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Learning from the Past: A Contentious Issue?

ABSTRACT: *Given that history is “man-made” and those who study or read history are men and women who carry with them their own respective perspectives and value systems, it is difficult to imagine that people will learn the same lessons from history. This is not to say that one cannot learn from history; one certainly can, but expect not that one’s view would be broadly shared by others. This article looks at the controversy surrounding the often heard exhortation that one ought to take lessons from history, lest one would succumb to repeating past follies. However, the aptness of trying to learn from history has often been questioned. This skepticism is understandable as it is said that the exercise cannot possibly be free from subjective elements. On the other hand, a persistent doubting or outright denying of the appropriateness of trying to draw lessons from the historical past, could in a way, undermine the very *raison d’être* or rationale for studying history itself. While some might be prepared to debunk history as a discipline, others would certainly want to defend its usefulness. In an attempt to shed some light to this seeming quandary, this article proposes that our attention be directed to the “obvious” lessons that we can glean from the past, contentious though that proposal might be.*

KEY WORD: *History, historical lessons, interpretations, perspectives, value systems, and contentious issue.*

IKHTISAR: *Artikel ini bertajuk “Belajar dari Masa Lalu: Satu Isu Perbalahan?”. Memandangkan bahawa sejarah adalah “buatan manusia” dan mereka yang mengkaji atau membaca sejarah adalah lelaki dan wanita yang membawa bersama perspektif mereka masing-masing dan sistem nilai, ia adalah sukar untuk membayangkan bahawa orang akan belajar mengenai pelajaran yang sama dari sejarah. Ini bukan untuk mengatakan bahawa kita tidak boleh belajar dari sejarah; satu yang pasti boleh, tetapi tidak mengharapkan pandangan seseorang akan dikongsi secara meluas oleh orang lain. Artikel ini meninjau kontroversi yang sering berlegar di sekitar saranan agar kita mengambil pelajaran dari sejarah demi menghindari kesilapan masa silam. Namun begitu, kewajaran gesaan ini sering dipersoalkan. Sikap sangsi ini tidak sukar difahami kerana usaha sedemikian itu dikatakan tidak mungkin teleraai dari unsur subjektif. Sebaliknya, tindakan mempersoalkan secara berterusan atau menafikan secara mutlak kecocokan upaya mendapatkan iktibar dari sejarah boleh, dari satu segi, menjejaskan asas pengkajian sejarah itu sendiri. Mungkin sesetengah pihak tidak keberatan untuk mencabar keutuhan sejarah sebagai satu disiplin, tetapi tentunya ada golongan lain yang mahu membela peranannya. Sebagai satu langkah untuk menghuraikan sedikit-sebanyak dilema yang kelihatan ini, artikel ini mengajak para pembaca memberikan tumpuan kepada pengajaran “jelas” yang dapat diperolehi dari sejarah, biarpun anjuran itu juga boleh mengundang kontroversi.*

KATA KUNCI: *Sejarah, pelajaran sejarah, tafsiran, perspektif, sistem nilai, dan isu perbalahan.*

INTRODUCTION

With regard to the Western concept of knowledge, or rather hierarchy of knowledge in classical Europe of the Greek and Roman world, philosophy used to occupy the uppermost rank.

A philosopher was, then, looked upon by society as the keeper and dispenser of wisdom. However, following the Scientific Revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries, philosophy lost its pre-eminent position. Its place was taken

over by scientific knowledge. If logic was the bedrock upon which philosophy was built and nurtured, empiricism, or empirical evidence, came to be the basis of scientific knowledge. The tool for acquiring and verifying this knowledge is, of course, laboratory experiments.

The achievement of scientific knowledge was crowned by of the 18th century Industrial Revolution and all the visible fruits that civilization managed to reap from it. Industrialization has brought material benefits to Western civilization in ways that were difficult to imagine previously. Inevitably, with the bestowal of such tangible rewards, men became more than ready and ever willing to discard logic in favour of empiricism. In other words, logic alone as a premise for knowledge became, over the years, harder to sustain. In the wake of empiricism and scientific knowledge not only logic but faith, the underlying basis for religious knowledge, also came under serious assault.

The compelling attraction of science was such that those studying human societies and affairs soon found themselves describing their field of activities as social sciences. Augustus Comte (1798-1857) used the term physical science to describe such a pursuit. Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) believed that it was possible to write history as it actually happened. He, therefore, believed in the concept of objectivity and positivism in the study of history. This trend of thinking gave rise to the heyday of positivism in historiography. It was, as it turned out, too good to last. The position was assailed by the relativists who emphasised and elaborated on the subjective elements of historical research and writing. It was a charge to which the positivists had no real answer.

Nevertheless, historians claim that they are, or at least aspire to be, objective when writing or dealing with historical events. However, their

definition of the term “objective” is qualitatively different from the one that is understood by the natural scientists. A historian confronted by someone doubting the veracity of his or her finding or conclusion, cannot answer the skeptic in the way that a natural scientist can. A historian cannot hope to silence the doubter by inviting him or her to witness a repeat experiment in a laboratory (Gardiner, 1961:91).

Of late, the post-modernists came with a new round of searing attacks on historical writing. The denunciations against historical writing coming from amongst them range from one alleging that historical writing is but another form of literature to one contending that there is nothing in it beyond the text. In short, history is what the historian makes of it, nothing more nothing less. As one post-modernist historian, Keith Jenkins puts it:

The past has and always will go with anybody without a trace of jealousy or a hint of permanent fidelity to any particular caller: hagiographers, antiquarians, professionals, Marxists, Annalists, Structuralists, fascists, feminists, pragmatic neo-Rankians, anybody can have it. And why not? Nobody has a patent on “the past”; it can be used or ignored by anyone (Jenkins, 2003:10-11).

The post-modernist assertion that there is nothing beyond the text is but going a little too far. Naturally, many historians have come to the defence of their own craft (Windschuttle, 1996; and McCullagh, 1998). In many respects, the post-modernists can be said to be attacking a “straw-man” as no historian worth his or her salt would completely deny the presence of subjective elements in his or her work, the profession to be “objective” notwithstanding.

Historians have always been aware that different historians read the past differently, what with their own and respective value systems. Historians have their own sense of understanding of the varied phenomena that they study

and all these, more often than not, tend to become embedded in their thinking and writing. The late and renowned English historian, E.H. Carr (1892-1982), quoted the words of his fellow countryman, C.P. Scott (1846-1932), a journalist and a member of Parliament, to highlight this point. What C.P. Scott said was: "Facts are sacred, opinion is free" (Carr, 1976:10). However, to proceed from this contention to say that history is just but literature is another thing all together.

Historical writing, out of sheer necessity, has to be selective. By definition, everything that has happened in the past until yesterday is history. But it is inconceivable that someone can write a history of the vast panorama, the entire past. Over the years, historians have veered towards their own individual areas of focus. Fields of specializations have been chosen by different historians according to their respective preferences or out of some other considerations.

Some of the selected areas are based on national or regional entities or their relatedness to some allied disciplines. This connection with some other academic disciplines has given rise to fields or categories like social history, medical history, economic history, and the like. The vocational devotion of a historian depends a great deal upon his or her interest, professional calling, training as well as the very purpose in writing history. Therefore, who the writer is, the audience he or she is writing the piece for and the goal for which the task is being undertaken could all be factors that can, in one way or the other, help shape or determine the final nature of any piece of historical work.

THE EXHORTATION TO LEARN FROM HISTORY

Despite the contested nature of historical writing, calls have often been made that one should undertake the

study of history seriously and benefit from what it can teach the present generation. This, it is said, ought to be done so as to avoid pitfalls that societies had suffered in the past. In the words of the 20th century American-Spanish philosopher, George Santayana (1863-1952), "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it".¹

National leaders world-wide, as well as others, have been known to repeat this pronouncement in one form or another. For instance, one of Malaysia's previous Prime Ministers, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, when delivering the Opening Address at the 16th Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia held in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, in July 2000, reiterated that "history is not just for school children but also for adults, particularly those who are entrusted with determining the policies of a nation" (*New Straits Time*, 28/7/2000:1-2). Later, in August 2002, he told participants of a national level patriotism assembly in Johor, "If we are ignorant of our history, we may commit mistakes which have occurred in the past [...] which have caused us to be colonized for 450 years" (*Daily Express*, 25/8/2002:2).

The predisposition towards looking up to history for valuable lessons, or guides, has endured the test of time and has not been confined to any one country. In 2010, in neighbouring Indonesia, a high government official had stressed the importance of history in the national character building effort. To the official, Hari Untoro Drajat, the Director-General of History and Antiquities, history teaching should not only be concerned with dishing out historical facts but must also be directed towards strengthening the national consciousness and identity. A failure

¹See article entitled "George Santayana" in *New World Encyclopedia*. Available [online] also at http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/George_Santayana [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 17/10/2013].

to realize the latter, he warned, would result in the weakening of national character. Should that happen, he said, history teachers would have to take the blame or share the responsibility for it (*Kompas*, 16/6/2010:12).

Similarly in 2012, Malaysia's Minister of Education, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, had articulated these very same sentiments. He believed that the study of history in schools would foster "the patriotic spirit and multi-racial unity" amongst Malaysia's younger generation (*The Malay Mail*, 2/9/2012:3). Towards that end the government has implemented a policy that requires students to at least secure a pass in history in their Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) or *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM). This, it had been explained, would ensure that they would give serious attention to Malaysian history and be conscious of it. If current students do not know "what happened in the past", said the country's Second Education Minister, Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, they "will not appreciate what we have now".²

Next door to Malaysia, in Singapore, the government too had embarked on this kind of agenda. It had introduced history as a compulsory subject at the lower secondary level (Tong Chia, 2012).

Academics had also argued about this need to draw lessons from history and to utilize it for the purpose of nation building. Mohamad Rodzi Abd Razak of UKM (National University of Malaysia) had argued that "Patriotism is a major element in the study of history".

²See, for example, news entitled "Bernama: 'Compulsory Pass for History Not Meant to Burden Students, Says Idris Jusoh'" in *Borneo Post Online*. Available [online] also at <http://www.theborneopost.com/2013/11/06/compulsory-pass-for-history-not-meant-to-burden-students-says-idris-jusoh/> [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 2/12/2013]; and news entitled "Compulsory Pass for History Not Meant to Burden Students: Idris Jusoh – Bernama" in *The Malaysian Insider*. Available [online] also at <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/compulsory-pass-for-history-not-meant-to-burden-students-idris-jusoh-bernam> [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 5/3/2014].

The study, he added, ought to be geared towards developing national awareness and nurturing the "feelings of love for the nation and state" (Rodzi Abd Razak, 2009).

Another Malaysian academic, Professor Sidek Baba of the International Islamic University of Malaysia, had also made known his views on this issue. In the context of history teaching in schools, he had emphasized on the importance of drawing lessons from history. In an article published in 2012, he wrote: "Learning and studying history would enable men to know the reasons why a certain [undesirable] event occurred in the past and why it should not be repeated in our time and in future" (Baba, 2012:1).

In an almost similar vein, James Campbell of Deakin University, wrote in July 2013, "Having a good grasp of History is key, not simply because of what it tells us about the past but also how it informs our understanding of and engagement with the present and aspirations for the future" (Campbell, 2013:5).

Latching this kind of concern and belief to the present world geopolitics and the perceived Sino-American rivalry, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Lee Poh Ping, had this to say, "[...] the wise leader can learn from history rather than repeat it" (Poh Ping, 2014).

Laudable Aspirations. These encouragements to study and learn from history are indeed laudable. They certainly reflect an enduring trust amongst many citizens in the role that history can play to enlighten and steer society towards achieving its own well-being.

Noble though this kind of aspiration is, the pursuit of such an ideal, of course not without its challenges. Learning from history is, to say the least, problematic. As has been said earlier, people, historians, and others

alike, differ in their understanding of what really took place in the past. People are selective about the past and, on top of that, interpret historical events or happenings differently. Thus, people could well be drawing different lessons from past events.

To some, this state of affairs might be something that is most welcomed. To others, this might not at all be acceptable. Nevertheless, amongst those that find it unacceptable, there might be some that are prepared to live with it. Those that cannot come to terms with this kind of scenario, that is having a past that is portrayed differently by different people, run the risk of veering towards being exclusivist. They might succumb to the tendency to hold those that portray the past differently as being “dishonest”. As a corollary to this, they might therefore claim or allege that there are certain quarters that have drawn, consciously or otherwise, inappropriate, wrong or even false lessons from past events (Patten, 2009:17).

In the circumstances, there is, therefore, a need for one to be a little more circumspect when placing trust in the ability of history to be an informant and interpreter of the past. History does not come into existence on its own free-will; it is man-made. The “objective” past is an elusive creature. Perceptions and interpretations often vary from one individual to another. These are surely challenges that all ought to be aware of right from the very start of any discussion on this subject.

VERSIONS OF THE SAME PAST

Students of history are only too familiar with the prevalence of varied interpretations of past events. This has emanated from many quarters and in numerous places. Different value systems, diverse definitions of terms, even personal or national sentiments, have certainly coloured the various recollections or reconstructions of the past. Non-historians have also stepped

into the controversies and made known the sides that they support or believe in. A mention of a few of the better known, or publicly reported, outcomes of this kind of clash of interpretations would suffice to illustrate this point:

First, to Chinese historians and Chinese in general, the Nanking Massacre was a hideous crime that the Japanese should apologize for; however, the charge is unacceptable to the Japanese side, at least the conservative side.³ Yet it has also been alleged that China has selectively excluded from the nation’s school textbooks accounts of past Chinese aggressions not only against Japan but also against Vietnam as well as Korea (Terrill, 2003:284-286).

Second, in 2006, the Algerian Prime Minister, Abdelaziz Belkhadem, insisted that France should admit the French crime related to the loss of millions of Algerian lives in the country’s independence struggle; the Algerian move came in the wake of a 2005 French National Assembly law that referred to “the positive role of the French presence overseas, especially in North Africa”, and praising the Algerians who took side with the French in the war for independence (cited in *The Jakarta Post*, 13/11/2006:11).

Third, the Beijing criticism of the Taiwan government for deleting from secondary school history textbooks phrases that link both China and Taiwan as one entity (cited in *The Star*, 1/2/2007:44).

Fourth, the controversy regarding the MCP (Malayan Communist Party)’s role in Malaya’s fight for independence. One historian who has no quarrel with accepting the part played by MCP has this to say: “Only in totalitarian state is there only one version – the official version – of any historical event” (Yue-Yi, 2007:6). Following the death of Chin Peng in September 2013, the

³For a detailed account of the “Nanking Massacre” from the Chinese perspective, see, for instance, Iris Chang (1997).

controversy was reignited. As a New Zealander historian puts it, “The scars of that period have not healed” (Reid, 2013).

Fifth, the Israeli government’s decision to accept two versions of the historical account of the creation of the state of Israel: for Arab Israeli students, the 1948 Arab-Israeli War is a “catastrophe”; and for Israeli Jewish students, a “war of independence” (cited in *The Star*, 23/7/2007:33).

With such varied conceptualizations and/or interpretations, lessons to be derived would naturally be different for different people. A Canadian historian, Professor Margaret Macmillan, has gone into great depth to analyse this issue of problematic or controversial handling of the past in her work, *The Uses and Abuses of History*.⁴

What then? What can one learn from history? Can one claim that people learn from history only what they wish to learn? And surely this is not taking the effort to resolve the predicament very far.

These are the kinds of challenges that have been alluded or referred to earlier in this writing. There is, therefore, a need to address these issues in order to overcome the quandary somehow, if at all possible.

Agreeing Upon a Premise. As a way out from this conundrum, one may suggest here that, for students of history or people in general, there is a need perhaps to draw out the obvious: to go back to basics, if one may.

As a start, there is a need perhaps to agree upon a common premise, or an assumption. This issue has been touched prior to this, though not in a conclusive manner. A basic calling of

history is to help the present generation better understand the past and derive benefits from that understanding.

It is also hoped that knowledge and understanding of the past can be utilised to chart a more meaningful future for all.

To avoid past blunders, there is a need to relook at those blunders or oversights. Of course the exercise, as already pointed out above (and that is why it cannot be conclusive), is fraught with difficulties. However, despite all that, the goal would have to be pursued regardless.

Otherwise, historical writing would become a pursuit undertaken simply for its own sake. Some might retort: what is wrong with that? Indeed, one can argue that there is absolutely nothing wrong with it if that is what one fervently desires in life (Blake, 1986:viii).

However, if, on the other hand, one is predisposed towards being a little more utilitarian in one’s approach to life, or if one cannot afford the luxury of pursuing the studying of history solely for its own sake, then one needs to assign a purpose to it. To learn from history might, then, be the generally acceptable purpose. This also means that one is not going along with what has been consistently advocated by the post-modernists.

Focusing on the “Obvious”. One can try to illustrate the point that one wants to make here by first explaining what is meant by the term “obvious”. At the outset, one can suggest that something that is “obvious” is something that can be generally accepted by ordinary men and women. Thus, for this particular purpose, one can pose this kind of consideration: would it not be “obvious” to all and sundry that people as a whole value freedom, abhor oppression by others and invasion of their land by outsiders? Is there not a lesson that can be learnt from the Western occupation of foreign countries and colonialism in general, Western or otherwise?

⁴See, for further information, Margaret Macmillan (2009); Simon Heffer (2009), available [online] also at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/5514219/The-Uses-and-Abuses-of-History-by-Margaret-MacMillan-review.html> [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 5/3/2014]; and Tom Holland (2009), available [online] also at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/apr/26/uses-abuses-history-macmillan> [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 29/10/2013].

Following on the above argument, it would also be “obvious” that a people that had been subjugated by a foreign power would sooner or later retaliate or rise up against the occupying power in one form or another; hence, the independent movements that the world had witnessed in the last century across nations of the Third World.

The recalcitrant attitude of the French notwithstanding (Blake, 1986), not all colonial powers are unwilling to acknowledge their past wayward actions. Thus, the present Dutch Government, for instance, had come around to admitting past excesses and agreed to grant monetary compensation to the relatives of those who were victimized during the colonial era. In the latest case, it is related to a series of summary executions of Indonesians that took place between December 1946 and February 1947 in South Sulawesi. In that whole tragedy, thousands of people lost their lives.⁵

Yet up to this day we have nations, buoyed in part by their own sense of military power, resorting to the act of invading foreign nations in order to pursue whatever national interests that they wish to pursue. Does it surprise us that the attendant warfare would lead and had led to further flare-up?

IGNORING THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

A seasoned and keen analyst of international affairs, Gabriel Kolko, has succinctly made the observation that executors of wars have to believe that fire-power and economic muscle hold the answer to all political and human problems. Many national leaders,

Gabriel Kolko claims, are averse to rejecting such “traditional reasoning” or “conventional wisdom” lest others might deem them unfit for national office (Kolko, 2006:173). Yet these strategies, to Gabriel Kolko, are wantonly irrational. He likened those leaders mounting such maneuvers as “blind men and women”. They are merely concerned with making a success of their political careers but in the end “states make monumental errors, and people suffer” (Kolko, 2006:173).

Wading into the discussion on the Iraq War, Robert K. Brigham has held up the war as an example of the failure of the American leadership to learn from history. He contends that the American government under Bush “learned nothing from the Vietnam War”. Consequently, this “recklessness” would “haunt U.S. foreign policy for years to come” (Brigham, 2008:177).

The Bush administration had been warned against going into Iraq. Two months before the invasion, realist scholars, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, published their article, “An Unnecessary War”, in the January/February 2003 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, emphasizing the danger of the military adventure.⁶

However, what many American policy makers learnt from the Vietnam War (erroneously, one may say), is that they have to overcome the “Vietnam Syndrome”. Americans, it was believed should not be blighted by the Vietnam experience. They should not be forever held hostage by the fear of losing American lives in foreign military expeditions. They have to debunk, so they believe, the notion that American

⁵See, for further information, Bastiaan Scherpen (2013), available [online] also at <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/jakarta/netherlands-apologizes-for-indonesian-colonial-killings/> [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 1/11/2013]; and news entitled “Dutch Apologize for Massacre” in *The Jakarta Post* (13/10/2013), available [online] also at <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/09/13/dutch-apologize-massacre.html> [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 1/11/2013].

⁶As cited in Knud Erik Jorgensen (2010). See also, for example, the articles entitled “Case Study 3 Realists Deeming Iraq and Vietnam Unnecessary” in <http://www.palgrave.com/politics/jorgensen/resources/casestudies/casestudy3.html> [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 24/9/2013]; and “War with Iraq is Not in America’s National Interest” in *The New York Times* (26/9/2002), available [online] also at <http://www.bear-left.com/archive/2002/0926oped.html> [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 28/10/2013].

military incursions oversea are destined to be in vain. In other words, America badly needs to win a war to overcome the phobia. A quick and decisive victory in Iraq, it was reasoned out, would enable Americans to prevail over the ghosts of Vietnam once and for all.

However, the expectations of the American policy makers *vis-à-vis* the Iraq campaign were rudely dashed. They had ignored the prior warning about the Iraq operation at their own peril. The hope of putting the Vietnam syndrome behind them failed to materialize. Instead, as observed by Robert K. Brigham, “There already is an Iraq syndrome, one comparable to the Vietnam syndrome that forced that [sic] United States to take a hard look at its policies and practices” (Brigham, 2008:178).

History had recorded numerous comparable tragedies. Can we then not say that the lessons of history are “obvious”, but man is also prone to act “irrationally” on many an occasion. Reflecting on the troubled times of the present world, Alan Cowell was driven to make this disturbing observation: “Whatever historians may conclude, policy makers now confront a time of imponderables where the lessons of the past, if glimpsed, do not seem to have been absorbed”.⁷

Contested Notions. What is “irrational” in the eyes of some might not be so in the eyes of others. A national leader responsible for, or who was a party to, a military onslaught, might even be prepared to justify his action by invoking his religious faith. Thus, with regard to the Iraq War, Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of Britain, was quoted as having said that he was ready to answer before God for “those who have died or have been horribly maimed as a result of my

decisions”.⁸

The above notwithstanding, there is also the Western or rather the American, industrial military complex that had a vested interest in the militarization of the United States. The country’s financial establishment, the major weapons manufacturers and contractors as well as the oil and energy conglomerates are said to be very much involved in this particular effort. They, it has been alleged, have enormous influence and this surely would be difficult to overestimate (Chossudovsky, 2007:322).

War, in short, can be an economic enterprise. Therefore, when national leaders declare that they launch foreign wars in order to protect “national interests”, their words ought to be taken with a grain of salt. The interests of these conglomerates might not be too far from their minds. On this very point, Noam Chomsky, a long standing critic of American foreign policy, has caustically remarked that “national interest” is but “a technical term referring to the special interests of domestic sectors that are in a position to determine policy” (Chomsky, 2004:29).

Whatever it is, these national leaders and stakeholders in the conglomerates view world affairs from their own respective perspectives. These perspectives might be based purely on political calculations, economic considerations, or on their understanding of their religious calling. These actors are likely to defend those considerations and perspectives as “rational”.

Rationality and Irrationality. What must be also “obvious” to many by now is that “rationality” and “irrationality” are viewed differently by different people; again value systems, or belief systems, come into play in this matter. Thus,

⁷See, for further information, Alan Cowell (2013). Available [online] also at <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/World/2013/09/01/Lessons-of-the-past-not-learned/> [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 4/3/2014].

⁸As cited in Colin Brown (2003). Available [online] also at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1429109/Campbell-interrupted-Blair-as-he-spoke-of-his-faith-We-dont-do-God.html> [accessed in Shah Alam, Malaysia: 21/10/2013].

within this very framework, the ordering of societies based on brute power and capability can still pass as a “rational” act to some people: “rationality” then is in the eyes of the beholder. After all, as the realists are never tired of reminding those who care to listen, international relations operate in a state of anarchy.

The American case cited above is, of course, only an example. One can surely find parallels or similarities elsewhere in our present world, recent history, or in older ones. Inevitably, one would also encounter identical problems that would render the exercise of learning from history problematic.

CONCLUSION

Given that history is “man-made” and those who study or read history are men and women who carry with them their own respective perspectives and value systems, it is difficult to imagine that people will learn the same lessons from history. One ought to appreciate, of course, the laudable goal of wanting to learn from history.

However, at the same time, one ought not to be too carried away by such a pronouncement. This is not to say that one cannot learn from history; one certainly can, but expect not that one’s view would be broadly shared by others. It will remain, whether one likes it or not, a contentious issue.

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