

Notes from just one week of the old Tool-Kit course at Oxford; pulled with affection from a dusty storage carton...

"Intellectual Tool-Kit"

SUMMARY NOTES - HISTORY LECTURE TWO: MICROSCOPES, MACROSCOPES AND OTHER HISTORICAL FILTERS

**** These are not comprehensive notes, but just informal summary points of key ideas, for later reference or study. Clearly nothing here should be quoted as the author's final assessment. ****

I.0 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

- This course brings out the 'tools' which selected major thinkers have used in their work on that most perplexing of tasks: The understanding of human beings.
 - I like to think of it as opening up a big tool box, filled not just with hammers and pliers, but with little viewing goggles. You strap one on, and see the world from Durkheim's perspective; strap on another, and you're looking through Gary Becker's eyes, or Marx's, or whoever.
- The intention is not to get you to simply copy any of their approaches, but to understand how their different approaches work: what they offer, and what they miss.
 - To do that we'll follow a consistent approach: first we'll give some examples of a particular theory in operation, then we'll try to 'X-ray' how it works, and then, stepping back even more, we'll try to see what can be salvaged from it even if we're not going to accept it in its entirety.
- The goal throughout is to emphasize the difference between jargon, and insight.

- Jargon is deliciously seductive. It gives you a wonderful sense of joining. You can pull it around yourself like a cozy warm coat.
 - But although this is tempting, in the long-term you're not fooling anybody. It's harder, but much more satisfying to work on getting real insights.
- As the course proceeds, we'll see that the various thinkers group together in a few clusters. What's learned about one member of a cluster can give deep insights into other, seemingly unrelated members of it.
 - For today though, back to our history sequence.
 - Last week we concentrated on Braudel, and on Tocqueville. This week we're showing four more thinkers. At the end I'll summarize them, organized into grids for clarity.
 - We'll note how each approach restricts you into a type of subject matter, as well as one sort of causal analysis, and a 'level' of detail.
 - To make it clearer, we'll also look at the likely flaws one gets as any one approach is taken to extremes.
 - Note that my favorite historian - Thucydides - comes next week.

I.I HALBERSTAM

- In the lecture I gave some background on David Halberstam: at one time the New York Times's best foreign correspondent, immensely skilled at working out what the 'real' story was, in almost any setting he was sent to; later though, a writer of books concentrating on recent American political history.
- His approach is to look for the true personal motivations of the people concerned.
 - Think of it as the true story someone would whisper to you; the way people say, yeah this is what we're doing, didn't you know this?

Let me give two examples of this sort of approach.

1) Stephen Ambrose wrote an excellent biography, discussing George S. Custer, in parallel with his final opponent, the Indian Chief Crazy Horse. It turns out that Custer was last in his class when he was at West Point, the American military academy. Did that mean Custer was simply dumb?

- Nope. Ambrose looked more closely. West Point regularly kicked out the lowest ranked students. Nobody could end up last so many times entirely by

chance. Custer loved having a good time, and knew his abilities very, very accurately. Each year, as final grades approached, Custer would pull himself up till he just slipped in.

2) Now an example from Halberstam himself. In 1957, Little Rock, Arkansas had segregated schools.

- The standard story most people learn is that the governor of the state, a man named Faubus, was a racist. He wouldn't let black students into white schools on principle. But the American president, Eisenhower, forced him to, by sending in paratroopers to guard the new black students.
 - It turns out though that Gov. Faubus had not been a hard segregationist before. Rather he was an opportunist, and when it turned out he could only get elected by appealing to the redneck vote, he did.
 - It also turns out that there were two main high schools in Little Rock. One was middle class, and the other was working class. Clearly the middle class one was untouched: a lot of the hatred the white protesters at the working class one felt was a generalized anti-establishment, class resentment too.
 - Even Eisenhower wasn't quite as portrayed. Although he had little reflex to push hard for integration, Faubus had promised him there would be no problems at the Little Rock high school. But then Faubus had pulled state guards away, which pretty much guaranteed there would be problems. (It also guaranteed his re-election.)
 - No one double-crossed Dwight David Eisenhower. The thousand paratroopers were sent in.
- Note the significance of these further analyses. If you felt someone like Faubus was a deep racist, there would be no chance he could change his actions. But of course many Southern politicians were like Faubus, and jumped when it became expedient to be non-segregationist.
 - Missing the background on Faubus, would let you miss that point.
 - Similarly for missing the class resentments of the white Little Rock citizens.
 - And similarly too for the significance of Eisenhower's motivations.

- Since he wasn't motivated by non-racism or any general principle of universal justice he'd picked up from WWII, there was no reason to expect he'd react so strongly to other cases of segregation in the South...so long as no one embarrassed or double-crossed him in carrying them out. This is what happened, and only by understanding that can one understand the long hiatus in further school integration.
- In summary, Halberstam brought in class, and ambition, especially of the political leaders involved.
- The approach each time is to be sure that 'significant' strands of potential human motivation are taken into account. In the RAND corporation case from last week it was corruption, family alliances, and also - this was the interesting twist - the embarrassment almost everyone feels at being publicly seen as corrupt. In the Custer case it was understanding his personality type. (Think of the sort of student who's friendly to everyone, whose room is always open for partying, and who seemingly never studies...yet pulls himself together enough to get an acceptable degree, and somehow, through self-deprecating charm, ends up getting that BBC job in London.) And in the Little Rock case, as noted, it was being aware of class, and the ambition of politicians.
- The strength of Halberstam's approach is that it can give real insight.
- The weaknesses though are several.
 - 1) There no universal method to it. If you're as good at judging people and bringing them out as Halberstam you'll do well at it; if not there's no training that can make you much better.
 - 2) Only partial aspects of reality are considered. There's no way of telling when you've 'completed' or fully described the situation.
 - 3) And, most of all, it easily veers into over-cynicism.
- This last point is the associated flaw you always get if the approach is taken to extremes. People are often venal, but not always, and assuming the worst means missing some important forces.
 - Thus the pre-World War I German naval buildup involved the steel and ship industries giving huge bribes to the groups campaigning for this buildup.

- If you stopped your analysis at that point though, it would make sense to conclude that if you just stopped such bribery, then military aggression would also stop. But of course there was nationalistic fervor, genuinely believed in, which also helped the naval buildup go ahead. Concentrating entirely on the bribery, you'd miss the nationalism. Studying German history in this century, that would be a pretty big miss.
- With such flaws your explanation is too thin. The Halberstam-style approach seems one that takes a broad view of human motivation, but wherever this flaw enters in it ends up taking too 1-dimensional a view after all.
 - This is especially beguiling in International Relations. It's very impressive when a famous politician or one of their assistants confides to you the 'true motivations' of some important event. But although it's thrilling to hear such (generally sarcastic) details of famous people, and although it can make you feel that you're right there on the inside, it often is only very minor or limited aspects.
 - Even in the Little Rock case: Eisenhower's personal links with the state governor are interesting to learn about, but there were deeper flows working through the postwar world which came to be more important than that. (In defense of Halberstam, at times he is of course entirely aware of that; I'm just concentrating on the aspects of his work which excludes that.)

1.2 TECHNOLOGICAL REDUCTIONISTS

- These are the people who really take a 1-d view, especially in terms of what's derived from technology.
 - But they sometimes do get very good results...
- I mentioned several examples:
 - There were the simplest 'Marxian' points - much less nuanced than in Marx himself, as we saw - on the way the handmill helped set up or underpin mediaeval configurations of society; the way the steam engine did the same for industrial class system in a different configuration of society.
 - There was Neal Postman's points on the way adults used to have a unique knowledge realm, which kids couldn't enter into very easily. What 10-year-old is going to read a big newspaper, or will have accumulated an adult's lifetime of experience? But with television,

according to Postman, that changes. Kids and adults will watch the same programs, often including the same news broadcasts. The adults have no special knowledge, or at least a lot less, and so get deferred to less. It ties in with the oddity of seeing 50-year-old men now dressed in the same outfit - jeans and running shoes - that children might wear.

- I also referred to cars leading to much of suburban life; out of town big shops changing local high street shop density; etc.
 - In these views, the way we respond to new inventions is like ants reconfiguring around a sugar spill. Let the sugar fall out in one pattern, and the ants shape up one way; let the sugar spill another way, and the ants hurry to take up a formation appropriate for that too.
 - Sometimes the reductionists take a very crude view, and will insist in working at the level of the general phenomenology of the event considered. Thus TV is inherently different from print, and so, they might say, anyone spending much time around TV will be shaped differently than someone dealing with print. But points like that are at a huge level of generalization. In the 'era' of print there were vast national and historical differences, which the mere phenomenology of print didn't account for. Ditto now with TV.
- In brief summary though, the strengths of the technological reductionists are that they sometimes do give nice, surprising results. They also accept that technology can be significant, and aren't 'embarrassed' to allow it to be more important than traditional engines of historical change.
 - The weaknesses though are that:
 - As noted, it's only one aspect of matters, and so later developments are likely to 'veer' quite far from the reductionist predictions, as those other aspects come on stream and take effect. Consider the wild failures of almost any predictions of the future, which have been motivated by a focus on just one - generally technological - aspect. (Or, a bit more generally, the way stopping those German industrial bribes wouldn't end the incentive for naval rearmament.) Things just aren't that neat. There's a certain 'juvenility' in insisting on technology alone, which is why the question 'What was the best year for science fiction?' can usually be answered: 'Whenever you were 11 years old.'

- There's also often a sloppy reasoning, stemming from that 1-dimensional focus. So TV is of great interest to Postman, but there might be far different reasons why older people dress like youngsters, be it changes in medicine, or the business world being less controlling and allowing people to be more informal out of hours, or an upped vanity in general, or a general lauding of new objects (be they computers or people), or whatever.

1.3 EDWARD GIBBON

- In his book on the Roman Empire
 - 1) He looks at the full structure, i.e. the full outer lineaments of a society. (This is what Halberstam was not so good on; with Halberstam it's a bit hit and miss when you're done.)
 - 2) But also: he emphasizes the inner undercuttings of any such structure. (This 'undercutting' is what has some similarities with Halberstam's approach.)
- It's a rare mix, and what makes his book readable and insightful.
 - Let me try to pass on something of his tone.
- That 'undercutting' is in his sentences, which often have an ironic twist.
 - He discusses Mohammed's early followers racing across North Africa, and notes they had a great success in converting the groups they conquered. (Note that compulsory circumcision was one requirement of conversion.) He phrases it that when one has a choice between losing one's head, or losing one's foreskin, the decision is easily made.
- To make his approach clearer I'll give a sequence of quotes, first about his views on religion; then giving his main analysis.
- Note that his religious views have the typical Enlightenment cynicism, and that he shapes that within his typical epigrammatic twists.
- Often his bias is very clear:
 - Gibbon: 'The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.'

- or, Gibbon: 'It was indifferent (to the ancient philosophers) what shape the folly of the multitude might choose to assume; and they approached, with the same inward contempt and the same external reverence, the altars of the Libyan, the Olympian, or the Capitoline Jupiter.'
- Again, note the typical epigrammatic twist: his sentences logic flows forward until he gives them an inner twist and back-cut; as we'll see, this matches his overall analysis to some extent. Also note that his main assumptions - his anti-religious bias - are stuffed into the sentences, and presented in a way that narrow-mindedly blocks discussion.
- It's true that he did occasionally accept religious 'effectiveness', but only as a practical motivation, as e.g. in recognizing how important it was that the Legionnaires worshipped the imperial and divisional flags, which indirectly resembled themselves. By having such worship, they were indirectly worshipping and strengthening themselves.
- Now let's recap his main 'structural' view. This was to consider the Empire as something of a hollow cockpit, with controls which though a bad person could take over. (In his work as a whole in this section he was showing how a previous structure crumbled, and a new one was built up.)
 - In an alternate phrasing, his sociology of the early Empire described it the setting up of an emperor-machine, which with the wrong person in the driver's seat would be awful.
 - Note that in general we like such cute little summary models - consider the remarkably simple patterns which some of the functional anthropologists excitedly came back having found - even though real life is rarely so simple.
- Again, I'll give some examples of his phrasing for this 'cockpit' analysis.
 - Just as the Empire reached a peak of happiness, in c. 100 AD, any careful observer, or any of the good emperors, would see the whole structure was unstable, for it depended on the character of a single man.
 - Gibbon: 'The fatal moment was perhaps approaching, when some licentious youth, or some jealous tyrant, would abuse, to the destruction, that absolute power which they had exerted for the benefit of their people.'

- In another phrasing, Gibbon: 'The happiness of an hundred millions depended on the personal merit of one or two men, perhaps children, whose minds were corrupted by education, luxury, and despotic power.'
- There were parallel weaknesses elsewhere. In his work he showed how the Emperors had needed to reduce the Army's internal discipline so that it wouldn't rebel against them, but yet in doing so they had deeply weakened it, even though this wasn't yet visible to the barbarians.
- Overall, he contrasted all this with the strengths of Europe at his time of writing. It was divided into many states, and so even a total incompetent in one of them couldn't destroy everything. Rome though had controlled the whole world, or all that seemed to count, so Gibbon emphasized how there were no co-equals of the emperor in parallel states to rein him in by force or example, or to give refuge to dissidents. If a dissident did manage to get over the border, the 'barbarian' leaders he encountered would recognize it was to their great advantage to send him back.
- There's much more to his analysis, but that gives a hint of his political sociology.
 - Because he's such a good writer it comes to seem very persuasive in reading it. It's also striking to see an ancient society come to life, especially when you're being led by the hand by such a seemingly cunning - and safely removed - observer.
 - Many of the particular points hold up well. Thus the distortions produced by a concentrated cockpit of power have been much observed in this century. On the simplest level, consider the way Saddam Hussein's field commanders couldn't make tactical moves without getting approval from the top.
- But the flaws?
 - Some of these are in Gibbon in particular; some are what you get whenever you follow his sort of approach too far:
 - 1) He went on way too far with the epigrams, especially in the way that he incorporated within them 'hidden' assumptions that might really not be true.
 - This even if there is this venal motivation, it didn't always operate as slickly as he wrote it. There's also the point from the German

navy example above, that you're painting with too crude a brush by insisting on that aspect alone.

2) He's backing a current view.

- For him it was being anti religion. For others it might be e.g. a history showing that the UK, or Peru, or whatever is the best country in the world.

- Such backing is very common. In the Mary Douglas week, we'll see how we like to summarize much of our life in e.g. an ordinary meal, and even more, how we like to 'sustain' our attitudes by associating them with solid events.
- How much more satisfying is it to find what you believe backed up by all of history?
 - Examples here are people finding a hidden gender aspect in history which is not just mildly significant, but which utterly controls all else, or at least is the only aspect of the historical period under consideration which you talk about. Another example is the way several historians of science these days (who, in a truly odd career choice, often hate science) try to use examples from the past to undercut the status and social presumptions of all science, even when that too means giving only a skewed view.
 - Clearly whenever you do that, you're not fully describing or being open to what actually occurred.

1.4 WEBER AND ARON

- We began by looking at how Weber described three stages of authority, which were likely to succeed each other.
 - First was traditional authority, where things were done because they'd 'always' been carried out that way. Then there was likely to be charismatic authority, when things get based on the associated power or impact of one striking individual - think of Brad Pitt motorcycling into a village, and all the young people dropping their traditional habits, and doing whatever he says.
 - Finally, there's bureaucratic authority, where the once-fresh rules have been formalized and get automatically carried out. Thus that village, after a while, might have rules that Okay, it's 3 PM so we're going to enact the arrival of the great Brad, even though we've now done that 4,000 times and no one alive except some doddering elders remember his Awesome Arrival; then at 3:30 we have the

four-minute break for coffee then at 3:34 it's off to the square for the ceremonial...

- Weber's own analysis has often been stultified (just as in that process of bureaucratic authority taken over!). Too many people say, Oh, I've got it, let me now look back at, say, recent Korean history and see in what year they made the switch from charismatic to bureaucratic authority.
 - That destroys too much evidence. What's better is to say, look at Korean society in say the 1980s and estimate how much they used the three sorts in varying extents. That can lead to analyzing why the distribution of those three sorts had varied from before, etc.

- We discussed how it's often useful to use the terminology of vector spaces here. (You can think of a vector space as a full range of possible descriptions; each vector axis is one aspect ('dimension') of that description.) Then you naturally end up using the terms as a mix, instead of just as one selecting one as operating full out. (In week 11 or 12 we'll see the tendencies towards reification which confuse this.)

- The strength of this sort of approach is that it's a fuller way of analyzing societal structures than what we've seen before. There's less insistence on any one construct.

- There still are weaknesses:
 - 1) Weber's own typology is a close transposition of the Bible, in its late 19th C German Protestant interpretations. Traditional authority is the Old Testament, charismatic authority is the life of Jesus, and bureaucratic authority is sensible, or at least comprehensive, later codifications.
 - Or you can see his view as an over-generalization from the immediate world he was interested in, of Junkers (the big land-owners, with 'feudal' attitudes) vs. the rationalizing German State. In any event, wherever someone's just generalizing out from such limited experience, even if they pretend that it's really based on a much wider survey, then you can have doubts about whether it really will apply generally
 - 2) The vector-mix can be cold, and seem to miss important part of life.
 - 3) You don't know if it's comprehensive.

- Note that these critiques don't cancel everything, for the very nature of using vectors as only 'possible' factors, means that there's less problem with it not being comprehensive, or over-generalized.
 - That leads though to yet another critique, an aesthetic one more than anything else. Gibbon is delightful and enriching to read, for you see this great view taking shape. In Weber's work, as interpreted here, everything's less artistically fulfilling, for the reader has to do so much of the work on his own.

- One parallel work is Raymond Aron's suggestion that it's useful to analyze post-WWII politico-military developments in terms of three levels, at the peak of which is the level of the ballistic missile. This includes not just the physical missiles, but also strategic decision making, graduate programs in International Relations, the conniving at organizations such as the National Security Council, etc.
 - Below that is the level of technologies typified by the tank. That includes particular military commanders, radio links, bureaucratized national armies, etc.
 - And finally, at the 'bottom', there's the level associated with the hand-held submachine gun: wars of colonial liberation, ideologies of resistance, etc

- Aron was strongly influenced by the way, in the 1950s, that the higher levels didn't always control the ones below them. Thus the 'bottom' level proved to be more powerful than the middle level, as e.g. in the French army's loss before Algerian guerrillas. Similarly, the level of tanks proved able to stymie the highest level, as e.g. in US strategic superiority not being able to push back Soviet tanks in Eastern Europe.
 - His view naturally extends to the existence of a level below even the machine-gun level, and the way - under a few very particular conditions! - it too could stymie everything above it. One example is the Intifada; another is Martin Luther King using the U.S. South as a viewable morality play, as noted above.

- There are several things to note about this work of Aron.
 - 1) As opposed to Weber, it links 3 levels, and not just 3 doings within 1 level.
 - That's excellent.

2) Related to that, Aron's analysis nicely brings out the way each level has its associated world.

- (Thus the way that someone from an International Relations course is likely to have a different background and attitude and clothes and - who knows? - a different reflex towards decorating their rooms than someone from e.g. the straight military level, which probably makes the meeting between them uncomfortable.)

3) And, as always, there's no 'method' about choosing levels of analysis which prove to be this insightful. It just so happened that Aron was especially good at it; he was:

- a) well-versed in potential categories (as a young man he was the one who introduced his (briefly) best friend Sartre to German existentialism). But also:

- b) he was wide open to evidence about actual political and social developments around him.

- This last point is especially hard to continue once you become famous. Who wants to step out of the easy cocoon of automatic respect and prerogatives? Sartre, for example, failed utterly at it. (Aron in his autobiography has written sensitively about the awful moments when they realized their friendship was going to have to break because of that).

- From all this, recap the general approach.

- What we've been doing in both these history weeks is implicitly creating a hyper-space volume, similar to the generalized fitness landscapes we'll see in the Darwin week. You then notice that a society in history has:

- a location, i.e. its current description

- a trajectory. Note that one sort of trajectory is ballistic, as with a rocket that's fired once and then allowed to glide. Or our eye movements in reading, where the eyeball gets flung forward in a great spinning turn, and then glides along a while before restraining muscles etc rein it back. This isn't the sort of trajectory being used here. Think rather of something continuously powered as it moves along even after its initial gliding starts, as e.g. a plane flying

- and finally, again as with the fitness landscapes, you do your best to understand the 'easy' and 'hard' - the likely and unlikely - alternate paths for that society to jump to.

Before turning to the reading list, let me first, almost mechanically, summarize the analysis of this week's thinkers, using informal language where it might get the points across.

- After this typed out list, I'll include the little hand-inked grid which summarizes it even more briefly.

- Each thinker selects a certain type of motivating causality.
 - For Halberstam it's 'real' motivations
 - For the reductionists it's science or technology
 - For Gibbon it's the assembled structure he's described, plus logical or psychological flaws
 - For Weber it's evolved structures, though he has that interesting 'judo' twist of swiveling around and using those as a tool.

- That gives each thinker a selected domain of the world to 'scoop' into.

- To roughly 'x-ray' the theories:
 - Halberstam brings out an assemblage of personal motivations
 - The reductionists take the following approach: an event or invention 'a' pushes along to produce a splayed range of consequences 'b'
 - Gibbons builds up an assemblage, largely composed of venality, plus logical twists that'll always be there (this is somewhat like Halberstam) within that structure
 - Weber has a fuller way of analyzing those structures, i.e. there's less insistence on following the author's one construct (though, leaving matters up to the reader is less 'artistically fulfilling' and less directly informative than Gibbon, as we noted)

- Finally, back to the particular flaws of each thinker, followed by possible 'salvages'.

- Halberstam leaves out total structures as well as overall motivations and (some) historical flows

- It is though, an excellent reminder of 'humanly true' motivations and actions

- The technological reductionists are too one-dimensional

- They do though remind us that there can be those general splayed out effects, as well as particular ones they've seen

- Gibbon can be too sleek (despite being aware of non-rational factors) and he's deeply distorted by his current-time bias against Christianity
 - But there's an architectonic triumph, and he also brings out these very logical human motivations or hypocrisies

- Weber's work as seen today can be over-delimited if the axes are wrongly chosen, and it can seem a total approach even though it really presumes a particular scale (as opposed to Aron's scheme working on several different scales)
 - It's good though as an approach for others to use, as well as for granting a few particular insights.

(and then there was a combined reading guide for the two history weeks)