

History: The Power of the Idea and the Idea of Power

Early on in *Preface to History*, Carl G. Gustavson refers to the philosopher George Santayana's famous lines on the relevance of history. He does so with good cause for his own underlying approach to history builds on Santayana's message. This becomes clearer if we extend the philosopher's quote: "Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness...when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it... this is the condition of children and barbarians..." When Gustavson says, "Our ideas seem to be drawn to the more primitive level by a mental force of gravity unless the person consciously assists the more complex and true explanations to gain the supremacy" (15), he extends Santayana's warning. While Santayana exhorts us to leave childishness behind by first remembering history, Gustavson tells us that we must look at it with the eyes of an adult, that is, in a critical and more complex way. We must leave behind the "childish and primitive mind." We must grow up.

To grow up in this sense involves first the ability to build with the obvious facts of history a frame of reference, and to apply to this picture principles such as causation, comparison and motivation. It further requires the development of a historical perspective. A key element in this endeavor is the increasing capacity to conceptualize duration in history. From duration, one builds to recognizing continuity – the flow and growth – of the narrative of history. When a person has developed this capacity, what Gustavson calls historical mindedness, she will exhibit the following characteristics, all aspects of a mature and critical thinker: a natural curiosity as to what underlies any historical event; looking to the past when seeking answers to present problems; recognizing forces dynamic in society; stressing the continuity of society; recognizing that society is, at the same time, undergoing change; approaching the subject with humility; and knowing that each situation and event is unique (7). It is only when historical-mindedness is developed that a person can hope to achieve the twofold purpose of history – to discover the origins of our society and culture, and to apply what we have learned to solving present problems.

Among the characteristics listed above, Gustavson focuses on the principles of change and continuity, causation, the uniqueness of historical events and the importance of recognizing forces dynamic in society. Early on he lists six primary forces: economic, religious/spiritual, institutional/political, technological, ideological and the physical force as embodied in the military or police. In operation in all of these forces are two other driving forces - the idea and power. In the following section, I will explore these last two forces more in depth and attempt to see how they are connected.

Ideas are subject to the historical principles of continuity and change, and causation. Like everything else in history, ideas evolve and both shape and are shaped by other forces. An example of each of the above is the way the earlier collectivism in Russia allowed the idea of socialism to thrive and be converted into a social movement, or how absolute power inherent in the divine right of kings was later transformed into the absolute power of the state. Gustavson compares ideas to inventions in that ideas are a response to a particular set of social conditions and once germinated are open to modification and improvement (154). In the way an invention moves from the drawing board to its realization in the physical world, ideas move from the realm of speculation to

the world of action. They manifest themselves in “large scale action” such as social movements and institutions. They also frequently deviate from the search for truth to an instrument of power.

Among the large scale actions in which we see the power of ideas are those Gustavson highlights: The divine right of kings, democracy, socialism, progress, nationalism, liberalism and toleration. In our time we could add to these individualism, feminism, globalization, environmentalism, and the offshoots of individualism and democracy – human and animal rights, among others. In many of these arenas, the powerful idea became a tool that enabled certain groups to gain dominance. When the idea becomes rigid and crystallized, when it serves the purposes of a group as its primary function and substitutes loyalty to a cause for the search for truth, the idea crosses over into ideology and dogma.

Much could be said here of the ways ideas are transmitted and of the mechanism that transforms an idea into a tool of power or into an entire institution. Gustavson uses the examples of the spread of nationalism and socialism to illustrate how this works (158, 159). I would like to focus, though, on what happens to ideas that become agents of power and the control of such ideas. To do so, we first need to understand some of the operating factors at work in the force of power.

Gustavson defines four ways in which power is manifested: Physical force, economic power, spiritual power, and technological power. Throughout the book, Gustavson illustrates these forms of power with a rich variety of examples from European history, and supplies us with a means to recognize them in periods and places not discussed in the book. Gustavson’s example of the brute strength evident in the power of the feudal lord, is equally recognizable in what Winston Churchill called “the terrible 20th century”, the clanking of armor and hooves now replaced by the thunder of tanks and goose-stepping fascists. This same historical example supplies us with another look at how physical power is magnified by technological power. Reading a newspaper with even a cursory eye today must convey to the reader the role of economic power in a society as well and give pause to those who worry about the decline in the spiritual power of both our established religions (as with the scandals in the Roman Catholic Church) and our political ideals. These four forms of power are everywhere evident and in constant interplay, with one at times dominating the scene to be replaced in the next instance by another.

Gustavson uses the example of European colonialism in Africa to illustrate the tremendous force of all four forms of power in combination. It is difficult to look at any number of events in history and not find a similar combination at work. The Spanish Conquest of Mexico with its superior physical force enabled by advanced technology (the horse and the gun,) the moral force of its religion, and the need on the part of the Crown to replenish its coffers, is but one example. It should be mentioned that forces can also work against the group; the Aztecs were disadvantaged by their belief that the god Quetzalcoatl, whose representations in art bore a striking resemblance to a mounted Spanish cavalier, would return at precisely the moment in history when Cortez arrived on the scene. Thus they were defeated not only by the power of the Spaniards’ spiritual idea of the supremacy of Catholicism, but also by their own belief in an idea whose time had passed.

While the physical form of power, brute strength, has been a continuing factor in the history of the world, Gustavson points out that there has been an evolution away from brute strength towards power wielded through political rights and associations. Gustavson sees the preservation of free associations as integral to the maintenance of a balance of power (195), the more so in light of the increasing power of the state and the changing nature of liberalism. Building on Gustavson's insight, I would add that the preservation of free associations also contributes to the free flow of ideas, a phenomenon very much in evidence in the history of the United States where associations in the form of private enterprise both fuel and feed off of the flow of ideas. The capitalist system, relying as it does on competition, could not function without it.

In making his point about the importance of free associations, Gustavson commented about the changing nature of liberalism. Where a liberal once fought for freedom from governmental controls, Gustavson argues that the liberal now increasingly looks to the government to achieve necessary measures (193). Gustavson's example suggests that it is possible for the meaning of ideas to change. Could there be any connection between the level of power an idea attains, (and hence its move towards institutionalization,) and its ultimate corruption? In this case when liberalism moved away from the philosophical realm into the world of institutions, it changed, as did socialism and nationalism, both of which experienced a gross distortion into fascism. In our current age, we might look at what is becoming of the idea of progress. Progress has come under attack in the last half century and serves as a good example of the way an idea changes meaning in light of evolving social forces and developments in the body of knowledge. An environmentalist today has a very different idea of progress from that held by an industrialist a century ago. Perhaps it is the nature of the powerful idea, like the powerful nation, to reach a zenith and then decline. And if it is true that power corrupts, we should not be surprised then that that what gives ideas power also opens them up to corruptibility.

How are we to recognize a powerful idea? Gustavson makes the point that rigid control of an idea is an indication of its power. He further believes that "...the persistence of rigid controls...is an indication that ...control of ideas is not wholly possible" (195). The Cold War struggle of ideas would bear this out. Gulags could not stop the spread of the ideas of democracy, individualism and freedom nor could persecution and witch hunts during the McCarthy years deter intellectuals in Western Europe and the United States who were committed to Communism. In the fifty years since Gustavson wrote this book, the control of ideas may be even more difficult. I say "may" because of the susceptibility of people to misinformation and the fact that while new technologies may come and go, I also tend to agree with Barnum when he said, "there's a sucker born every minute." Gustavson writes, "Because of the higher development of education ...and the improved means of spreading ideas, the government must provide the masses with ideas or see the masses permeated by thoughts not to the liking of the authorities" (196). This still rings true today. With the Internet, the masses may have improved access to information and a greater range of sources, but it is also the sheer amount of information, much of it trivial, which makes manipulation of the large common mass of people possible. We live in the age of information and misinformation. As every other age has witnessed, technology may make our activities faster, more convenient, and more accurate but it will still be at the service of, and a reflection of, the human will with its

love of ideas and its drive towards power, and with all of its conflicting impulses towards good and evil.

With these varying impulses so evident today, I think the question is not how historical thinking can be used profitably in everyday life, but how one can go through life without reference to the events, decisions and personalities both great and flawed of our collective past. How can a citizen vote without a sense of the history of democracy? How can we get through the news day and still have hope without an understanding of the similar challenges that faced people in the past? How barren to live in a world where the origins of our customs remain concealed in a distant mist. As I read Gustavson, I began to place my siblings and friends in various lights- my twin sister the nun as an extension of the long history of the Roman Catholic Church, my brother the policeman as one more in a long line of those who favor physical force as a means to societal control, my elder sister the Gay, conservative, CEO of a large Christian organization as a wonderful product of varying lines of development, myself too as just such a product of forces. A sense of history allows us to see ourselves and others in a truer light. It gives us insight as to why a person acted in a seemingly irrational way, or why events in our time seem to be careening out of control. Historical thinking gives us a context in which to live our lives, a context infinitely more varied and rich than the narrow field of the present. And in it, I believe, lies the only hope for our future.

Work Cited

Gustavson, Carl G. *A Preface to History*. New York: McGraw, 1955.