



BACK **TO THE FUTURE**

History Extension Major Work
Essay Word Count: 2500

Should history inform contemporary political policy?

Discuss in relation to the Chinese Communist Party's application of history to strengthen Chinese politics.

'It isn't enough for a commander in chief to invite friendly academics to dinner. The U.S. could avoid future disaster if policy makers started looking more to the past.'

(Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson)¹

The later part of the twentieth century saw a re-imagining of history's purpose, founded in an understanding of history as both a window to, and mirror of, society.² The shift from the characterisation of the historical practice to one not of retrospection, but lived introspection, offered a re-examination of the past through the lens of contemporary values. In his 1932 annual address as the president of the American Historical Association, historian Carl Becker critiqued academic history, contending that 'the history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world'.³ Whilst historical academia has its necessary function, it is clear that the discipline has reached a crossroads. Professional historians must decide whether to retreat further into the ivory tower, or move toward integrating their discipline into a wider intellectual and cultural milieu. Identified by historian John Tosh as 'historical knowledge that has been built up in pursuit of academic ends but which also has a bearing on current public concerns', applied history embodies the utility of history as a tool to inform the present and future, utilising the methodologies of scientific historical epistemology to assist policy construction.⁴ As political policy requires a foundation in knowledge beyond the short-term, applied history is an approach

which allows the purpose of the historical discipline to be validated in the twenty-first century. The successful commitment to using applied history to assist contemporary political policy development is most potently evident in China in the era of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has actively engaged in historical analysis to avoid creating the circumstances which precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although the ideological framework of communism has historically failed to produce stable nations, the CCP's effective use of applied history to inform contemporary political policy has resulted in the establishment of China as a working embodiment of the communist doctrine. The rise of China to global superpower status demonstrates the value of applied history, supporting the notion that history should be utilised as a tool to inform political policy worldwide.

Since the late 1970s, history has diffused into a multiplicity of sub-disciplines which reflect a fundamental shift within the historical discipline, from one exclusively concentrated on the ivory tower to one which embodies 'a fundamental sense of public purpose: a moral, methodical and intellectual impetus for working in ways that contribute to public life and societal good.'⁵ Applied history is one of these sub-disciplines; defined as the 'explicit attempt to illuminate current policy challenges by analysing historical precedents and analogues,' it epitomises the notion of a history dictated by academia but benefitting a wider populace.⁶ The increase of historical sub-disciplines such as applied history has inevitably given rise to considerable debate over their merits and potential contribution to a 'de-academisation' of historical practices.⁷ Yet, if these sub-disciplines are grounded in critical academic methodologies, they allow the historian's work to transcend the 'inglorious isolation' of academia and assist with finding

solutions for contemporary problems.⁸ To ensure their work remains relevant, historians must reorient their work towards more utilitarian purposes (such as applied history), for history that influences the course of history not only enriches our understanding of the past but our experience of the present.⁹

One way that history can demonstrate its efficacy to the present and future, is by providing evidence to inform contemporary political decision making. Applied historians assist policy makers by analysing the historical record of relevance to a contemporary issue, providing perspective, inciting imaginative problem-solving, proposing possible policy actions and presenting historical evidence which assesses the probability of potential consequences.¹⁰

Historical theorist Robin Collingwood, in his article 'Historical Evidence,' remarked: 'our role as historians is to address the practical questions of our time'.¹¹ It is precisely for this purpose that proponents of applied history call for the increased role of historians in contemporary policy construction.¹² In 2016, historians Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson publicly urged Presidents of the United States to form a 'White House Council of Historical Advisors,' in an effort to have applied history inform US policy.¹³ Ernest May, one of the earliest proponents of applied history, contends that 'professional pundits [must] discover means of addressing directly, succinctly, and promptly the needs of people who govern'.¹⁴ Globally, current political policy suffers from chronic historical myopia, as decision-makers analyse short historical time-spans, which distort the significance of events. Without a concrete understanding of the past, we will inevitably fabricate 'a past that reinforces our understanding of current problems'.¹⁵ Employing history as a tool to inform policy creation in a systematic and academic manner would provide a solution to

this issue, raising questions and guiding through analogy, rather than maxims. It is through the approach of practical historicism that policy-makers can illuminate the consequences of actions in comparable circumstances, instead of offering prejudgements of the future.¹⁶

Applied history has traditionally been regarded negatively within academic circles, due to history's rhetorical power to both inform and misinform.¹⁷ The misappropriation and misuse of history by governments in the 20th century, to establish 'national myths,' overlook political errors and legitimise political behaviour, has left professional historians 'wary' of the employment of historians in the public domain.¹⁸ Historians and policymakers often have disparate goals and interests, which can lead to the distortion of historical research for political purposes. It is appropriate to only utilise historical analogies to open up, critically inform, and broaden the scope of debate. This will extend the parameters of discussion and incorporate other perspectives and experiences, as opposed to employing analogy to close an argument, or purposefully shape the outcome of a debate. If a historical perspective is utilised in this manner, history can be considered a relevant tool for the future, allowing for the validation of the academic discipline in conjunction with offering distinctive advantages to policy makers.

The CCP's successful application of history as a tool to inform contemporary Chinese domestic policy, patently evidences that history should inform political policy. The rise of China under the governance of the CCP reflects a great paradox as , 'the world's second biggest, and most dynamic economy, happens...to be governed by a system which had been written off two decades ago.'¹⁹ The success of the CCP in their unique application of communism can thus be attributed

to their effective use of applied history. History has not been kind to communist states, evidenced in the collapse of communist parties in twenty-eight different nations since the establishment of Russia as the first constitutionally defined socialist state in 1917. Thus, policy researchers such as Kavyas have considered communism through a lens of 'retrospective determinism' which appraises the collapse of the Soviet Union as 'inescapable', 'inevitable' or as 'a product of the communist system itself'.²⁰ However, the CCP has led China on an unprecedented rise to the position of a global superpower. China's share of the global economy has grown from 2% in 1980 to 18% in 2016 and is set to reach 30% by 2040.²¹ This statistic is given greater weight when contrasted to America's share of the global economy, which has dropped from 55% in the post-Cold war years to just 11% as of 2016. Other economic statistics, such as the quadrupling of the Chinese per capita global national income from \$290 in 1985 to \$8100 in 2016, also indicate China's rise to prominence on the global stage.²² Arguably, this success stems from the CCP's strategic use of applied history to shape its domestic policy. Allison asserts that China is unique in its focus on decision making through 'invoking strategic principles' drawn from an analysis of the Soviet collapse and deeply ingrained within Chinese policy.²³

Current political decision making across the globe is largely devoid of consequence analysis; having an understanding of the reasons for, and impacts of, past policies. Historical research conveys trends and patterns which provide opportunities for policy-analysts to 'comprehend why and how previous decisions were made, assess and evaluate evidence and its corresponding range of policy options.'²⁴ By recognising how policy culminates in certain historical

consequences, researchers can identify historical contingencies and direct policy to address historical tendency. For the CCP, the dissolution of other communist regimes is a historical tendency to be managed, and researchers such as Greer Meisels, in her work, *Lessons learned in China from the collapse of the Soviet Union*, suggest China implements policy specifically to address this issue. Upon becoming president, Xi Jinping questioned his colleagues over the collapse of the Soviet Union, stating 'it is a profound lesson for us.'²⁵ Through the party's analysis of the policies which engendered the collapse of the Soviet regime, within a framework of applied history, it concluded that fatal mistakes were made by Mikhail Gorbachev, the last General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party: notably the lack of strict anti-corruption policy and the nationalisation of the military, by requiring its members to swear allegiance to the country instead of the party. By isolating these errors and associated consequences, the CCP directed specifically developed policies to target the conditions which precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union, demonstrating the crucial importance of using applied history to inform and influence current political policy.

Policy-makers demonstrate a proclivity to think 'in a linear, problem-solving manner rather than to see issues as long-term and recurring phenomena.'²⁶ Events, however, do not occur in a vacuum: they can always be positioned along a trajectory of antecedents and consequences. Examining issues over a longer time period allows historians to help develop more effective policy by elucidating the deeper complexities of an issue and the build-up of contributing, long-term factors. The CCP's use of applied history is grounded in a detailed appreciation of the disparate policies which converged to bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union. President Xi

connects the Soviet Union's collapse to the transference of official military control away from the party, as the depoliticisation of the military and separation of the government from the nation's armed forces meant that the party was disarmed and unable to quell a public uprising.²⁷ In response, Xi has overhauled the previously autonomous power of the military, re-organising it into fifteen individual departments which communicate directly with the Central Military Commission, chaired by Xi. Re-connecting the military to the party not only indicates a deep commitment to constructing a military-backed political party, but exemplifies the CCP's use of applied history to inform and develop political policy in order to produce a strong communist society.

Finally, politicians tend to rely on inappropriate analogies, resulting in reflexive decision making and conjectures. The historian's command of the principles of time and context are crucial tools within the public domain, as politicians need to understand the impact of past policy within its historical context. Furthermore, whilst critics of applied history suggest that the constructed nature of history makes it vulnerable to misuse, as professor Ja Ian Chong notes: 'basing theory and micro-foundations more on empirical observations and less on assumptions enhances parsimony', as 'disaggregating history enables more accurate causal inferences by reducing the possibility of over determination, clarifying likely spurious relationships and uncovering omitted variables'.²⁸ One of the most effective aspects of practical historicism is that it 'does not depart from the canons of historical thinking, but rather amounts to a logical extension of the core principles of historicism'.²⁹ If policy is developed from considered academic methodology, policymakers can critically analyse situations and transcend the veneer of historical narratives.

Communist politicians have employed reflexive decision making to the detriment of political and societal stability. During the height of Stalin's political terror campaign, Russia directed policies to suppress public dissatisfaction through a buttress of force and coercion. This policy was manifested in the 'Great Purge,' a period between 1936-38 in which an estimated 600,000 Soviet citizens were executed. Instead of employing reflexive decision making when faced with a similar issue to the Soviet Union, the CCP observed the long-term consequences of addressing the dissent of citizens through policies of public suppression and in contrast chose to focus on strict government regulation. By analysing how displays of wealth resulted in public disillusionment and precipitated the downfall of the Soviet Union, the Chinese leadership developed and implemented policies to attack corruption and ostentation in order to maintain the party's reputation.³⁰ By assessing the results of Gorbachev's failure to monitor the corruption and spending of politicians, Xi recognised that maintaining the credibility of party officials was crucial in stabilising a communist regime, stating that 'winning or losing public support is an issue that concerns the CCP's survival or extinction'.³¹ The different ways that Chinese leaders have designed and melded these policies in contrast to the Soviet Union attests to their commitment to using applied history to avoid reflexive decision making, allowing the party to be 'engaged in a continual learning process – defined by pragmatic adaptation – and culminating in a type of policy-planning plasticity'.³² Xi instigated an anti-corruption campaign involving 18 task forces led by military lieutenants who report to him directly and which, since 2012, has seen over 900,000 party members disciplined and 42,000 expelled and prosecuted in criminal courts. Rather than reflexively developing a culture of terror to repress dissent as the Soviets did, Xi's policy was more calculated, involving disciplining and detaining politicians on a public level, to

demonstrate the party's values and emphasise the CCP's reliability. As a consequence of seeing the impact of diminishing support on the Soviet Union, removing antagonistic politicians who risk damaging the party's legitimacy continues to be an effective tool for the CCP.³³ The success of this policy in maintaining the party's reputation, supports the use of applied history by the CCP to develop an adaptive pattern of authoritarian rule, allowing it to recover from challenges which have proved disastrous for other communist regimes and direct China's rise toward global superpower status.³⁴

The CCP's success at utilising an applied history framework to inform its contemporary policy suggests that applied history has utility for governments beyond China. In observing how the CCP employs lessons learnt from history to develop its policy, governments can similarly avoid falling into perilous historical patterns. Collingwood commented that 'our role as historians is to address the practical questions of our time'; but by isolating the historical profession to the ivory tower, museums or schools, we are not maximising historical skills to contribute to the development of society. It is incumbent upon policymakers to understand the significance of history to pertinent issues facing contemporary societies, because, as George Santayana so famously proclaimed, 'those who do not know history's mistakes are doomed to repeat them'.³⁵ We can effectively use the past, not to answer all problems of the present, but to stimulate more questions and enlighten debates around present-day decision making processes. An examination of the CCP and the benefits of practical historicism thus evidences that applied history should inform political policy, as it reinforces the need for history as a discipline beyond academia and offers governments crucial tools for effective political policy construction. Perhaps no individual

has expressed the social relevance of history better than Winston Churchill: 'the longer you can look back, that farther you can look forward'.³⁶

Endnotes

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