

The greater impact for plans of the powerful or their mistakes on history

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Abstract: It is how we, the public and policymakers, respond to plans and mistakes that really shapes our history. As Yuval Noah Harari has argued in his writings, we study history not to learn about the future, but to broaden our horizons, to understand that our present state of affairs is neither natural nor inevitable, and that therefore there are more possibilities ahead of us than we realize. Even if history repeating itself is inevitable, the choice of whether or not to make the "same" mistakes in decision-making remains open.

1. Introduction

The recurrence and changes in human history are indeed the histories of plans and mistakes. Both the plans of the powerful and their mistakes impact how history presents itself, yet their roles vary. This essay tries to shed new light on their comparison study by bringing in more optimistic historical perspectives that value historical experiences and deem learning history essential.

Starting with some definitions, in the following analysis, the “powerful” are generally referred to as the policy-makers, while “plans” and “effect” stand for policy-making and its evaluations. Also, “mistakes” according to the Oxford Dictionary, are actions or judgments that are misguided or wrong.

“Plans” and “mistakes” seldom come alone in history; oftentimes, they intertwined with each other. Compared with plans, mistakes whose lessons, learned or not, have greater effects on history, either altering its directions or making it “cyclically” repeatable.

2. Mistakes Serving as Lessons

In handling public security issues and economic crises, we can easily find examples of how lessons were learned from mistakes in previous policy-making.

Take the epic Great Famine in Ireland as an example. The famine starting in 1854 reached its climax when the Whig administration went back to the “laissez-faire” economic policy. By advocating the absence of governmental interventions in the economy and suspending some constructive measures like the Corn Law and interfering food movement to England, the Whig government indeed deepened the crises and catalyzed the highlights of the famine: the number of martyrs later calculated reached 1 million, up to 10 percent of the total population [1]. The potential repercussions of the “laissez-faire” policies still rang a bell when the Chinese government evaluated the "market-regulated" approaches during the 2008 Asian financial crisis. After prudent consideration, in late 2008, China implemented the largest stimulus package in the world [2]. By unveiling the four-trillion-yuan-package, shifting its fiscal policy to the “proactive” stance, and adjusting its monetary policy, China became the first major economy in the world to emerge from the Global Financial Crisis. Moreover, the impact of the Great Famine (Ireland) is long-lasting in terms of arousing global attention to the treatment of starvation caused by natural disasters and changes in political situations. Thus, when Somalia was on the edge of famine because of the civil war and the drought, the UN and other organizations effectively performed multiple rescue measures, including continuously giving away life-saving water, sanitation, food, and cash from April to June in 2023 [3].

Speaking of lessons taken from controversial public policies, the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 never missed our attention. As the local authority chose not to report the nuclear radiation leakage to the public nor evacuate residents when it happened, huge environmental and health threats

were inflicted upon local people “unnoticed” [4]. Even after 20 years, the effects of the accident, according to environmental authorities, are still lingering: contaminants that had settled to the bottom in an insoluble phase would not dissolve for 800–1000 years. Additionally, the number of malformation livestock was reportedly 20 times higher than in average years [5]. These ramifications managed to alert the public of nuclear safety concerns. Therefore, when the Japanese government planned to discharge nuclear wastewater from the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station in 2021 into the ocean, it soon evoked strong objections and doubts from the public and global communities.

There are also well-grounded proofs in state economy. In October 1929, when the Great Depression officially broke out at full strength, the Hoover Administration resorted to the *laissez-faire* policy and the Gold Standard monetary system, which was “less robust than its pre-war predecessor”. The system was incapable of withstanding the shock of the depression, and it soon became under strain with the economic slowdown and recession starting in 1928c [6]. Comparatively, when Franklin Roosevelt assumed the presidency, he drew lessons from his political predecessors, halted previous economic measures, and adopted Keynesian Economics. By adopting fiscal and monetary policies that stabilized economic output, inflation, and employment, the US economy soon regained signs of recovery in 1933 [7].

Thus, without the participation of a series of mistakes, world history would not experience its highs and lows, all of which made up the splendid picture of human history.

3. Mistakes Left Unstudied or Unchecked

It has been proven again and again by historians that people hardly learned from past mistakes. And that brings about the great potential of making repeated, if not worse, mistakes for policy-makers in future decision-making. What is also worth mentioning is that behind all those potential mistakes is the recurrence of mendacity in politics. Ferdinand Mount once concluded that politicians “lie” to cover up their mistakes, to gain advantages over their opponents, or to achieve purposes that might be unpalatable or harmful to their public or a foreign public. Also, Ruth Ben-Ghiat documented in his book the “viral recurrence” around the world, over the past century, of despots and authoritarians “with comparable strategies of control and mendacity [8].”

The dissolution of the Soviet Union vividly demonstrates how worse plans and mistakes influence history. Given its severely unbalanced and fragile economic structure, a series of economic reforms put forward by Stalin’s successors ended up with unsatisfactory results. Later, they adopted the Khrushchev Reform that initially focused on stimulating economic growth by emphasizing light industry and consumer goods and attaching great significance to agricultural development. Yet, the government failed to take into account the influence of factors, including natural calamities, that drastically affected its agriculture. Moreover, when problems loomed large, the government’s inability to respond and adjust its economic strategic planning was exposed vividly. Consequently, in the last six years of the Khrushchev regime, the average wages of Soviet workers rose only by 2.4 percent per annum while the price of daily supplies rose by 25-30 percent [9]. The disproportional relationship worsened the financial situations of the Soviet Union. It is more than surprising that decades after Stalin’s reign and having passed over 3 governments, the Soviet still had not taken the very step toward pragmatic economic reforms until its collapse. Nevertheless, the event also marked the ending of the Cold War, ushering in a brand-new pattern of the world’s superpowers.

In the same period, on the other side of the earth, a rapid anti-racism activity put on stage in South Africa was reaching its peak in overthrowing the government that spoke for racial discrimination. During 1949 -1994, the South African government followed a policy called Apartheid. The content of the Apartheid includes not allowing non-whites to participate in politics and driving the local Africans to the Bantustan (the name of the isolation area between the African and other people) [10]. According to L. S. Stavrianos, Bantustan only covers 14 percent of the land of the country with 73.8 percent of the total population living in, later catalyzing the racial activities led by ANC (African National Congress) and other groups, causing some violent conflicts. After the massacre that happened in Sharpeville and Soweto, the government continued to take extreme measures that deteriorated the already-tense race relations. Moreover, the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela, the

ANC leader, inflamed the widespread opposition at home and abroad. Among others, the US government, for example, imposed economic sanctions. The government eventually paid its prices, and a new South Africa was thus born. Apartheid had a great effect on history as it ignited the flames and hopes for racial equality on a greater scale, building the cornerstone for a more civilized human society.

Nevertheless, the unstudied mistakes in these cases, also foster the forming of new orders in world history.

4. The Plans' Game: More of A Matter of Probability

Sir Arthur Keith's theory of a species-wide amity-enmity complex suggests that human conscience evolved as a duality: people are driven to protect members of their in-group and to hate and fight enemies who belong to an out-group. Thus an endless, useless cycle of ad hoc "isms" arises [11]. It is often the case when it comes to policy-making in societies with rigid hierarchies. Since most plans made by the powerful often represented the interests of the ruling class, consequently, the grassroots were more likely to respond inactively or even remained skeptical toward "plans" not made by themselves nor for themselves. According to *The Prince* written by Niccolò Machiavelli, for a kingdom under hereditary monarchy, it is reasonable that the ruler will be naturally well disposed towards him unless extraordinary vices cause him to be hated [12]. The civilians were adapted to the current situation and sometimes were inconsistent with the changes and plans made by the powerful. Thus, once having to implement them, there is a great chance that they would either accept them reluctantly or worse, act as rebels. In both cases, the plans at least, cannot be implemented effectively.

Political reforms in Ancient China, like the Xining Reform (1069-1076), could perform as "moderate" examples. Initiated by Wang Anshi, the famous minister of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), Xining Reform concluded heroically, even in failures. Before the reform, the dynasty had sustained over half a century's economic prosperity and a war-free period. The whole society was largely accustomed to what had been set for them. Thus, even though the reform aimed at liberating the economy and enlarging social welfare, the reform failed to get support from the civilians and it received oppression from the old liners. What is more, the reform itself had some rules that fail to include the people's worldly concerns. For instance, the Horse Protection Law and the Green Seedling Law increased the burden on people and the improper ways when implementing the laws done by some officials incurred the discontentment of people [13]. Like what *The Prince* stated, the people in Hereditary monarchy countries were less passionate about the changes, and if the plans could not benefit them straight, they might be skeptical of the plans and these plans could not have an effect on history [14].

Some may argue that there are still some "utterly righteous" plans designed by the policy-makers, like the Meiji Restoration in Japan starting in 1868, that brought about unprecedented social and industrial development for the whole country. However, successes like these were always conditional. Had it not been for the mistake of the Sakoku policy made by the Tokugawa shogunate government, the naval gun on the black ships of America would never throw open the door of Japan. Moreover, in comparison, during the same period, a similar movement took place in Japan's neighbor, China. The Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895) in the late Qing Dynasty, with the same goals as the Meiji restoration for modernization in heavy industries and military, did not thoroughly realize its designated goals. In its implementation, the Qing government's failures in coordination, conservative ideology, and inadequate capital, together with external political pressures from the Western powers, contributed to the reform being a superficial attempt to modernize areas of Chinese societies [15].

Noticeably, the historical impact of plans is heavily dependent on the nature of the policy-making, and the internal and external conditions in its implementation. And, it takes great synergy of the influencing parameters for the plans to shape substantial historical impact. Yet, the difficulty lies in that we hardly figure out the complete picture of all the functioning parameters when making plans. And it leaves the performance of plans inconsistent and vulnerable to internal and external changes. Only by constantly readjusting and fixing the plans, mainly through studying their mistakes, can we

hope to increase their probabilities to generate greater impacts. But the core remains the willingness to learn from history.

5. Conclusion

It is how we, both the public and the policy-makers, respond to plans and mistakes that truly shape our history. As Yuval Noah Harari, said in his book, we study history not to know the future but to widen our horizons, to understand that our present situation is neither natural nor inevitable and that we consequently have many more possibilities before us than we imagine [16-17]. Even if historical recurrence is inevitable, whether to make the “same” mistakes in policy-making is still optional.

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