
CHAPTER 3 CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

“A society in stable equilibrium is—by definition—one that has no history and wants no historians.”
Henry Adams

“All things flow, but they need not necessarily rush down a cataract.”
G. J. Renier

In June of 1939 Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto was made commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet of the Empire of Japan. An original thinker and instinctive gambler, Yamamoto was Japan's most distinguished military man, and he knew how vulnerable America was in the western Pacific. He recognized that Japanese power could readily overrun the Philippines, Indo-China, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and many island chains to the south and the east. But Yamamoto was also a keen student of history, both of his own country and of the United States. He told his countrymen that easy early victories might prove too costly in the long run, because they would arouse America's "fierce fighting spirit," shown in so many Civil War battles and in the naval actions of the Spanish-American War. He did not want to see that force, nor the force of American industrial strength, unleashed against Japan. Again and again he urged caution upon his nation's rulers.¹

By late 1940, however, the Japanese war party had become dominant, and soon Yamamoto was directed to prepare for war, though he told the Japanese premier "If I am told to fight regardless of the consequences, I shall run wild for the first six months or a year, but I have utterly no confidence for the second or third year."² It was the reluctant Yamamoto who conceived the bold Pearl Harbor attack plan (based on his historical awareness of the successful surprise attack against Port Arthur in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904), organized it, and brought it to completion on December 7, 1941. Yet so strongly did his sense of history enter into his thinking that while toasts to his great victory still lingered in the air, he remarked that he feared that all they had done was awaken a slumbering giant and fill him with a terrible resolve.

Though he did not survive the war, Yamamoto's vision of what would happen in the Pacific proved prophetic as the Japanese navy began its long slow retreat in June of 1942. Yamamoto was a prophet not because he could look directly into the future, but because he saw that forces active in the past would reassert themselves. He knew that, as they had in the past, the raw industrial power of the United States along with American organizational skills would be decisive in the long run. In a word, Yamamoto had a sense of history.

Yamamoto's well-developed foresight is a good example of something very important about education. Most of us are aware, if only vaguely, how much more there is to education than factual information about a variety of subjects. We learn grammatical rules, geometric axioms, principles of government, how to operate a computer, and other segmented bits of knowledge. These things are worthwhile,

¹Edwin P Hoyt, *Japan's War The Great Pacific Conflict* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), 187-93

²Nathan Miller, *War At Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 195

even occupationally crucial in some cases, but there is something much more important about education. A computer can be programmed to “learn” all of the above and more, but it is a poor imitation of the educated human mind. This “something more” is a special quality of the mind that develops through years of study—a cultivation, a breadth, an enlargement. This is not the exclusive product of any academic discipline, for it can be learned while pursuing many fields of study. But we believe, perhaps immodestly, that the study of history is especially conducive to developing it. In fact, many historians would argue that the development of this quality of mind, which in these chapters we are calling “historical thinking,” is far more important than any sterile memorization of facts. It is an outgrowth of serious reflection upon the past and is its longest lasting benefit.

Though historians may vary in their emphasis on each of the several components of historical thinking, they generally agree that the following are essential:

- Awareness of the themes of continuity and change in human affairs, as well as the interplay of long-term and short-term causes.
- Sensitivity to multiple causation.
- Sensitivity to context, how other times and places differ from our own.

The first of these components of historical thinking—the interplay of continuity and change—will be discussed in this chapter; the others will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

Change

Someone once said, “The mountain has no history.” Neither does the polar ice cap, nor do oceans. Why? Because they never seem to change, at least not to our eyes. Geologists would disagree with this observation, but it serves to bring out a major point: There can be a “history” only when there is change. In essence, history is the story of change.

Change is an ever-present part of life, especially for those who live in modern industrialized states. We routinely change our clothes, change courses, change schools, change jobs, change apartments, none of which are of any great significance. But we use the same term to describe developments that are of potentially enormous importance, such as major policy swings after an election, the sudden outbreak of a war, a coup, or a revolution, a decisive shift in public attitude, the advent of a new technology, the effects of a natural disaster. Ideally we would have three or four different words to distinguish between minor and major changes. In this case, however, the English language, ordinarily so rich in vocabulary, fails us.

History is concerned with *significant* change. Sometimes this involves an entirely different state of existence for society, such as that brought on by wars, revolutions, and plagues. At other times, a society remains the same structurally but important social, political, and attitudinal changes have occurred. And then there are the changes that are even more gradual, such as population shifts, that can greatly affect the balance of political power or the economic advance of nations and peoples.

Continuity

When we open a history book, often we find we have entered a world where change is so constant that it is almost overwhelming. Events parade by us in bewildering succession, each representing a change from that which preceded it

We get a sense of perpetual motion and can begin to lose our perspective. (Today the subject is the Ancient Greeks, but we discuss the Renaissance tomorrow!) We know things don't happen that way in our personal lives, and gradually we retreat from that historical world that seems so unreal.

As preoccupied with change as our society is, if we were asked personally whether change or continuity was more dominant in our lives, most of us would probably say "continuity." We would then speak of the monotony of the things we do, including eating, working, sleeping, talking to friends, watching television, making monthly payments—all adding up to continuity. Life, as experienced on the day-to-day level, is inevitably routine and frequently boring, so we hunger for some variety, anything fresh, such as a major news event, some exciting gossip, or even a crisis on our favorite soap opera. Yet, almost paradoxically, we also happily return to familiar patterns

This leads us to qualify an earlier statement. To regard history as a story of change is a half-truth, or at best, a three-quarters truth. There are some important words to remember concerning human society: inertia, preservation, apathy, stability, tradition. All such terms in one way or another refer to a social guardianship of the status quo. Most changes take place in the overall context of continuance of many of the old ways of doing things, and are often no more than patchwork alterations of the existing system. Further, social, political, and economic inertia create limits to the extent of change. A few months after his inauguration in 1961, John F. Kennedy remarked to an associate that he had found that despite his impressive constitutional powers there was very little a president could do to bring about substantive change. To cite another example, it is worthwhile to remember that the Confederate States of America were created for the *preservation* of the traditional southern way of life in the face of encroaching change. The most effective historians remain conscious of the essentially conservative nature of human society and weave their stories with threads of both change and continuity. "Indeed, given human and cultural patterns, it would be most surprising if major changes in public mentality occurred at anything more rapid than a glacial tempo"³

Continuity and Change: Striking the Balance

Historians are well aware of the resistance to change represented by the fixed ways of society, even though in telling their story they may not discuss these continuities directly. Their approach is more often to explore emergent factors, which in their combined influence become strong enough to produce change despite resistance. Their discussion might include such themes as *newly prominent* ideas, dissatisfied interest groups, charismatic leadership, compelling motivations, institutional weaknesses, significant recent events—with appropriate detail concerning each. To counterbalance a preoccupation with the new, historians will then consider existing elements of the status quo, such as historic political party alignments, traditional institutions, attitudes and values, or long-existent economic patterns. There is always something old in anything new. In the next chapter on multiple causality in history we will further explore the various possibilities mentioned above.

³Conal Furay, *The Grass-Roots Mind in America: The American Sense of Absolutes* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1977), 136

The Stages of Historical Consciousness

Even at this stage it should be clear that thinking historically is not as easy as it might at first appear. Below we list the four stages one passes through on the road to a more sophisticated appreciation of history and mastery of historical thinking. You are probably farther along that road than you think. At what stage are you?

Stage I: History as Fact

To me (says the typical Stage I student) history is a bunch of facts—dates, names, events—that I have to memorize for the test. The books and lectures are full of facts, but I really don't see how they all fit together. I take history because I have to, and it bores me. Once I get my requirements out of the way, I plan to avoid history like the plague.

Too many people in our society never get beyond this view of history. It is not always their fault: All too often history teachers teach the subject as if memorization of facts were the essence of historical study. Of course such people are bored by history. They lack any sense of the causal relationships that give meaning to the study of the past, and they certainly don't have the faintest understanding of the role interpretation plays in history writing.

Stage II: History as Causal Sequence

I now see (says the student at Stage II) that history is more than facts. History provides a story of sequential developments over time. you know. Event A leads to event B which leads to event C, and so forth. The stories are often interesting (my teacher tells some great anecdotes!) and it is satisfying to know why things happened as they did. More important, I am now beginning to see where I fit into the picture. I understand my own origins a bit better, and I know where those values they are forcing me to study came from. The only thing that bothers me is that my textbook and my instructor sometimes contradict each other. It's a shame that historians can't get their act together and come to some sort of agreement on the true causes of events. Maybe in time they will.

Generally, a large number of people reach this stage. Stage II "consciousness" is still quite basic, but it is far beyond the very simplistic outlook of Stage I. People at Stage II can be fascinated by history and can understand cause and effect relationships. But they still do not realize the complexity of such relationships and cannot accept the possibility of alternative interpretations. When they come across contradictions, they assume that one version is, of necessity, false and the other true. Furthermore, the notion that both versions could be false yet could contain a part of the truth never occurs to them. Put another way, what they seek from a history book is *the* truth, not *a* truth. Such people also have difficulty in perceiving the difference between fact and opinion.

Stage III: History as Complexity

I'm confused, says the Stage III student. History is a subject in which there is so much to learn, I no longer know where to begin. There are too many variations in the accounts you read, even accounts of the same time and place! Some books (or lecturers)

emphasize politics and war, others emphasize social life, or economics, or ideas, or art, or science and technology. Studying history is like looking in a kaleidoscope in which the picture changes with each turn of the cylinder. History certainly isn't like math or chemistry, where you can get exact and certain answers. In history there seem to be so many ways of looking at the same event or period that I often don't know what I should be studying anymore.

People at this stage are (at last!) conscious of the relativistic character of history. The paradox of Stage III is that people who reach it often feel themselves to be more confused and ignorant than they did at Stages II and I. It is at Stage III that students realize how complex human affairs really are and how much there is to be learned about even tiny segments of the past. They also begin to realize how little they know compared to the immensity of what there is to know. But this feeling of helplessness is really a positive sign. The recognition of ignorance is the first step to real understanding and wisdom.

At this level people begin to think like historians. They finally realize that, due to the enormity and complexity of the historical record, accounts of even the smallest segment of the past are very selective and limited in what they cover. They understand, further, that individual historians are the ones who ultimately decide what to include and exclude in any history of any subject. Historians tell different stories depending on their interests and points of view. This awareness is an important insight. Even at Stage III, however, people still lack a full appreciation of the inherently interpretive nature of history.

Stage IV: History as Interpretation

Last year, remarks the increasingly confident student at Stage IV, a professor said that "history" is as much a product of the historian who writes it as of the actual people who lived it. At the time I didn't understand the comment at all, now I do. Just as individual historians will choose their topics differently, and disagree on what evidence should be included or excluded, historians, of necessity, interpret their materials differently. Not only that, but I now realize that studying the various interpretations of an event, and how historians support and develop their interpretations, is much more interesting than just trying to memorize facts.

Students at this stage will derive the most intellectual satisfaction from the study of history. They have come to terms with the interpretive nature of written history. They understand that the evidence for any historical event is contradictory, complex, and incomplete. At the same time, paradoxically, they know that there is far more evidence available (for most events) than any historian can handle comfortably. Moreover, historians will approach the evidence with different questions, different personalities, different value systems, and different abilities. The result: history as interpretation. These realizations are uncomfortable for individuals who crave moral certainty and loath ambiguity. However, the sooner they realize that history cannot provide absolute truth, the sooner they will be able to extract the maximum intellectual benefit from its study.