purposes of orientation in life. Lessons presuppose that past experience and practice can help identify, ameliorate or solve current problems. Lessons of history profit from a row of concepts and dimensions that seemingly are opposites but, by the person who teaches or learns lessons, or the person who analyses them, must be made consistent and compatible, such as past versus present, distance versus proximity, contemporaneousness versus instruction in present life, change versus continuity, complexity versus simplicity, nonrepetitive versus repetitive moments, analytical openness versus introversion, and prospectivity versus retrospectivity. The examples are manifold, but the mentioned binaries, the first in the pair representing traditional scholarly values, the second perspectives of what Germans call *Lebenswelt* and here will be called the practical past, might suffice to demonstrate that lessons of history are qualified and contextualised historical operations that need to be both analytically and practically developed.

Here, the history concept must be understood inclusively, and orientation as a broad guiding activity aimed at acquiring historical knowledge and skills that are meaningful and useful for both our present-day conduct in life and our more far-reaching calculations for the future. Consequently, historical lessons are close to what Hayden White in his last book just called the practical past.[6] They obviously also answer to what Reinhart Koselleck denotes as the present past, as they have an obvious orientation towards a human preparedness to act or a competence to chisel out scenarios, that is, what he denominates as the future made present.[7] Lessons of history are active applications to or uses of the past for the learner to orientate in life and set a good course towards the future. Those who produce, practice or analyse lessons must therefore carry through a qualified operation that can be compared to an equation with three time variables at work, one reasonably known contemporary one, the other two temporal projections from this point of view. In fact, the unknowns of the learning process are many; it cannot even be assumed that the lessons actually learned are the same as the one who teaches history had intended.

Traditionally, lessons of history belong to the educational sphere, in particular to history teaching and its objectives.[8] This is, however, too narrow a demarcation. Historical lessons are obviously available and applicable to all

---

[6] Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

[7] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 159, 259.

[8] Alaric Dickinson, Peter Lee and Peter J. Rogers, *Learning History* (London: Heinemann, 1984); Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

human beings, be they students, decision makers or football players, in search of useful information, models and strategies from history. In school, there are certainly fixed syllabi and textbooks that serve to emphasise certain histories and lessons designed to make orientation easier, often by states and authorities anxious to socialise their young citizens or legitimate their power positions. However, lessons of history are responses to much deeper and wider faculties of life than those connected to formal, state-sponsored education and politics and must be analysed thereafter. There are scholarly indications that many people do not get their notions of the past primarily from the history produced in universities and taught in school classrooms, but rather from various practices of "popular history-making".[9] Connecting to an idea originally formulated by the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, White also maintains that the practical past, based on experience and habit and often devoid of a conscious and active processing of historical knowledge and analysis, is essentially different from an academic and theoretical past that, in White's critical analysis, "is constructed as an end in itself, possesses little or no value for understanding or explaining the present, and provides no guidelines for acting in the present or foreseeing the future".[10] Oakeshott himself defined the practical past as "a present of objects recognized to have survived", but not primarily as a result of its relationship to the past, but to "the time and circumstances in which they achieved currency in a vocabulary of practical discourse".[11]

This state of opposition between a historical and a practical past is probably widely supported, at least among professional historians. However, it is not, and should not be, an absolute distinction. No doubt, as Beverley Southgate has underlined, the coupling together of the two pasts constitutes "the dilemma of whether or not to lay claim to 'practicality' or some material advantage – alternately citing the pragmatic need to 'learn from the past' … and more idealistically asserting the inestimable value of pure 'knowledge for its own sake'".[12] The purpose of this article is to reflect on the theoretical and methodological implications and prospects of an understanding of scholarly history as lessons, and on what here will be called historical culture, of which also professional history and historians are part. In fact, the practical and the historical pasts need to be brought together into one operation of historical

[9] Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[10] White, *Practical Past*, 9.

[11] Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 48.

[12] Beverley Southgate, "Humani nil alienum: The Quest for 'Human Nature'," in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan and Alun Munslow (London: Routledge, 2007), 69.

thinking. But how is this accomplished? What history is preferably transformed into lessons? Who learns lessons, where, when and how? Why are lessons of history useful not only in life, but also in professional historical thinking? Are there different types of lessons, responding to different historical circumstances and qualifications?

Learning History in Historical Culture

Lessons of history demand a belief in history's transferability or translatability. Therefore, any discussion on historical lessons must start from a correspondence theory that helps us indicate the relationship between the one who learns a lesson in posterity, and the history that he or she turns to in order to learn. We need to reflect on historical learning. All historical phenomena certainly have a context related to the time, society and culture in which they occurred, a historical specificity or unicity. However, a learning process implies that the same historical events in one way or another may remain or reoccur, in the sense that they might be applied to contexts more or less removed from the original ones, to processes of communication and evaluation. Thus, their application goes beyond their specific or unique features. When historians talk about developments, compare events from different times or put questions to history from a posterior position, they obviously are drawing towards lessons, although few are prepared to label their historical thinking in this way.

To formulate effective and useful historical lessons, we obviously need to know a great deal of history. Nevertheless, historical lessons are hardly the results of a quantitative cognitive operation, and not even of the traditional qualitative, analytical-critical work of the historian, focusing on explaining or understanding history in its contemporary setting. To be sure, due to the level of historical knowledge, among other things, everyone does not have the same prerequisites for learning historical lessons. Individual qualifications are certainly significant, but more interesting from a scholarly analytical perspective, at least the one identified in this article, are the cultural and societal learning environments and mechanisms for extracting lessons of history.

From this follows that historical lessons essentially are collective products, irrespective of whether they are taught or learned, and that all human beings learn lessons of history, but in very different ways, with different histories involved. We do not turn to the same periods and events in our search for lessons. In the author's home country of Sweden and neighbouring Russia, historical lessons are learned from different histories and in different ways. Like memories, lessons of history may unite social groups, but may also create divisions between them. Many Swedes tend to extract historical lessons when analysing and evaluating

our "arch-enemy" Russia, in a way that is totally different from the way we tend to talk and think about the history of Britain. The observation indicates that lessons are not only strictly intellectual products but also contain ideological beliefs and emotional features.

We learn history in historical culture, which is the arena in which a society considers and expresses what history is worth turning to, for learning and teaching, but also for remembering, researching, filing, exhibiting, celebrating and debating. Lessons of history are not any histories, but products of these activities, and therefore incorporated into larger cultural contexts, which traditionally have been nationally framed. To be sure, there is in the present world an ongoing change towards more transnational or global histories and lessons of history, especially conspicuous in the spread of Holocaust history all over the world, in everything from scholarly to political discourses, but we should nevertheless be aware of its continuous national ramifications. Strong moral historical narratives such as the Holocaust surely have the power to change historical cultures, but no doubt the opposite is also the case: strong, nationally anchored historical cultures have the power to change narratives such as the Holocaust, and the lessons extracted from them. It is enough to compare the Holocaust entry in different national encyclopaedias to support this conclusion.

Historical culture has a high degree of cultural inertia but nevertheless undergoes change, which – as already indicated – means that there are times and spaces in which historical lessons are deemed more desirable and relevant than others. There are times when there seems to be a general conviction that history has no lessons to offer contemporary times. In times of political and social harmony and stability and of solid economic development, there is normally little demand for lessons of history. It may be explained by the fact that the historical lesson that society moves forward towards the future in a benign and progressive way is so natural that there is no need for the lesson to be spelled out. As François Hartog puts it: "Time is unthought, not because it is unthinkable, but because it is not thought or, more simply, no one gives it a thought."[13]

On the other hand, in times of conflict, crisis and discontinuity, historical lessons may more often be explicitly formulated and appreciated as an intellectual but also existential, moral or ideological response to needs of orientation, sense-making and guidance. Not only do we need to historically explain and understand an ongoing military conflict or financial crisis; we also feel a need to learn its historical lessons to avoid repetitions. The first decades of the new

[13] François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 8.

millennium, with the dramatic Lehman Brothers financial collapse in 2008, an aggressive Russia occupying Ukrainian Crimea in 2014, and the Middle East in seemingly permanent conflicts, obviously answer well to the latter situation.

Positive Responses

It has already been noted that the idea of lessons of history has a certain resonance in society, culture and education, often expressed not only as lessons, but also in kindred concepts such as experience or memory. No doubt, they benefit from processes such as the "history craze" of the period around 1990, but the general idea probably goes back on an almost ageless curiosity whether human beings, by mastering the past, can plan or cope with their lives and societies in a beneficial and productive way, or at least better than anyone not experienced or in other ways less well-informed about history. When you have fully learned the historical lessons, you can hope to avoid making the same mistakes again and to make the world a better place. This optimism is mirrored in bold declarations such as Francis Bacon's "knowledge is power".

This appeal of lessons of history has a long history, reaching back to antiquity. Learning and history has always belonged to the same line of thought. Aristotle underlined the need for *phronesis*, an experience-based wisdom on practical things, and Cicero famously formulated the sentence *Historia magistra vitae est*, indicating that history is life's teacher, or that the study of history could and should serve contemporaries as lessons for the future. Any man can make mistakes, but only the fool persists in error, Cicero noted, underlining that lessons of history are connected to ideas of repetition over time and a trial-and-error learning process. These ideas, broadly connected to human behaviour, decision-making and scenario-production in different natural and cultural circumstances, characterised much historical thinking until modernity, and in wide circles they are still highly relevant when we discuss lessons of history, as projects of empowerment and human betterment through historical knowledge. Ideas about early warning systems and standard operating procedures are often based on notions that history, when actively consulted for lessons, provides us with orientation when challenging or threatening situations occur in the present.

In political and economic thinking, historical lesson discourses are frequent, as they are in social sciences such as political science, international relations and economics. In these contexts, lessons of history sometimes are chiselled out as linear projections of historical trends. Like Fukuyama's conclusion, some of the lessons of 1989–1991 had this prospective extension, predicting a better future from a traditional chronological perspective that here will be called genetic, with a focus on roots, developments and points of qualitative change.

More often, lessons of history start from exemplary historical "cases", that is, analogies, metaphors, parallels, precedents and other conceptualisations that, despite historical change, are supposed to maintain an "essence" or identity over time. For scholars who give credit to these historical lessons, it is obvious that "although no two situations are ever identical and it is important not to draw false analogies, there are often common, or comparable, features from which lessons may be learned".[14] For economists, this learning potential is often found in the 1930s, in particular if the main question concerns free trade versus economic protectionism and trade restrictions. At the time of writing (2018), these alternatives carry an immediate interest. In response to an increasing American economic nationalism, IMF managing director Christine Lagarde presented her lesson: "History shows that import restrictions hurt everyone, especially poorer consumers."[15] The obvious historical background for such a declaration is the interwar financial crisis, with protectionism leading not only to an economic depression but also to the breakdown of the traditional political system and a rise in political extremism.

Instead of analogy, the medical concept of "syndrome" has sometimes been used to indicate this thinking. A syndrome is an aggregation of phenomena which are known to appear together and that, taken together, can unveil a more fundamental medical record or a deeper truth. In a way, it is a principle for understanding how posterity can inherit an earlier generation's failures, or that we sometimes become prisoners of the past. Thus, scholars have taken an interest in political historical lessons such as Pearl Harbor, repeatedly invoked in the United States as a relevant analogy after 9/11, as a "policy memory".[16] Another recurrent example is "Munich", going back to British prime minister Neville Chamberlain's soft and fateful attitude to Adolf Hitler in their encounter in Munich in September 1938, epitomised in the fraudulent phrase "Peace for our time". The historical lesson of Munich, that aggressive dictators must be met not with appeasement but with determined resistance from the outset, was applied as late as 2003 when the United States intervened in Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein from power. It has been described as a rationale of postwar US foreign

---

[14] Margaret Doxey, "Reflections on the Sanctions Decade and Beyond," *International Journal* 64, no. 2 (2009): 539.

[15] Ed Conway, "Trade Wars and the Lessons from History," *Sky News*, 12 April 2018, https://news.sky.com/story/why-uschina-trade-dispute-has-historians-nervous-11326394.

[16] Jesseka Batteau, Sebastiaan Princen and Ann Rigney, "Lessons from the Past? Cultural Memory in Dutch Integration Policy," *European Journal of Political Research* 57, no. 3 (2017): 740–58.

policy that has informed an entire row of presidents and their advisers.[17] Arguing for a US military intervention in Vietnam, Lyndon B. Johnson invoked American fights for freedom in two world wars and in Korea, and moreover: "Nor would surrender in Viet-Nam bring peace, because we learned from Hitler in Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression."[18] The frequent American use of the Munich analogy must obviously be explained by its accordance with the predominant, long-time idea of containment and the domino theory in US foreign policy: "The Munich lesson was not only a cognitive means applied to a given situation, but the very basis for how the United States knew how to identify a danger and how to achieve security."[19] However, when it comes to Chamberlain's misdirected ambition in Munich, to peaceful alternatives to conflicts, we are less prone to turn to history. In these cases, Barbara Falk maintains, we tend to suffer from historical abstinence.[20] One probable cause is the strength and the continued relevance of the Munich syndrome.

There are historians who take an active interest in lessons of history. Many of them are inspired by the cultural turn, with its focus on history as a communicative and cultural artifact and process. Historians of the Holocaust, the Russian Revolution, the Vietnam War or any other borderline history have realised that their objects of study not only were dramatic events in the past, but also that they come back in cultural, intellectual and political discourse again and again, and that this return of history in experiences, memories, narratives and lessons must be studied in its own right, since it influences many people's orientation in life and society. Other historians that touch on the lessons approach include those with a strong engagement in problems of international relations, especially human rights, human suffering and social injustice, and in finding solutions outside the traditional ideological and institutional movements that have seldom convincingly and effectively demonstrated their capacity to end the undermining of human rights and the perpetration of crimes against humanity. The insight that such problems often are rooted in history seems to go hand in hand with a hope that "counter"-histories such as the English Magna Carta or the human rights declarations of the American and French

---

[17] Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Göran Rystad, *Prisoners of the Past? The Munich Syndrome and Makers of American Foreign Policy in the Cold War Era* (Lund: Gleerup, 1982).

[18] Quoted in Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, "The History of a Lesson: Versailles, Munich and the Social Construction of the Past," *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 4 (2003): 504.

[19] Ibid., 505.

[20] Barbara J. Falk, "Learning from History: Why We Need Dissent and Dissidents," *International Journal* 64, no. 1 (2008/2009): 243.

revolutions, despite their obvious historical limitations, can provide lessons for a better world. Probably, Lynn Hunt has pointed to the most crucial historical lesson of the eighteenth-century revolutions when she argues that they "opened up a previously unimagined space for political debate", suggesting the more general lesson that human rights profit from an open society.[21]

Critical Responses

> Until history became professionalised as an academic discipline … its mission had been primarily educative, even reformative. History explained communities to themselves. It helped rulers to orient their exercise of power and in turn advised their advisors how to influence their superiors. And it provided citizens more generally with the coordinates by which they could understand the present and direct their actions towards the future.[22]

The quotation, from two US historians, indicates that there was a time when professional historians also responded positively to the challenges of lessons of history. Today, however, most historians do not find lessons a useful analytical concept. The topic is rarely present in traditional scholarly historical journals and books. To be sure, a few historically based articles can be found, mostly published in nonhistorical journals, with an explicitly instrumental orientation to demonstrate how health or climate conditions have changed for the better, sometimes also for the worse.[23] The logic of many of them are adjacent to the natural sciences, where lessons constructed from empirical generalisations are common. But these are exceptions. When the Canadian journal *International Journal* introduced a series on lessons of history in several consecutive numbers over three years round 2010, an analyst afterwards laconically noted that "historians were surprisingly rare among the commentators".[24] If books on lessons of history are written, the title almost always serves as a cover name for traditional history, without other ambitions than to present *wie es eigentlich gewesen war*. If lessons had been taken seriously, such books would not have been described as final historical works, but

---

[21] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007), 133.

[22] Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 9–10.

[23] For example, see Walter W. Holland, "Perspective: Lessons from the Past," *International Journal of Health Planning and Management* 31, no. 1 (2016): 5–24; Brian Weir, "Climate Change and Tourism: Are We Forgetting Lessons of the Past?," *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* 32 (2017): 108–14.

[24] John English, "Are there Lessons to be Drawn from the 'Lessons of History'?," *International Journal* 66, no. 4 (2011): 1021.

only as stages of these works. The fact that most historians are not only researchers but also teachers does not change the overall impression that lessons of history for most of them are impossible or improper to identify and communicate.

Not only is the term lesson rarely used among academic historians; even the idea that knowledge of history is organised to serve the orientation of learners in posterity has few promoters among them. This is not how historians normally promote their studies. Scare quotes are frequently deployed to demonstrate the general lack of confidence in the concept: "Others may declare that there are 'lessons' of history, but we know better!" The reasons for this hesitation, discomfort or even rejection are manifold, and several arguments can be chiselled out, partly well-founded, partly less so. One objection concerns the nature of history as characterised by novelty, singularity and uniqueness; another the absolute demand to do full contemporary justice to history; a third a conviction that historical time proceeds progressively from an earlier to a later time, and not from a retrospective projection. A fourth and equally imperative demand is to distance scholarly history from all kinds of uses of history for latter-day purposes, be they commercial, ideological, moral or political. No doubt, lessons of history belong to this category.

One possible basic objection is that there is no such thing as "history" to learn from. The past itself is dead and out of reach, and history is what historians and others write about it, which means that the writers and their contemporary situations and world views are integrated parts of the process they write about. History is the past that we have agreed on. One conclusion is that we can possibly learn from other historians' interpretations, from historiography, but not from the historical past itself. It is of course true that lessons of history are always diluted, filtered or simplified through the historians' temperament and Zeitgeist, or, within the framework used here, through historical culture.

Such an outlook can be difficult to digest for many empiricist historians used to thinking that their discovery work in the archives and interpretative work with new and innovative theoretical and analytic frameworks are a guarantee for the novelty of history. However, lessons of history are seldom new. Rather, they are part of an permanent discussion on or orientation about the human predicament. The historical knowledge connected to lessons of history is rather based on experience or even remembrance, that is, a knowledge previously tested and found relevant and useful. This means that providing lessons of history are less about the production than the reproduction of history. However, the latter must be understood as a qualified process enlightened by many of the findings of the cultural turn. Some of them will be emphasised in what follows.

Associated with the idea of history's novelty is the notion that history is singular and unique. If there are many sayings about the value of history as our guide in

life, there are at least as many proverbs to corroborate the argument that there are no lessons of history, at least not of the kind that are instrumental in our orientation in present-day and future life. Here, it might suffice to recall Hegel's famous dictum that the only thing we learn from history is that we never learn from history. To be sure, there are no general laws in history that can compete with the successful predictions, regularities and repetitive patterns in natural science, if we leave out of the account abstractions such as "history takes place in oxygen" that have no analytical value. If history entails laws, it is only in a weak, conditional sense. However, there is no need for general laws of historical development to state valuable things on historical grounds about the present and future. What is needed are rather historical generalisations of various kinds, such as probabilities and regularities related to histories of individuals, institutions or conflict issues, based on more basic insights as the one that idea and action normally go together. In themselves, historical explanations have a general character, also without references to universal laws or notions of déja vu, and even historical understanding would be impossible without access to means of a more general identification with a historical action or event, or a presupposition of the case in question.

It goes without saying that the strict insistence on singularity renders impossible any idea of historical lessons and transfers constructed from analogies, comparisons, parallels and similarities. We obviously have to seek a position that might bridge extremes, recently described as ahistorical alarmism (all developments are completely new) and historical contempt (everything has already happened before).[25] As Koselleck wisely maintains: "If everything always repeated itself identically, there would be no change and no surprise – either in love or in politics, either in the economy or anywhere else. Gaping boredom would spread. If, in contrast, everything were new or innovative, humankind would fall into a black hole from one day to the next, helpless and bare of all orientation."[26] Historical lessons, benignly applied, can counteract the temporal disorientation that might set in if we, historians or others, only choose to dwell in the past – or if someone decides to remain in the present. But these lessons cannot be predictive in a strict sense, only open up for alternatives, opportunities and possibilities. "History does not repeat, but it does instruct," Timothy Snyder argues.[27]

---

[25] Petri Hakkarainen, "Rethinking in Time," in *The Use and Abuse of History*, ed. Antti Blåfield (Helsinki: Siltala, 2016), 42.

[26] Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 159–60.

[27] Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan, 2017), 9.

Another reason why many historians tend to reject lessons of history goes back to the basic professional understanding that history has a kind of intrinsic value, a right to a life of its own, which means that our present-day activities to interfere with it must be minimised, on intellectual as well as moral grounds. The idea that the interpretation of history must follow its own internal scholarly logic is firmly anchored in professional historians' identity and historical thinking. History must be understood or explained from its contemporary setting, and not from some external "lesson" position. Thus, improvement and progress in society and life should not be regarded as the result of a conscious use of history in any other way than by transforming its users into more analytical and critical individuals and citizens. The conviction is strong that historians are experts on what has happened in the past but should not bother explaining current problems or anticipating the years to come, since these activities can negatively influence the possibility to analyse the distinctive character of history.

Therefore, the layman who asks the historian for historical lessons normally gets no other answer than irritation and a rebuking comment that history only makes sense in its own right, and that presentism, the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present, must be avoided. Historical empathy is about "thinking in time", historical understanding about how past events were experienced by people in history. Many professional historians, with David Lowenthal honouring history as a foreign country where people do things differently to a present standard, regard lessons of history as changeable, contradictory, lacking in nuances, vague and, in particular, insufficiently grounded in history. Lowenthal's recommendation is not to endanger the temporal fabric, since, as he puts it, "time travel tends to make the past thin and artificial".[28] Following the Holocaust historian Michael Marrus, the depreciation may be expressed in stronger wordings, almost as a lesson: "Beware of lessons!"[29] The "lesson" character of Marrus' argumentation becomes even clearer if another of his admonitions is added: "get the history right".[30] Nevertheless, for many historians, lessons do not answer to the use of history, but to its abuse. They do not only turn away from "false" analogies, but rather reject all historical analogies. If history can teach lessons, the one prioritised by historians is often that history can educate the judgment or the critical skills that helps human beings to see through historical "lessons".

---

[28] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 31.

[29] Michael R. Marrus, *Lessons of the Holocaust* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 160.

[30] Ibid., 159.

Modern professional historians' concept of history suggests that time is linear, starting from the beginning and progressing from one time to another, eventually but not necessarily to reach the present. It is true that progression is not used synonymously with progress any more, and most historians admit that there are nonprogressive elements present in professional historical thinking, such as the introductory moments when scholarly problems are drawn up, research questions chiselled out and theories applied. That these operations, starting from the historians' own time to proceed retrospectively into history, interfere with the linear narration and analysis is often considered a disturbing necessity rather than an integrated aspect of all historical work. Surely, lessons of history could have a natural position among those elements that define and direct this work, especially since historical lessons are often hard to differentiate from what are denominated as problems, theories or answers to qualified historical questions.

In a professional understanding, history is complex and multifaceted, which means that an advanced combinatory capacity is needed to demonstrate the causal and other connections within this historical complexity. Lessons are often represented as histories of simplicity and clear-cut analytical lines, which turn them into a worse case of history. This is not a very productive state of opposition. It is true that the past is a foreign country, and that we need knowledge, skills and a large amount of historical imagination to be able to properly understand what held historical societies together. It is also true that there is often a need for an analytical isolation of certain aspects or dimensions when lessons are provided, but this analytical operation is not unfamiliar for a historian, trained not only in the art of complexity, but also in handling the incomplete character of our historical knowledge and analytically chiselling out the more or less important factors and processes in history. Complexity and analytical streamlining are not contradictory concepts.

A final reason why historians refrain from introducing lessons of history is that they tend to divert our thinking from the realm of scholarly history, to the realm of religion, ideology and politics. The relationship between history and biology, obviously relevant when lessons are inquired, can be problematic in an era when social constructivism almost reigns supreme. Declarations such as "history is a fragment of biology", or "the laws of biology are the fundamental lessons of history", prevalent in older historiography, are no longer considered on the scholarly level.[31] Furthermore, few historians identify themselves with macrohistorians such as Spengler and Toynbee, who both tended to propose

[31] Durant and Durant, *The Lessons*, 18.

grand patterns and cyclical developments that helped them identify large-scale lessons about continuity and change, rise and fall, in history. Nondemocratic ideologues and rulers take great care in paying attention to history, but not with the history promoted by historians. Instead, they often make claims on behalf of historical lessons gathered from a highly selective search for sources. Authoritarian and totalitarian regimes express confidence in pedagogical or didactic ideas that history presents more or less unilinear regularities to be learned from, in a blunt ambition to legitimate their own "progressive" power position, or to rationalise various wicked deeds. The traditional scholarly aim has been to unveil and criticise this kind of historical "lessons", not to present new and better ones.

It goes without saying that a distinction between lessons and "lessons", between conclusions about history drawn from reasoned judgments and fair interpretations, and narrow and biased analyses, is not without justification. However, the boundary line is not absolute and unequivocal. Lessons of history are situated in a field of tension with both scholarly and extrascholarly implications. It is certainly true that lessons of history are not always benign. Scholarly history is and must be an unprejudiced intellectual operation, while "prescriptive" history risks transforming historians into prophets of the future. There are indeed reasons to critically dismiss "lessons" that do not qualify as historical lessons. If they are extracted within a framework of "Whig" historiography, where history is mobilised in the service of an inevitable progression towards a better present, there is often reason to criticise the analytical work. If lessons of history are transformed into invocations created to legitimise or whitewash actions already taken, nothing good comes out of it. Even more problematic are "lessons" produced as reductionist and simplistic political uses of history, according to the formula "present-day X is like historical Y". If the lesson of the Holocaust is that abortion or mobbing in the schoolyard should not be allowed, or that the same genocide is like the post-Holocaust Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, "lessons" tend to magnify superficial similarities between phenomena of different eras at the expense of more fundamental differences. Lessons of history often benefit from proximity and likeness and other linkages over time, but, no doubt, such linkages must be treated with knowledge and respect for both phenomena involved, and with explanatory or heuristic rather than normative or predictive objectives. Besides, "this time is different" may also be a relevant historical lesson.

Consequently, there is no point in throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We need history to understand ourselves and others. A more qualified handling of history, philosophically, scholarly and practically, promises a better understanding. Nowadays it goes without saying that histories do not live their own lives but are

fundamentally dependent on the problems, questions, interpretations and content selections of those who turn to history for various scholarly or nonscholarly purposes. All histories are doctored and created to respond to certain purposes. Lessons of history, with their inquiry into the character of the transfer between the past and the present, and in its extension even to the future, are the historians' responsibility, whether we like it or not. They should not, as they often are, be regarded as burdens of history. Rather, the relevant question is how historical lessons can be extracted without sacrificing scholarly values. Historians have better qualifications than most others to make "educated" guesses about the future, if education stands for a capacity to identify important actors with their ambitions and motive forces, frameworks, rules, norms and attitudes, resources and risks, alliances and conflicts. Some of the historians' professional values, such as the tentative and limited character of historical knowledge, the critical approach to broad generalisations and the constant need to discuss and distinguish between the use and misuse of history, must surely characterise all historical work, be it oriented towards lessons of history or not.

Two Basic Approaches

Lessons of history can be formulated and learned, but for a historian there is also a need to establish an analytical and methodological understanding of the lesson phenomenon. In this effort, a fundamental distinction between a functional and a hermeneutical approach to historical lessons is necessary. The first is direct and instrumental, starting from the idea that human beings construct and make use of lessons of history to satisfy basic and tangible needs and interests, broadly related to orientation and sense-making, but also to narrower ideological and political interests. In this functional way, lessons are articulated by individual and collective agents to solve distinct and practical problems of life and society by turning to history for guidance. Used in this learning perspective, history has an immediate utility value. The analytical task is to identify the agents that teach and learn lessons, clarify their interests and study the accomplishments of a rectilinear and straightforward learning process, with its more or less intended results and consequences. Normally, it is an easier analytical task to define the concrete lessons, their teachers and their underlying presumptions than to determine their reception and influence among students or political subjects. For this task, another analytical perspective may be useful.

The second approach starts from a more fundamental idea, that historical lessons are preformed and given as dispositions by the historical culture in which human beings live and act. Historical culture is not just any storehouse of inherited historical knowledge, but a reservoir of a selected and recognised

history with direction and potential. Those who learn from history are already taught beforehand, borne by our preunderstanding and prejudices, in a learning process that often has a much longer chronological extension than that of individual learners. The history that is used for learning purposes is already selected and has been proved functional within a historical culture to which we inescapably belong, as is the preferred correspondence between history and the present. In this hermeneutical way, lessons of history are never spontaneous or arbitrary but constructed beforehand, in a cultural process that marks off the scope for and directs the effort to create historical lessons. It also underlines that not all conclusions about history are to be described as lessons. Many of them are dismissed as uninteresting, not worthy of learning. For lessons to be successfully learned, the history that is involved needs to be firmly rooted in historical culture. This insight goes hand in hand with the abovementioned idea that lessons of history seldom or never start from "new" histories, but rather from repetition and confirmation. Swedish historical lessons about Russia seldom surprise.

These two approaches to lessons of history are analytical ideal types that in the scholarly analysis mostly work together. It is imperative to emphasise that lessons of history are taught and learned by agents who actively and consciously express their will to orientate in life by turning to history, but it is as imperative to demonstrate that lessons of history are not learned randomly and outside history, but rather in accordance with patterns of historical culture that set the boundaries for lesson-making. A qualified analysis of lessons of history must balance the extreme activism that any history can be used for any purpose that one sometimes can find among the adherents of so-called cultural constructivism, with a reference to historical culture, which in its turn must not degenerate into an extreme cultural determinism.

Three Learning Perspectives

One of the undisputable accomplishments of the cultural turn of recent decades is the introduction of multiple perspectives on history. Departing from our later-day needs and interests to orientate ourselves, lessons of history can be derived from three historical perspectives. They are closely related to and dependent on each other but can and should nevertheless be analytically separated. Two of them are more fundamental and go back to Søren Kierkegaard's well-known dictum that life must be lived forwards but understood backwards. The first part of his statement can be related to what can be described as a genetic perspective, with its insistence that learning history starts from conditions that we as learners are in the middle of. In other words: we *are* history. This historicity is something that we cannot avoid and that we need to handle as best we can, by holding on to

this proximity to history, while we consciously and actively dissociate ourselves from or "raise" above it.

The best way to uphold a beneficial analytical and critical distance to history is by utilising a genetic perspective of history, which has palpable similarities to a traditional scholarly historical perspective. It is the perspective that we associate with the concept of historicity, the notion that we all and always are in temporal motion, open to but also uncertain of the future. As already mentioned, there is also an element of proximity involved, since the genetic perspective serves the purpose to demonstrate the coming into being of ourselves and our society. In Peter Jarvis' words, "being is always becoming", which in his interpretation means that learning cannot avoid perspectives of time, both past and future.[32]

Here, we understand history – and historiography – as continuous change and depict ourselves as the temporary final point of a linear history in constant movement. History is a kind of prologue, traditionally demonstrating the start of a progressive, more or less continuous road towards the present. We learn from roots and developments, causes and effects, intentions and consequences, all of which must be laid bare for us to explain and understand what we and the world have become, and why it is so. The general genetic idea is to go back to where a conflict, a problem or any other thing in current life that needs redress started, to follow its real and possible developments in a linear way up to the present situation, and to predict its progression towards a future that is marked by past experiences but nevertheless open to change. In this genetic spirit, Margaret MacMillan sees history "as a pool, sometimes benign, often sulfurous, that lies under the present, silently shaping our institutions, our ways of thought, our likes and dislikes".[33]

A genetic perspective can have a linear and continuous extension from roots and causes to a present situation, or it can pinpoint a historical case, a period or an event, which is immediately related to the current situation. The genetic process demonstrates change as well as continuity, but often it is instrumental to identify historical turning points that seem important for posterity. Two maps, one from the era before the First World War, another from after the Paris conferences of 1919–1920, may teach the observer several valuable lessons of history. The first demonstrates a European space with few similarities with present Europe, while the other, to a great extent, is similar to our own time. If nothing else, this genetic history teaches that the Great War fundamentally

[32] Peter Jarvis, *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning* (London: Routledge, 2006), 5.

[33] Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile, 2009), xiii.

changed Europeans' living conditions, for the better or, in particular, for the worse.

Genetic historical lessons are connected to what could be described as the historical actor's viewpoint. These prospective lessons are options, scenarios or future-oriented projections of historical trends, based on actions and behaviour, and their results and consequences. They often get their relevance and strength from the occurrence of different kinds of structural elements that tend to "lock" or restrict historical developments to certain tracks. Thus, genetic lessons are often path dependent, which indicates a conviction that a decision taken at a given circumstance is limited by decisions taken in the past. An awareness or knowledge of history therefore enables better, or at least more realistic, guesses about the future of a historical phenomenon. If one knows that Sweden has not been at war since 1814, a historically well-founded prediction is that Swedes will not be among the warmongers in the future, especially not since a state of neutrality, nonalignment and stable peace has been long idealised among Swedish politicians and public opinion. Of course, a lesson of this kind has its limitations, since war always involves an adversary, whose ambitions and objectives are not considered in the lesson. The genetic perspective often brings forth negative linear lessons of history based on ideas of the absence or presence of certain historical traits, such as the conclusion that democracy has a hard time establishing itself in a Russia without democratic traditions, that peace in the Middle East will be difficult to reach, or that decolonising states are highly influenced by colonial practices from the past.

To the aforementioned suggestion that the First World War once and for all changed the world, one could add that great wars in general tend to radically transform society and the world. The genetic lesson is intimately connected to what could be called a structural lesson of history, which may come forth if two or more genetic histories are juxtaposed and diachronically or synchronically compared. Analogies, comparisons and parallels are all examples of lessons of history constructed on structural similarities or patterns of action taken from different historical periods or spaces. If, say, a great power has decided to provide foreign economic assistance to, or resort to sanctions on or intervene militarily in another nation on several occasions over time to achieve power change or the survival of a regime, the structural lesson can inform about factors and preconditions for failure or success in these endeavours.

In fact, genetic and structural lessons of history are often closely related to each other, since a genetic lesson, precariously based on unique historical developments, are often reinforced, or even made into a lesson, by being included in a more generally based historical conclusion. Thus, the history of the interwar Sudetenland conflict does not bring about a historical lesson until it is connected

to a more general analysis that a lack of coincidence between the territory of a nation-state and the ethnonational composition of the population tends to bring forward conflict. To the structural lessons can also be assigned theoretical generalisations built on empirical historical analyses, such as Kant's well-known theory of democratic peace, maintaining that democratic countries neither go to war against other democratic states nor kill their own citizens.

Thus, structural lessons of history consist of aggregate or concentrated connections between different historical phenomena, or between history and the present. Therefore, these lessons often recall historically oriented proverbs or sayings, or rhetorical tropes or stylistic figures, formulated as recommendations of action from a historical evaluation. In fact, such lessons can often be compared to scholarly problematisations or hypotheses, used for a kind of preorientation in history and society, intended to be confirmed or refuted by empirical studies. Many of them concern specific historical subject areas such as politics and power, others the character of history itself, and of historical knowledge, such as Karl Marx's dictum that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce, or Mark Twain's thesis that history does not repeat itself but rhymes. Probably, also concepts with a historical orientation and a strong and enduring value that transcend chronological boundaries, such as "the national interest" or "Never again!", can be classified as lessons with a structural perspective.

The structural perspective has strong connecting lines to the genetic perspective, but it also serves to mediate the relation between this genetic perspective and a third, genealogical one. The genetic perspective is only half of the human predicament. The other side states that we, being history, are also simultaneously *making* history. As human beings, we can rise above life itself and make use of our experience, history and memory to understand our present situation, to make sense of the past and orientate ourselves towards the future. Quite contrary to the genetic "we-are-history" perspective, the genealogical "we-make-history" notion is that history is retrospective, beginning with the concerns and conditions of posterity, and only thereafter turning to the past for guidelines. When turning backwards, we look for continuities, predispositions, repetitions and other historical patterns to mirror our present-day situation and to learn from. As already mentioned, such a retrospective operation is dependent on and determined by established, preformed cultural values. Thus, as mentioned above, when we address history genealogically, we actively make use of it instrumentally to satisfy various needs and interests, but we are already culturally disposed to learn from some histories, and to forget or repress others.

Scholars such as Michel Foucault and Koselleck have, in different ways and from different theoretical perspectives, underlined this access to archaeological strata, *Zeitschichten* and *épistemes*, respectively, that render contact with history

possible while simultaneously providing it with restrictions and borderlines.[34] A few comments, with no pretentions to do full justice to their ideas, may illustrate their genealogically oriented historical thinking. Koselleck, inspired by the French Annales School, argues that history is not only linear change and eternal variability, but also, in a more practical sense of everyday practices and experiences, consists of recursive or repetitive structures that transcend traditional chronological boundaries and have a more general extension. This idea is clearly connected to his famous definition of history as multiple histories present at one and the same time, concluded in the conception "the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous", *die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*.

With inspiration from Nietzsche, Foucault also dissociates himself from the uniformity and inevitability of linear, causal history in favour of perspectives of discontinuity, different modes of historical change and plurality. However, much more emphatically than Koselleck, Foucault indicates that access to history, and to knowledge and truth in general, is conditioned by the power positions and relations inherent in modes of discourse. To be sure, discursive practices serve to create and construct knowledge, but the other side of the coin is that they, as underlying structures and principles, have an authorising and policing function. Foucault also radically reduces the role of the subject in the search for guiding and orientating historical lessons. While the German historian sees individuals and collectives with their interests and experiences as the main force behind lessons of history, his French counterpart regards an impersonal power, with its subtle and complex system of oppression and domination, as the principal operator of history. The spirit of this article is obviously closer to Koselleck's ideas, which will be made operable below, but it goes without saying that lessons of history are also intimately connected to positions of power.

What is Learned?

After discussing the appropriate dimensions and perspectives of lessons of history, the contents of "lesson" history is the next aspect due for reflection. Can any history be learned as a lesson if the level of abstraction is high enough? Probably not, at least not if lessons are to be connected to a more fundamental temporal orientation and sense-making. For Oakeshott, this practical and "living" past that can be learned as lessons consists of "an ever-increasing deposit of what are deputed to be fragments of a past which has survived, not as a wound survives in a scar but on account

[34] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Foucault's genealogical ideas are not as conveniently collected as Koselleck's but can be found in several of his works.

of their never having perished, which are now available to be listened to and consulted and which may be related to our current conduct".[35] This fragmentary character should not be mistaken for a historical selection based on spontaneity and arbitrariness. Again, lessons of history must be framed within historical culture, or to what Koselleck in his theory of historical time defines as *Erfahrungsraum*, described as a particular collective and cultural space that serves to orientate the interpretations and actions of human beings. The German historian's qualification of experience as a present past "whose events have been incorporated [in historical culture] and can be remembered"[36] indicates that the space of experience and historical culture are similar concepts. In an often-quoted wording, Koselleck lays down that "no history … could be constituted independently of the experiences and expectations of active human beings",[37] and experiences and expectations certainly work in tandem, but they are simultaneously different and their mutual relationship changes over time, and the historical space where lessons dwell can analytically be dissected separately.

One of Koselleck's sources of hermeneutic inspiration, Hans-Georg Gadamer, connects the space of experience to "the point at which people become aware of their own finality as the fundament of their existence and possibilities and find the limits for their rational ability to realise their expectations and plans for the future".[38] "Finality", "fundament", "possibility" and "limit" all indicate that histories that answer to these conceptual conditions, dealing with temporal perspectives of beginning and end, continuity and change, factuality and possibility and limitation and limitlessness, play a salient role as the historical themes in lessons of history. It means that histories of origins and roots, crises, choices of paths, dividing lines, turning points and transitions have a large learning potential. Catastrophic experiences, often connected to what has been described as "the original and founding tragedy of the identity of certain peoples",[39] obviously trigger learning processes, although, as Jörn Rüsen has warned, they often do not make sense as "normal" historical experiences do.[40]

---

[35] Oakeshott, *On History*, 18.

[36] Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 259. Author's remarks in brackets.

[37] Ibid., 256.

[38] Quoted in Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 233.

[39] Henry Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Past, the Contemporary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 10.

[40] Jörn Rüsen, "Interpreting the Holocaust: Some Theoretical Issues," in *Holocaust Heritage: Inquiries into European Historical Cultures*, ed. Klas-Göran Karlsson and Ulf Zander (Malmö: Sekel, 2004), 46–47.

Lessons are probably also intimately related to histories that reflect perspectives of fundamental dimensions of "life" and "death", "we" and "they", "good" and "evil", and "right" and "wrong". Scholars have denominated these histories as "foundational pasts" or "events at the limit", and Rüsen has used the concept of "borderline events" for histories that reach "beyond the level of the subject matter of historical thinking into the core of the mental procedures of historical thinking itself", which can be described as the principle behind the historical lesson.[41]

This historical thinking has often had the Holocaust as its historical topic, but it can be suggested that also other radical and dramatic historical events such as revolutions, great wars and crimes against humanity can trigger historical thinking in terms of lessons of history. Thus, if the – few – scholarly extracted lessons of history, as indicated above, concern "everyday" and routine phenomena such as health, demography, education and the environment, the historical lessons in wider society and historical culture often involve extraordinary histories with a strong ideological, moral and political capital. In these cases, it becomes obvious that active lesson-learning is strongly conditioned by earlier interpretations, representations and uses in historical culture. Sometimes, as in the case of the Russian Revolution, traditions and "schools" with radically different lessons can be perceived. Furthermore, these histories often have the complex historical sedimentation characteristic of historical lessons, involving all the three historical perspectives mentioned above: a genetic one, demonstrating that the event in question once and for all changed the world, a structural one, proving that the event, as maintained by Rüsen, has a much wider and deeper historical extension than the event itself, and a genealogical perspective, conjuring up the event again and again in posterity.

To be sure, not only historical events but also geographical places with many historical layers of meaning and condensation can be used to illustrate the "lesson" character of historical phenomena. Like events in history, there are spatial phenomena that combine a geographical range with a mental reach, transforming tangible spaces to cultural spaces.[42] Paraphrasing Pierre Nora's

---

[41] Jörn Rüsen, "Holocaust Memory and Identity Building: Metahistorical Considerations in the Case of (West) Germany," in *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001), 253. See also Alon Confino, *Foundational Pasts: The Holocaust as Historical Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[42] Christer Jönsson, Sven Tägil and Gunnar Törnquist, *Organizing European Space* (London: Sage, 2000), 183–84.

idea of realms of memory, defined as "any significant entity … which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community", one could talk about realms of historical lessons when analysing spaces with multiple functions and meanings appearing at one and the same time.[43] Many of them set out from grand narratives of national histories, but there is also an armoury of well-known events in international history with a "lesson" character that relates to places. Munich, with its agreement between Hitler and Chamberlain, has already been mentioned as an example, but the interwar period contains also other places with "lesson" qualities, among them Versailles, Trianon, Weimar, Rapallo, Locarno, Wall Street, Nanjing and Évian. A contemporaneous borderland in more than one sense is Bloodlands, an imaginary east and central European region made known by Timothy Snyder's influential book, where large-scale Communist and Nazi violence took turns in devastating large territories and their populations in the interwar years and during the Second World War.[44] The Bloodlands narrative involves many and differing historical lessons both in the region in question and elsewhere. No doubt, the most obvious is that totalitarian regimes and despots are uniquely evil, but Snyder's emotionally loaded, complex and multilayered history also invites more complicated lessons in which the "belligerent complicity" of the two evils, the Soviet Communist and the German Nazi one, is brought to the fore.

Finally, it can be suggested that another of Koselleck's already mentioned concepts, *Zeitschichten* or overlapping sediments or layers of time, is intimately related to historical lessons.[45] Obviously, they can be perceived as durable historical structures both in a genetic perspective, as *longues durées* as defined by Fernand Braudel, and in a genealogical perspective, as cultural predispositions related to Koselleck's own reflection on spaces of accumulated experience. The German historian does not exploit in detail this latter idea of how experience, sediments of time and posterity can be connected. One suggestion, that would best be called archaeological, is that human beings in search of orientation work themselves backwards to excavate a cultural soil where history has prevailed as findings in more or less durable chronological layers. The digging out of the soil does not take place randomly but follows the logic of historical culture, starting from the surface on which we stand. Often, these strata and their

[43] Pierre Nora, "From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*," in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), xvii.

[44] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic, 2010). For the concept "belligerent complicity", see 392.

[45] Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*.

boundaries towards adjacent ones are understood as answering to historical turning points where history meets the future, continuity and change confront each other and alternatives and counterfactual histories stand out in a natural way. The framework for this kind of historical learning is often national, and objectives often geared towards self-understanding and identity formation. It goes without saying that different individuals and collectives return to different historical layers to find what are perceived as their main orientations and themes to functionally satisfy their needs and interests, but it is also obvious that they all understand their findings as sediments that are – hermeneutically – connected to what are considered as their own circumstances and conditions, as origins, successions, continuities, repetitions or analogies that has a particular learning capacity for posterity. When Russians today excavate their historical culture, in pursuit of what traditionally is called the Russian idea, many of them, engaged in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, turn to the most profound sediment, Kievan Rus, where ethnogenetic discussions on who was first and therefore has the historical right to the territory are acted out. Others find answers to the Russian predicament in specificities of the Mongol-Asiatic, Byzantine or imperial historical strata. Yet another group sees the equally specific and most superficial modernisation process of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, unbalanced in its one-sided economic and military focus, and including large-scale state-organised terror, as the crucial Russian archaeological layer.

Who Learns Lessons?

A conspicuous idea in this article has been that a historical thinking based on lessons of history is not in line with modern historians' professional thinking. However, it has also been suggested that lessons of history are not always compatible with an open-ended, liberal and progressive discourse in wider society. It is again an example that we, when learning historical lessons, sometimes tend to be prisoners of the past, or rather a sharply marked off historical culture. In Koselleck's interpretation, the perspective of historical sedimentation serves the purpose of eliminating the surprise and novelty of the singular history.[46] The fact that history is embedded in strata of a historical culture built on repeatability and recognition obviously increases its value for learning purposes. The other side of the coin is that deeply culturally embedded lessons also tend to decrease the learner's openness and preparedness for plural and open-ended lessons of history. Lessons, functionally understood as

[46] Ibid., 7.

ideologues' and politicians' powerful endeavours to point out their preferred future by referring to certain historical phenomena that serve to legitimise or rationalise, or hermeneutically understood as results or strong cultural or ideological predispositions and prejudgments of whom is friend or foe, evil or good, do not give a great deal of space for analytical and critical historical lessons. Such lessons, often produced by intellectuals turned into ideologues and warriors, have more or less explicitly accompanied almost all nationalist conflicts, genocides and terrorist acts in the modern world. It is imperative to get to know and to learn the lessons of these malign historical lessons and their mechanisms, and to differentiate them from the more benign lessons that we all can profit from in our temporal orientation and sense-making.

Above, historical lessons have also been related to a strict political use of history. The purpose is to awake a political debate, by connecting what is perceived as an urgent present-day problem to a historical phenomenon with a strong societal and cultural loading. The method is to reinforce what are perceived as similarities between the two phenomena, at the expense of – major – differences that are toned down or passed over. Possibly, such a reductionism can analytically bear some reference to historical lessons, but these are obviously simplistic, trivialising and populist. They are not extracted to favour analytical clarity, and the idea to transform complex phenomena from different times to simple and unambiguous parallels cannot be described as favourable for orientation and sense-making. It goes without saying that these lessons must be functionally interpreted as a conscious and goal-oriented strategy by politicians and activists to pursue a politics by means of history. However, there is also a more hermeneutical and less objectionable approach, where victims of injustice, war and large-scale crimes have got "caught" by history and tend to come back to a particular, often traumatic date or event, "a new X", in their orientation in posterity.

The latter perspective leads over to the idea that political and ideological beliefs and convictions can be so strong and unchangeable that the historical, present and future horizons are brought together. This means that history is and will be eternally present and that lessons of history appear always and everywhere, with little variation. The reading of a chapter of *Mein Kampf* is enough to illustrate this idea, but there are surely many less extreme examples where nationalists, communists, religious activists and other fundamentalists, verbal and intellectual teachers as well as their followers, supported by ideological or religious ideas with a primordialist and deterministic leaning, present ready-made and closed historical lessons that only serve to strengthen their own political orientation. There are many indications that the politico-ideological spectrum should be widened. Scrutinising American postwar politicians of

different political orientations, Richard Neustadt and Ernest May have concluded that they often have used lessons of history to "make decisions they wanted to make with a minimum of fresh analysis".[47]

Traditionally equipped with a world view based on the developmental, linear idea that history continuously changes, as are we, its learners, liberal democrats often have a more intellectually qualified idea of historical lessons. Liberals have normally no utopias or other absolute answers that can constitute a basis for lessons of history but must extract them from a more reluctant historical substance, and with focus on processes of change and comparisons. Liberal lessons of history must endure the continuous and critical processes of trial and error and piecemeal engineering that, according to Popper, characterise open society. To be sure, the difficulties should not prevent us from working with this kind of lessons of history. Rather we should, endorsed by Popper's ambition, work for analytical and critical historical lessons. Here, they have been depicted as cultural objects that certainly reflect traditions and historical values in which we already find confidence and security but also can be used as instruments of action and change.

A Typology of Lessons

Finally, a typological framework of various lessons of history, related to two different contexts, one contemporary, one related to historical culture, will be introduced. It evolves from a couple of prepositions. In a progressive perspective, going towards more qualified mental operations, one can either learn *about* history, learn *from* history, learn history – with no proposition, or learn history *in history*. The typology gets its general inspiration from Rüsen.[48] It should also be underlined that these types of lessons of history often mingle in the empirical context, mutually reinforcing or excluding each other in a discourse of history lessons for the empirical scholar to make sense of.

The "learning about" historical thinking has an orientation towards announcing community and shared identity over time, with history as a kind of cultural glue repetitively defining traditions, historical time transformed into the time of nature, and lessons defined by a need for continuity. History is generally

---

[47] Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: New Press, 1988), 75.

[48] Jörn Rüsen, *Historisches Lernen: Grundlagen und Paradigmen* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994); "Historical Narration: Foundation, Types, Reason," in *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York: Berghahn, 2005), 9–39; Rüsen, *Zeit und Sinn: Strategien historischen Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main: Humanities Online, 2012), 148–217.

about recognition and confirmation of the present in "our" past. However, tradition is not necessarily backward-looking: it can be regarded as a collection of inherited cultural conceptions capable of guiding us towards the future, thus embracing both change and novelty. We have learned that also traditions are invented.[49] However, this is normally not the case with lessons connected to learning about history. That there are lessons to be transmitted and learned from a chronological but not genetically organised history is taken for granted, but the idea behind it is seldom explicated in the textbooks, popular magazines and books by nonprofessionals where these lessons are frequent. Such an explication of who is supposed to learn about history, and for what purpose, except the understanding of unprecise phenomena such as "human nature" or "eternal change", would probably be contradictory to the idea of a natural historical community with a consensual view of history. In general, Rüsen does not see that "learning about" lessons are results of conscious intellectual efforts, but rather "necessary conditions for humans to find their way", which indicate that they are strongly dependent on and activated by patterns of historical culture.[50] One history tends to be as valuable as another, even if political and military history, often personalised in biographies of prominent male individuals, is considered most permeated with lessons of history. Single storylines are preferred to alternative and multiple histories.

Often, histories that are learned about have a strong connection to an older, nationally oriented history of historiography and historical culture. However, there are certainly also more up-to-date examples. As mentioned, during the last quarter-century, the Holocaust has been introduced everywhere in the Western world as the most important historical lesson. David Cesarani has noticed that the genocide narrative has a dual character. On the one hand, the Holocaust has become situated in a traditional history, clearly answering to ambitions to promote a history that can serve unifying, homogenising purposes, with clearly defined perpetrators and victims, an intentionalist and straightforward narrative and conspicuous, often publicly declared lessons, related to the obligation not to repeat the Holocaust and the nationalist, xenophobic and antisemitic ideas from which it originated and again can originate. Lessons of this kind have been sent out from Brussels since 1990, based on the idea that the Holocaust is a founding history in a European cultural integration process.[51] On the other

---

[49] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[50] Rüsen, "Historical Narration," 13.

[51] Klas-Göran Karlsson, "The Uses of History and the Third Wave of Europeanisation," in *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance*, ed. Malgorzata

hand, Holocaust history scholarship is a qualified, multifaceted activity in which functionalist interpretations predominate, agency is many-headed and lessons are seldom expressed. Cesarani's plausible explanation relates to the special topic, with its good faith and subordination to extraneous agendas.[52] This is a good example of different histories with different lesson modes living side by side, and that the distinction between a practical and a historical past is still a vigorous one.

If traditions go back on a multitude of different and heterogeneous histories, the concept of learning from history represents an exemplary, *historia magistra vitae*-type of historical thinking. In its insistence that there are histories of a more lasting value that should be actively searched and used for posterior purposes, it is clearly based on a genealogical approach. The exemplary idea, prevalent not least when history is transformed into lessons by historical actors themselves, is that history, when soundly selected according to basic moral and ideological principles, provides us with valuable cases, models and rules of conduct that, tested against current precarious situations, are considered of a time-transcending value. These patterns are deducted from unique, concrete historical cases, borderline events, such as "Auschwitz" or "Munich 1938". They are both examples of "negative" lessons that these historical actions and situations should not be repeated, following the "never again" idea.

In recent decades, the exemplary idea has been widely used in pedagogical and political contexts. Noted, monumental individuals of greatness or decay are frequently invoked as moral lessons of history. Historical figures such as the German industrialist Oskar Schindler and the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who both saved the lives of thousands of Jews in wartime Europe, have been given a lot of public attention as individuals whose characters and activities are considered worthy of imitation. In Sweden, 2012 was officially proclaimed Wallenberg Year, exactly a century after his birth. The diplomat could not only posthumously count on his heroic achievements in Budapest in the final stages of the war, but also his status as a victim of Communist political repression in the early Cold War, thereby addressing two histories with strong learning capacity, a Communist and a Nazi one. That a Holocaust scholar a few years earlier had called Wallenberg "a less important diplomat who engaged in humanitarian work in one city during a few months" while the war drew

---

Pakier and Bo Stråth (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 38–55, and Karlsson, "The Holocaust in European Historical Culture," in *Ideas of/for Europe: An Interdisciplinary Approach to European Identity*, ed. Teresa Pinheiro, Beata Cieszynska and José Eduardo Franco (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 427–40.

[52] David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews, 1933–49* (London: Pan, 2017), xxv.

to an end was obviously not regarded as an obstacle to using his life story for promoting heroic lessons of history.[53]

The exemplary principle does not easily comply with a scholarly perspective, but in a time when biographies have gained popularity and identity politics has entered also the academic arena, studies with an exemplary objective of noted women or representatives of ethnic minorities have been published. In general, like the first type of history learning, the "learning from history" idea has a clear orientation towards collective learning and presupposes a society built on a strong cultural or ideological community that certainly is not existent in a modern democracy. To call a historical person like Schindler and Wallenberg a hero is not without problems, not only because it does not answer to a traditional scholarly standard to "lift out" a figure from the greater historical context, but also because it resembles a practice of historical culture often applied in totalitarian societies such as Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union.[54] For exemplary learning to be effective, the histories used must probably refer to values of a very general kind, such as those connected to what we denominate as crimes against humanity. This is certainly a legal term, but today it has also a more literal meaning, as crimes of such a magnitude that we see it as committed against us all.

The third concept, "learning history", with no preposition, can be treated more cursory. It refers to a scholarly genetic, analytic-critical thinking in terms of cause and effect, intentions and consequences and other complex historical operations, a thinking based on the "we are history" idea. In this modern professional idea, history has no enduring qualities such as traditions or examples since it changes eternally and the "we" is always moving forward. A tradition, an individual and an event is never greater than they are allowed by the historical context. Learning is connected to origins and developments, to historical concepts, to distance, to intellectual problems and to transformation. To learn history is not only to give the right answers to historical questions, but also, and especially, to ask the right historical questions. The learning constant is the historical thinking as such, based on scholarly, methodological standards,

---

[53] Paul A. Levine, "Raoul Wallenbergs uppdrag i Budapest: Bakgrund och motiv," in *En problematisk relation. Flyktingpolitik och judiska flyktingar i Sverige, 1920–1950*, ed. Lars M. Andersson and Karin Kvist Geverts (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2008), 269. Author's translation.

[54] Ulf Zander, "Oskar Schindler and Raoul Wallenberg: National, European and American Heroes," in *Ideas of Europe/Ideas for Europe: An Interdisciplinary Approach to European Identity*, ed. Teresa Pinhero, José Eduardo Franco and Beata Cieszynka (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 454–55.

which must rule over all histories, even – or, in particular – those connected to the politically sensitive ones. In fact, the latter are often avoided by professional historians. The critical lessons inherent in the "learning history" concept indicate an endeavour to do history full justice by counteracting all ambitions to draw "simplistic" or "reductionist" historical lessons, or even by doing away with lessons of history whatsoever. There is an obvious risk that such an idea about history, strictly upheld, is turned inwards and becomes an idea for a minority of professional followers.

Finally, the fourth and most qualified notion, that we learn history while standing in history, reiterates the basic hermeneutical claim that reflected historical thinking must take account of its own historicity, which indicates that both basic perspectives, genetic and genealogical, are present. Such a knowledge is participant, is has been argued.[55] For lessons to have their full significance, the critical perspective, one-sidedly destructive and in constant flux, must be connected to what here has been called orientation and sense-making. On the one hand, historical lessons must be analysed from a perspective of genetic development. Much like history as such, lessons of history are also subject to constant change. On the other hand, histories are genealogically interpreted and made use of by us, their "results", from various cultural and empowered positions. History must be provided with an active address. This learning process is both active and instrumental, in the sense that history is handled to satisfy various interests, among them both scholarly and extrascholarly, but is also passive and culturally predetermined, since historical lessons are embedded in genetic patterns and traditions. Historical lessons conceived in this way are framed in structural pregivens of different kinds but constitute simultaneously an open discourse of alternative and possible histories. History certainly takes place but proceeds and opens up to posterity when transformed into lessons. The most qualified lessons of history, based on ideas of how memory and experience work, take this duality into account. In another relevant duality, a historical lesson is less the result or the master of historical thinking than its useful instrument and servant. No doubt, such a notion answers better than the other three to an idea of historical lessons as part of a collective learning process in a democratic society.

Lund University

[55] John Lukacs, *The Future of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 97–100.