The power of the unexpected

Is Historical Inevitability Always Inevitable?

John Zucchi

Are historical events merely the outcome of vast impersonal forces? This belief has waned in recent years. The discipline of history has significantly benefited from the development of social history, which explores the lives, worldviews, and cultural interactions of women and men. This shift has challenged a certain determinism, although today, amidst ongoing wars in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, there remains widespread skepticism towards alternative approaches. While it is difficult to prove that individuals can alter the course of history, the intelligence and foresight of political figures such as Adenauer, De Gasperi, Schuman, Roosevelt, and Mandela have decisively shaped history in unexpected ways.

In May, 1953, the erudite Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford, Isaiah Berlin, delivered the first Auguste Comte Lecture at the London School of Economics, which was published in book form. The epitaph on the first page of the publication had only four words from T.S. Eliot's *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*: "…those vast impersonal forces…". Berlin's address had to do with "Historical Inevitability," a timely topic. The world had just emerged from a second major war within a generation. Many historians, political theorists, and sociologists subscribed to a scientific explanation of history – including the war – the idea that the path of history was determined by broad forces – social, economic, scientific, among others. Berlin had difficulty with those who believed literally in historical inevitability, who spoke of a rhythm of history: "Certainly it is to commit oneself to the view that the notion of individual responsibility is, 'in the end,' an illusion. No effort, however ingenious, to reinterpret that much-tormented expression will, within a teleological system, restore its normal meaning to the notion of free choice. The puppets may be conscious and identify themselves happily with the inevitable process in which they play their parts; but it remains inevitable, and they remain marionettes."

Since Isaiah Berlin's lecture, the discipline of history has undergone many developments. One of the key positive changes has been the growth of social history, which has allowed us many profound insights into the lives of men and women of different classes, races, or ethnicities, slave or free, rich or poor. Cultural history has allowed us to enter the mindset of individuals and groups, trying to understand their view of the world and their connections to broad cultural currents.

On the one hand, we feel that we have a better sense of the individual and the difference that one man or one woman can make to their society. On the other hand, it is so easy to give in to a contrary view and to argue that no matter the moral uprightness or idealism or

charisma of a single individual, history is really the result of the "vast impersonal forces" view that Eliot had denounced.

We see a faith in those forces nowadays when we discuss two of the most significant wars underway – and unfortunately not the only ones. Despite pleas from within and from around the world, it appears that the logic of war prolongs the tragedy in the Middle East. The Israeli government will not give in to a true ceasefire and end to the conflict, and neither will Hamas. Those "impersonal forces" seem to dictate the absence of alternative. Either side will lose by suing for peace. And in Ukraine we see an even more poignant example of what appears to be the onslaught of history. Pope Francis's entreaty for peace, his appeal not to equate the call for a peace accord to a sign of weakness by either side, is one of the rare voices countering the inevitability of a long war. Yet, his request is perceived as foreign, strange, naïve, and even irritating. Some suggest that he is not a power broker and should keep out of such issues. Whether people are supporting Russia or backing Ukraine, it seems that the only solution for the foreseeable future is to keep arming and rearming either side. Effectively, the understatement is that those "vast impersonal forces" will determine the outcome.

The challenge to the inevitable course of events

But does it have to be this way? Does history follow an inevitable path? Can an individual change a course that we might think unavoidable? Can one person make a difference? This is hard to "prove." We can easily try to make the case that someone's foresight, persona, authority or intelligence have been instrumental in leading history in one direction or another. Among politicians, think of the significance of Adenauer, Schumann or De Gasperi for postwar Europe. Or Franklin D. Roosevelt's ability to communicate to Americans during the Great Depression, and the positive influence that had on the country.

And there are others who have challenged the inevitable course of events in a remarkable fashion, and their stories are so well know that I need not go into them here. One need only call to mind Nelson Mandela, an activist with the African National Congress from the early 1950s, whose release from prison in 1990 after 27 years led to a revolutionary change in South African politics. Not only that, but he reached the hearts of millions of people around the world, including former supporters of apartheid in his own country. One can say the same about Martin Luther King, who had an unparalleled influence on the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

There are also those who might seem not to have changed the course of history, to have been noble losers for a great cause. One can think of Alexander Navalny who died in a labour camp, or the Unknown Protester who stopped the column of tanks in Tiananmen Square, merely standing there. The Tank Man has been left with no name. We don't know his fate. We know the fate of Mahsa Amini who was killed in custody in Teheran, after being arrested for not wearing a hijab. Her death sparked riots for months in Iran. We can argue that Amini, Navalny or the Tank Man changed nothing, as the powers they challenged are still in place. But what do we know about the future? It might seem that Mandela spent a generation in prison before he "made a difference." But that is not true. That difference began years before his release. We have also seen how Navalny and Amini have captured the public imagination in their home countries and around the world. The "great men and women" of history never change things on their own. Rather, they offer new possibilities to the world. And miraculously, at times, the world listens.

Historians rightfully argue that the "great men" version of history is easily open to criticism

and with good reason. Historians will accept that leaders can make a difference, but also that there are forces that placed those leaders in their prominent roles in the first instance. Yet it is also true that many of those so-called great men and great women at one point were nobodies. Their fame might have exploded suddenly but before that they had a sense of themselves and an integrity that came from this awareness – despite all their shortcomings – that somehow reached others.

The little miracle of a child

Can we perhaps look to simple people, what history might call nobodies, those who come from the grass roots and ask if they can indeed make an impact on history, even on an immediate event? Following the invasion of Normandy in 1944, Canadians were holding off the Germans south of Caen, and were engaged in a battle in the central square of the town of Falaise. The two sides were lodged in various buildings on opposite sides. All this was part of a plan to give time to the Americans to build a bridgehead to the west. A Canadian officer, Jacques Dextraze, who was commanding the Fusilliers Mont-Royal regiment (and would eventually become a general), later told of how the two sides were lodged in the square with machine guns endlessly firing in all directions, when at a certain point the gunfire died down. Dextraze looked out and saw a lone child – a four or five year-old boy had walked out of a school doorway into the square, looking around with his finger in his mouth. And the firing stopped immediately. A woman, presumably his mother, ran into the square, took the child into her arms, looked one way, then the other, and then rushed into the church. That hushed silence lasted a few more seconds and then the pattering of the machine guns started up again. This is not to say that anything changed in the long run. But for at least for a few moments, the inevitable course of power and violence had to stop before a fact, a child who was unaware of the little miracle he had introduced.

The gesture of Viola Desmond

This brings me to a second example from the grass roots. The Canadian ten-dollar bank note has a woman's image. Her name is Viola Desmond, born in 1914 in Halifax Nova Scotia. As a confident, young Afro-Canadian woman she trained to become a beautician, having to leave Halifax for her training, as persons of colour were not given formal guidance in this kind of work. She returned to Halifax and established her own business, providing beauty services and products, and training other Black aspirants to her trade. In 1946, she went

on a business trip with her husband to the town of New Glasgow, a few hours from Halifax. Her car broke down. As it was being repaired, she went into a cinema. She was sold a ticket for a balcony seat but wanted to sit on the parterre. That would involve a small extra fee, which she was willing to pay. Desmond's offer was not accepted. She was black and was not allowed in the seat she wanted. Viola Desmond sat on the main floor anyway. For this act she was arrested and jailed, for tax evasion, for not paying the full price of the seat she chose. Viola pursued the case in court. Viola Desmond lost in court, but the case led to a new consciousness in Nova Scotia Blacks. But it was also one of many cases or episodes that embarrassed smug Canadians, who liked to criticize race relations in the United States without looking in their own back yard. Indeed, Nova Scotia outlawed the practice for which Desmond was jailed seven years later.

Leyner Palacios, when an individual can make a difference

A third example comes from the edge of a jungle in the Boyajá region of Colombia, not far from the Pacific coast and towards the north, from the hamlet of Pogue. Leyner Palacios, an Afro-Colombian who is now 48 years old, is the last of 24 children of a farming family. As the youngest child, he had to learn to fight for himself and he feels that this is where he got his negotiating skills, which would stand him in good stead later in life. Palacios was deeply influenced by a Catholic missionary who introduced him to other priests and nuns. The missionary, Fr. Jorge Luis Mazo, was murdered in 1999, and his death would have a strong bearing on Palacios. These missionaries noticed the young man's capacity to communicate and reach the heart of others, so they asked him to accompany them on their travels to access communities they wished to encounter. But they also noticed that he had a marked capacity to negotiate with anyone. In the dangerous and tense dealings with FARC guerillas or with the paramilitary, the missionaries found Leyner Palacios's gift for communicating with anyone indispensable.

One of the experiences that Palacios describes points to the mysterious way in which the individual can make a difference in what seems like an inevitable course of events. In the late1990s, the FARC, which had been present in the region around Pogue for a number of years, began to recruit teenagers. One could not say no to the request. Priests and nuns in the region asked for a public meeting in Bellavista and Leyner Palacios was asked to address the FARC and request that the locals not be recruited. This of course was a dangerous plea, and once Leyner voiced it he closed his eyes expecting to be shot. What he received was a round of applause, not only from his people but from the FARC guerillas as well. This is not a fairy-tale, everyone lived happily ever after story. Five years later the FARC would bomb the church in Bellavista killing over one hundred worshippers inside, including many of Palacios's relatives. But Palacios was instrumental in getting the FARC to apologize for the bombing in 2014 and he convinced them to do it publicly in Bellavista. He would go on to become a member of the Truth Commission that would investigate the conflict involving the FARC and paramilitary groups in the country for over half a century. He still occasionally must go into hiding.

These are three simple, true stories, and one can easily say that it is naïve to think they can teach us anything about the individual's bearing on the onslaught of history. Henri-Irénée Marrou, in his *The Meaning of History*, published in 1959, reminded us that history's course is not determined by "historical actors [who] are no longer men but entities: ancient cities, feudalism, capitalistic middle class, revolutionary proletariat. There is an excess here." For him, the "specific sphere that really existed' is neither the fact of a civilization nor the system or supersystem, but the human being whose individuality is the only organism genuinely supplied by experience."

Each simple episode I have introduced has a lesson for us. The young boy who ran into the central square of Falaise did not even know what he was doing, but a simple fact stopped hundreds of soldiers from doggedly firing at each other. A few moments of silence resulted from a vulnerable child. People's hearts can be reached, even in the midst of violence. Viola Desmond was considered a second-class citizen, but she had a sense of her herself, and was fearless in pursuing her rights and asserting her dignity in the face of laws and practices of the majority community. In this case, people did not stop those practices immediately, as had the soldiers held their fire in the square of Falaise, but this was one of many such episodes through which a doubt was planted in the minds of Canadians that they were closed to the experience of the other. The example of the young Palacios negotiating with the FARC in 1997, asking them not to recruit minors in his region, is a poignant reminder that there are times when the single individual who has a sense of himself can indeed make a difference. He reached out to the FARC and expected to die. Somehow, strangely, one could say miraculously, the other side listened and accepted his request. As Chesterton wrote in one of his Father Brown stories, "The most incredible thing about miracles is that they happen."

Even today, is it possible for us to accept that it is not too naïve to believe that these miracles are possible. Is it simplistic of us to believe that that a Luther King or Mandela or Amini can still arise? Do we not dare to hope that there are still many people like Desmond or Palacios among us who risk everything in the face of power, including holding an olive branch when peace seems unlikely? Is it possible to believe that an individual with a sense of awareness and goodwill can still reach out to the enemy and risk suing for peace?

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