Chapter 5

Lessons of History

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How often have we heard that if the lessons of history are ignored, they are doomed to be repeated? But just what are the lessons of history? Can they be used systematically in the generation or analysis of prospective policies or in forecasting and scenario construction? In order to derive at least tentative answers to such questions, the Project conducted a three round inquiry. The first two of these rounds involved two dozen or so historians from several countries who were asked to provide "lessons of history", historical examples that illustrated them, and some questions that they thought futurists should ask when they constructed scenarios. The findings from this panel were then provided to a panel of futurists in the third round. The futurists were asked to judge the utility of the suggestions made by the historians.

5.1 Study Design

The sample of historians was drawn from several sources including literature search, Internet search, and personal recommendations. One hundred names were listed for Round 1 and sixteen were added for round two. In most instances, the questionnaire was sent without a prior contact. Twenty-six responses were received to Round 2, from North America (30%), Europe (61%), and Australia (8%). The futurist panel was also geographically diverse: 23 responses were received from North America (47%), Europe (34%) and Asia (13%). As in the case of the Lookout Panel, the participants were promised anonymity with respect to their specific answers.

In the **first round**, the requests were:

> 1.1. We are interested in having you identify two or three lessons drawn from historical situations that may be useful in forecasting or in assessing future policies and plans. Several examples are given but we would like you to add to the list.
>
> 1.2. In addition, because of your experience in dealing with real past situations- as opposed to imagined future situations - we ask that you think about questions that futurists and planners should ask about the scenarios they write.

Responses were received and used to form a **second** questionnaire that was sent to all of the participants. The participants were asked to provide judgments about each of the "lessons" and about the "questions for futurists", as follows:

For the "lessons", the respondents were asked to provide judgments about the historical validity and the future applicability of the statements. The criteria to be used in identifying important historical lessons included the number of people who were ultimately affected, the severity and permanence of the effect, and the generality of the situation. The judgments used the following scales:

Historical validity:

1 = True beyond doubt; has always been the case in history.
2 = True most of the time.
3 = True about as often as it was not.
4 = False most of the time.
5 = Almost never true in history.

Future applicability:

1 = Will be true in almost all future situations.
2 = Will be true often, but is situation dependent
3 = Will be true as often as it will be false.
4 = Will be false more often than true.
5 = Will almost always be false in the future.

When judging the usefulness of the "questions for futurists" the panel used the following scale:

Importance of the question:

1= The question is extremely important and will lead to productive considerations in constructing scenarios.
2 = The question is very important and can provide significant insight in constructing scenarios.
3= This question is important but is eternal and essentially unanswerable and will not add insight to the construction of scenarios.
4= This question should be used with considerable caution since it will often lead to misleading conclusions and consequences.
5= The use of this question is counterproductive; it will do more harm than good in the construction of scenarios since it will lead to erroneous consequences.

The **third round** went to futurists. The questionnaire displayed the "lessons" suggested by the historians and the "questions" for futurists. This third round panel was asked to:

1. Review and rate the usefulness of the enclosed "lessons from history" for scenario construction or in assessing future policies and plans. Please add other lessons from history that might be more useful; and

2. Review and rate the usefulness of the enclosed "questions from history" for scenario construction or in assessing future policies and plans. Please add other questions that might be more useful.

Participants were also asked to add other "lessons" to the list and historical illustrations as well as to add to the set of "questions for futurists."

The scale to be used for both responses was:

1 = Extremely useful; should always be considered.
2 = Useful most of the time.
3 = Useful about as often as not.
4 = If it were used, it would be harmful most of the time.
5 = If it were used it would be extremely counterproductive; should never be considered.

The questionnaires themselves and the names of the participants are available at http://www.acunu.org/millennium/history/loh-ops.html

5.2 The Analysis

The results of the first two rounds could be displayed on a grid with historical validity on the abscissa and future applicability on the ordinate, as shown below:

Not surprisingly, there was a high correlation between these two; in other words, if the historians thought a "lesson" was important in the past, they were likely to think it had future applicability as well.

The 50 items suggested by the panel were grouped into four domains, as follows1:

Higher Historic Validity; Higher Future Applicability	**Validity**	**Fut Applic.**
10. Wars in some form will continue.	1.14	1.96
18. Some large scale projects turn out to be inefficient.	1.19	1.64
7. Communications capabilities are important to survival of political organizations.	1.24	1.09
	1.63	1.75
6. Political systems can collapse suddenly.	1.76	1.91
44. Sharp transformations occur every few hundred years; they are understood fifty years later.	1.76	1.83
Higher Historic Validity, Lower Future Applicability		
22. Global history is marked by great migrations.	1.30	2.10
15. Lessons of history are often forgotten.	1.42	2.05

Higher Historic Validity, Lower Future Applicability	**Validity**	**Fut Applic**
21. Water shortages lead to social change.	1.63	2.05
23. Epidemics play a great role in evolution of the modern age.	1.84	2.30

Lower Historic Validity, Higher Future Applicability

47. More developed civilizations have stabilized population; underdeveloped regions have rapid growth.	1.89	1.89
5. Leadership in industry and commerce predicts global political leadership.	1.90	2.00
42. Societies with dramatic disparities between rich and poor tend to be unstable.	2.06	1.94
1. If the interests of local people are considered when protecting natural resources, there will be a reduction in conflict.	2.15	1.80
38. When strong political actors use political pressure and military force, reaction is instigated.	2.24	2.00

Lower Historic Validity, Lower Future Applicability

19. Economic innovations may benefit a society or group, but may have a negative impact on social structure.	1.89	2.45
9. World systems move through phases; no phase is stable.	1.90	2.20
43. Understanding the role of empires is important; empires rise and fall.	1.94	2.11
37. Progress is impeded when dialog between inventors and those who apply the inventions is impeded.	1.94	2.11
41. Environmental factors such as weather and climate trigger migration and conflict.	1.94	2.21
20. Climate changes lead to social changes.	2.00	2.45
13. Great powers sponsored opposite sides but that has changed recently.	2.00	2.30
12. Charismatic and extreme personalities trigger socio political realignments.	2.05	2.50
31. Population stability may be impossible.	2.06	2.74
40. When strong actors challenge society's worldview, strife friction and crime usually follow.	2.18	2.41
30. Governments try to improve the situation but usually make crises deeper.	2.18	2.61
29. When two vastly different cultures exist in geographic proximity, conflict can be expected.	2.22	2.37
11. Wars generally occur between contiguous nations.	2.22	2.42
26. When social institutions do not provide justice or security, superstition leads to new religions and institutions.	2.22	2.37
32. Major defensive works do not guarantee security.	2.28	2.53
27. Over-consumption leads to economic decline and moral decay.	2.29	2.50
3. Challengers do not win global wars.	2.32	2.68
17. History cannot be used to predict the future.	2.32	2.70
33. Mobility of an economically motivated power is a determinant of the war aims they might pursue.	2.44	2.69
39. When a ruling elite attempts to reconstruct society, events tend to be the opposite of expectations.	2.50	2.65

35. The inventiveness of a society can be linked to its population growth.	2.50	2.71
2. Global wars generally last for a generation.	2.52	3.36
34. Strong powers conquer more effeminate societies and then become effeminate themselves.	2.63	2.88
4. Global evolution of democracy depends on military cooperation.	2.63	2.45
48. Women are very often catalysts in early stage of revolutionary upheaval.	2.65	2.50
49. Societies with an overabundance of lawyers are inherently unstable.	3.19	3.19
36. The most reliable lessons in history are those that can be quantified.	3.24	3.28

In the second part, the questions for futurists were also ranked according to their perceived importance by the historians. The questions that scored equal to or below an average value of 2 were:

32. What value systems prevail?	1.68
29. What factors can influence behavior in a period of social change?	1.72
4. At what rate is the world's economy globalizing?	1.75
30. What factors can influence people's will to accept change?	1.78
15. Should the interests of a state prevail over individual interests, liberties and freedoms?	1.82
2. When will solar energy be able to compete with fossil and nuclear energy?	1.85
40. How will future conflicts be influenced by information warfare?	1.89
21. How will water shortages affect social stability?	1.89
17. What are the circumstances that allow or oblige the international community to intervene in the affairs of a state?	1.90
35. In an era of globalization, what role will regional and local interests play?	1.95
1. How can the poor share in scientific and technological achievements?	1.95
10. Should predicting events or understanding long running processes be the focus of futures research?	1.95

In Round 3, the futurists had a chance to rate the utility of these questions; their ratings are shown below:

24. What are the social economic, and political ramifications of new technologies	1.40
23. What will be the consequences of the increasing division of the world's population between the educated and computer literate and the ignorant?	1.50
4. At what rate is the world's economy globalizing?	1.55
35. In an era of globalization, what role will regional and local interests play?	1.55
21. How will water shortages affect social stability?	1.57
29. What factors can influence behavior in a period of social change?	1.62
1. How can the poor share in scientific and technological achievements?	1.65

15. Should the interests of a state prevail over individual interests, liberties and freedoms?	1.67
17. What are the circumstances that allow or oblige the international community to intervene in the affairs of a state?	1.68
8. Can large scale changes be "managed" to achieve pre-intended outcomes?	1.70
3. At what rate and in what areas is the world becoming more democratic?	1.74
32. What value systems prevail?	1.76
10. Should predicting events or understanding long running processes be the focus of futures research?	1.76
20. How will ecological, geological, and climate change affect social stability?	1.76
40. How will future conflicts be influenced by information warfare?	1.86
30. What factors can influence people's will to accept change?	1.86
9. How can meaningful historical precedents be identified?	1.86
13. What is the role of the state in an era of unlimited global information?	1.90
5. How is global institutionalization changing?	1.90
14. What is the role of a traditional state organization when economic trends lead to integration beyond the traditional borders?	2.00
44. What technologies could be applied by non elites to change social structure?	2.00
31. Is it possible for any government or non-governmental organization to inspire society to undergo desirable change without resorting to any violence?	2.00

A remarkable finding is that the single item about which there was greatest disagreement between the two panels was:

17. History cannot be used to predict the future.

The average futurist response for this item was 1.45, in other words, between "Extremely useful" and "Useful most of the time". The historians gave this item an average rating of 2.70, or an assessment close to "Will be true as often as it will be false."

The table below presents a list of "Lessons of History" about which there was greatest disagreement. Using a difference of .5 as the cutoff, the significant disagreement was on only five items:

Lessons	*Hist.*	*Fut.*	*Diff*
17. History can cannot predict the future.	2.70	1.45	1.25
10. Wars in some forms will continue.	1.96	2.59	0.63
32. Major defensive works do not guarantee security.	2.53	1.91	0.62
14. Totalitarian regimes can distort perceptions of history.	1.65	2.22	0.57
50. An indicator of social or political decline is the extent to which leaders base decisions on poor or misinformation.	1.75	2.26	0.51

Similarly there were a number of differences between the historians and futurists on perceptions about the potential usefulness of "questions about the future."

Questions	*Hist.*	*Fut.*	*Diff*
44. What technological advance could be mastered and applied by large numbers of non-elites to change the social structure?	2.88	2.00	0.88
23. What will be the consequences of the increasing division of the world's population between the educated and computer literate and the ignorant?	2.32	1.50	0.82
24. What are the social, economic, and political ramifications of new technologies?	2.00	1.40	0.60
41. At each development or application of a new and untried policy, how does it correspond with the sociocultural paradigm and mentality of the society, and what are the possible patterns of its adaptation for the existing polymorphic structures?	2.00	2.57	0.57

The futurists felt that asking about technical advances and the division between computer literate and ignorant was more important than the historians felt; similarly the historians judged the question associated with matching policy to the social paradigm more important than the futurists.

5.3 Conclusions

There were a few discernible themes that ran through the “lessons” suggested by the historians. The list below first presents the theme and then some items that support the theme, together with the futurists assessments.

Theme: Things often turn out differently than intended

	Valid.	Applic.	Futurists
18. Some large scale projects turn out to be inefficient.	1.19	1.64	1.77
24. Technology can bring unforeseen consequences.	1.37	1.70	1.27
28. Well intended polices can have unintended consequences.	1.45	1.71	1.68

Theme: War is part of the global prospect

	Valid.	Applic.	Futurists
10. Wars in some form will continue.	1.14	1.96	2.59
46. When an activity is desired by many people, the action of a few can precipitate action.	1.56	1.75	1.73
11. Wars generally occur between contiguous nations.	2.22	2.42	2.36

Theme: Some historical triggers to war continue to operate

	Valid.	Applic.	Futurists
45. Large scale migrations which disrupt existing social situation, conflict follows	1.56	1.74	1.73
21. Water shortages lead to social change.	1.63	2.05	1.95
41. Environmental factors such as weather and climate trigger migration and conflict	1.94	2.21	2.00

Theme: There are few historical rules for peace

	Valid.	Applic.	Futurists
7. Communications capabilities are important to survival of political organizations.	1.24	1.09	1.35
1. If the interests of local people are considered when protecting natural resources, there will be a reduction in conflict.	2.15	1.80	2.09

Theme: History may not be useful in forecasting

	Valid.	Applic.	Futurists
15. Lessons of history are often forgotten.	1.42	2.05	2.18
16. Even when lessons of history are remembered, mechanisms for implementing may be missing.	1.58	2.00	1.82
17. History cannot be used to predict the future.	2.32	2.70	1.45

Theme: There is a grand sweep, a dynamic flow, to history

	Valid.	Applic.	Futurists
22. Global history is marked by great migrations.	1.30	2.10	2.48
44. Sharp transformations occur every few hundred years; they are understood fifty years later.	1.76	1.83	2.13
9. World systems move through phases; no phase is stable.	1.90	2.20	2.14
43. Understanding the role of empires is important; empires rise and fall.	1.94	2.11	1.91

5.4 Another Context

While lessons of history may be an important departure point, history can be used in other ways in forecasting. The method of analogy, for example, uses historical experience to gain insight into the possible future course of a current development. In marketing research it has been used as the basis for forecasting the rate of penetration of a new product by observing how long a similar product took to be accepted. For example, when color television was first introduced a crude marker of its prospects was the prior rate of sales of black and white television sets when that technology was new. But there are inevitable differences in the two cases. Color television is at once more captivating but must face the hurdle of obsoleting the sets already installed. Thus, forecasting by analogy teaches through historical comparisons, but is not an end-all.
An important comment on the design of this portion of the study was received by e-mail and will help set the stage for further work:

> There is a range of questions that should be addressed before we boldly use the past to guide our steps into the future. Many of them are in fact, a handicap for any historian, dealing with the past. I only want to raise some of them:
>
> The question of uniqueness: Is the current era, staffed with atomic bombs, space ships and its supposedly global interconnection really comparable to medieval times, ancient regimes or the age of the steam-engine?

The question of comparability: Can we really understand the purposes and aims of preceding generation, with knowledge and values, different from ours?

The question of historical laws (or historism-question): Does history repeat itself and is it therefore possible to single out specific laws? Or has every time and culture an unique set-up with an unique mindset?

The question of complexity: Is society not too complex and unpredictable, compared to natural sciences, to allow any predictions for future developments?

The question of relevance: Even if we can single out specific lessons in history, would there be not as many counter-examples with diametrically opposed lessons, that make our findings useless?

I do not have straight answers on these questions, and maybe some questions cannot be solved at all. For example the “question of uniqueness” can never be answered sufficiently. Only the future course of events will reveal if the unique features of our times (and every time has unique features) are so different from the past that our historical experience ceases to be a reliable guardian. For many post-modernists this would prove the triumph of relativism. I would like to know the opinion of other historians on how to solve these riddles.

These remarks and others received during the study will help in the pursuit of the “lessons of history” objectives in the future.