



The case for applied history

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On a wintry day in January 1687, a small group of men huddled around a wooden table in an antechamber of the Louvre. Known as the *immortels*, the forty-odd individuals were all members of the Académie Française – an institution created half a century prior by Cardinal Richelieu, with the aim of showcasing the resurgent nation’s cultural prowess. Indeed, since the foundation of the institution in 1635, France had emerged as the most formidable power in Europe. Its combined economic, demographic and military might was unmatched. Under the aggressive leadership of Louis XIV, France had won a series of major victories, greatly enlarging its territories in the wake of a seemingly inexorable tide of conquest. And yet, in retrospect, it is clear that the French monarchy had already reached the high watermark of its power. Indeed, only a year prior, a grouping of fellow European powers, disquieted by the Sun King’s growing religious intolerance and expansionism, had coalesced to form a powerful new coalition – the League of Augsburg – with the express ambition of counterbalancing French hegemony on the continent. In early 1687, however, the dangers of hubristic overextension were far from readily apparent: For many of the august académiciens, it may have seemed that their country was at the very zenith of its power, with little to fear at home or abroad. This was an era of almost unabashed national self-confidence, one whose cultural productions were aureated with a shared sense of martial glory and grandeur.

On this particular occasion, the literary grandees had assembled in the bowels of the frigid palace to give thanks for the recovery of their monarch, who had just undergone a singularly unpleasant surgical procedure. A cloying panegyric was composed for the occasion by Charles Perrault, a writer and court favorite, and read out loud. Entitled ‘The Century of Louis the Great,’ the poem made a brazen and controversial claim. Not only, argued its author, could France claim to rival in its splendour and intellectual achievements Augustan Rome, it had in fact already surpassed it. The advent of modern scientific discoveries (such as the telescope and microscope) and cartesian rationalism heralded a new era of progress, one which required a collective casting off of the crushing weight of antiquity:

*Beautiful Antiquity was always venerable,
But I never believed it was adorable.
I see the ancients without bending my knee,
They are great, yes, but men just as are we,
And one can thus compare, without fear of being unfair,
The Century of Louis to the fine century of Augustus (...)
If we were to lift the specious veil
Which prejudice puts before our eyes,
And, tired of applauding a thousand gross errors,
Were sometimes to use the lights of our reason,
We would clearly see, without temerity,
That one might not adore all antiquity.*

For all their trailblazing talents, the ancients were also, he argued, the products of a more primitive, even barbaric, era. Their science had been proven to be fatally flawed and their poetry could appear crude, especially in comparison to the more polished verse of Perrault’s contemporaries. Even the great Homer, Perrault boldly suggested, would have benefited from being born in the seventeenth century, one in which ‘a hundred defects attributable to the century in which [he] was born’ would not mar his otherwise exquisite works.

The response to the poem seems, in the main, to have initially been one of bemused befuddlement. Most of the other *immortels* engaged in polite, if perhaps unenthusiastic, applause, while the famed playwright Jean Racine – much to the author's vexation – thought that the poem was an elaborate prank and that Perrault actually believed the opposite of what he had written. The one exception was the great poet Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, more commonly known as Boileau, who – seething and restless – had ‘grumbled in an undertone’ throughout the entire recitation, before suddenly leaping to his feet and shouting that it was ‘disgraceful for such a thing to be read, criticizing the greatest men of antiquity.’ This notorious breach in decorum has traditionally been viewed as the starting point of an increasingly virulent intellectual debate over the merits of the classics, the notion of progress, and the value of applied history. Commonly known as the *Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns*, the controversy raged over almost a century, extending far beyond the salons of Paris to eventually engulf the entirety of the European *Republic of Letters*.

In France, the *Moderns* were spearheaded, at various junctures, by influential figures such as Perrault, the Cartesian intellectual Bernard de Fontenelle, and the abbot Jean Terrasson. The *Ancients* who resolutely opposed them included literary icons such as Boileau and Jean de la Fontaine, and leading classicists such as the formidable Anne Dacier, one of history's greatest translators of the *Iliad*. Meanwhile in England, the quarrel was ignited by William Temple's famous 1690 *Essay Upon the Ancient and Modern Learning*, and its flames then further fanned by William Wotton's spirited response in his *Reflections Upon Ancient and Modern Learning*.

As University of Chicago professor Larry Norman notes in his masterful study of the period, the quarrel was not a rigidly bifurcated dispute between partisans of tradition and champions of progress. Rather, it was a complex, multilayered and often passionate moment of collective intellectual reckoning:

'The conflict idea [ran] much deeper than a simple dispute unambiguously opposing clearly identified parties. This is true because partisans on either side were very often attracted to positions associated with their opponents. From contending principles, the two parties sometimes reached common conclusions; from common principles, contending positions. Indeed, and the point is capital, they agreed on what one might erroneously consider the essence of the quarrel: there was in fact little dispute that a vast historical evolution had considerably distanced modernity from antiquity, and more importantly, there was a consensus that 'authority' granted to the latter was largely superannuated. (...) What the parties differed on, then, was not the deep fissure between antiquity and modernity, but instead the value to be granted those different times and, perhaps more fundamentally, the criteria for judging such value.'

THE NATURE OF THE QUARREL

There comes a time, no doubt, when all rising great powers, in a fit of adolescent peevishness, lash out at key aspects of their intellectual heritage. Ancient Rome, after all, had long entertained something of a schizoid relationship with Greek culture, viewing it as both a wellspring of wisdom and a morally polluted foreign import. At the apogee of Rome's power, Virgil famously crowed that his empire had overtaken, in the glory of its achievements, ancient Hellas. The effeminate Greeks, he observed dismissively in the *Aeneid*, may have once pioneered the disciplines of rhetoric, astrology and sculpture, but their hardier Roman successors had mastered an altogether more useful set of ‘imperial arts’ in the course of their conquest of the Mediterranean basin. It was to Rome, and Rome alone, that the task fell ‘with awful sway, to rule mankind, and make the world obey.’

Equally conflicted attitudes existed vis a vis European culture in the bustling coastal cities of nineteenth century America. Thus in 1837 Ralph Waldo Emerson gave a famous speech at Harvard, one in which he argued in favour of an intellectual emancipation from the Old World, stating that,

Our (America's) day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. (...) We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. (...) The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be too timid, imitative, tame.

An American Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, later rapturously referred to Emerson's speech as ‘America's declaration of intellectual independence,’ while the Romantic poet and critic James Russell Lowell observed that whereas,

...the Puritan Revolt had made us ecclesiastically and the Revolution politically, we were still socially and intellectually moored to English thought, till Emerson cut the cable and gave us a chance at the dangers and glories of the blue water.

It was the somewhat predictable nature of these oedipal revolts against ancient authority that the seventeenth century French moralist Jean de la Bruyère lampooned in his collection of epigrams known as *The Characters*. The *Moderns*, he quipped, were behaving like churlish infants,

A man feeds on the ancients and intelligent moderns, he squeezes and drains them as much as possible, he stuffs his work with them, and when at last he becomes an author and thinks he can walk alone, he lifts up his voice against them, and ill-treats them, like those lusty children, grown strong through the healthy milk on which they have been fed, and who beat their wet-nurses.

The *Moderns'* critiques of the classics could not always be reduced to such crudely emancipatory efforts, however. Indeed, they often also incorporated a strong normative component, arguing that the pagan rusticity that characterized many of the ancient Greek and Roman traditions was morally as well as culturally inferior. Thus, the refined Perrault memorably took issue with the casual vulgarity of Homer's warrior-aristocrats, who laundered their own clothes and cooked their own food or – in the case of Odysseus – infiltrated Ithaca disguised as a beggar. ‘One cannot see without indignation and disgust one of the heroes of the *Iliad* lie down at night amidst the pigs,’ blustered Perrault. The brutish treatment of women was another source of indignation. Commenting on a passage of Theocritus in which a goatherd strikes his lover, the seventeenth century writer acidly remarked that,

...it will be said that those were the manners of the times. Well they were depraved manners, and consequently that was a depraved age, very different from our own.

Indeed, for Moderns such as Terrasson and Perrault, the prestige of the ancients had historically been tied to the supposed virtue of their heroes; yet these same heroes, in their cruelty, savagery and sexual licentiousness, often appeared anything but exemplary. Who could think, for example, that Achilles – that tenebrous warlord governed wholly by his selfish appetites and obsession for personal renown – could be held up as a paragon of aristocratic virtue? The modern, Christian world called for higher ethical standards, for more clearly didactic works, and therefore for a greater critical and emotional distancing from the oft-murky moral messaging contained in the classics. Then, of course, there was the inherent subversiveness of the political counter-models proffered by democratic Athens and republican Rome in an age of absolutist monarchy. The French Moderns were hardly the first to have drawn attention to the potentially insidious nature of some of the themes contained in the works of the ancients. Indeed, a few decades prior Hobbes had warned in the *Leviathan* that,

As to rebellion against monarchy, one of the most frequent causes of it is the reading of the books of policies and histories of the ancient Greeks and Romans (...) In sum, I cannot imagine how anything can be more prejudicial to a monarchy than the allowing of such books to be publicly read, without present applying such correctives of discreet masters as are fit to take away their venom.

In response to this onslaught of critiques, the Ancients argued that the great works of antiquity should be situated within their larger context, and as vivid depictions of past mores rather than as precise guides for moral (or political) instruction. The Moderns, by tying their assessment of the worth of the Classics to contemporary norms, were being shortsighted and displaying a form of temporal parochialism. The playwright Hilaire-Bernard de Longepierre's dispassionate plea for greater nuance in response to these spasms of moral outrage has a certain abiding power to it;

One must not believe that ideas of verisimilitude and decorum are the same in all ages. Must one not recognize that some these ideas are founded on customs, on attitudes, on religion, etc., and that our own age is a very poor measure by which to ascertain conventions of decorum, which rest on foundations so unstable and variable? What a strange blindness, what unfair and inverted logic, to want to bring everything back to one's own time without ever allowing oneself to lose sight of it for one moment!

These rejoinders were echoed in the works of figures such as Jean Boivin, who did not hesitate, in his *Apologia* for Homer, to tie the Moderns' presentism and intellectual superciliousness to broader manifestations of intolerance. 'There has never been an age in history that did not believe itself enlightened, and more enlightened than any other age,' he observed, before acidly remarking that, 'Such a good opinion of oneself is habitually the result of ignorance.' To openly express such visceral distaste for one's distant forebears was not so dissimilar, he boldly ventured, to indulging in knee-jerk xenophobia vis a vis one's foreign contemporaries.

To be incapable of tolerating in men of another century, or from another century remote from our own, manners and morals different from those of men of the present century or of the country we live in, is to be incapable of tolerating a foreign appearance in a foreigner; it is to want a Turk, an Indian, or a Chinese to think and act like us and to have none of the flaws of their nation and all of the virtues of our own. As for me, what I like in the Chinese are Chinese mores and ways; and I would be most displeased with a painter who, promising to make me a portrait of the Chinese emperor, painted him dressed up as a Frenchman.

CONTEMPORARY RESONANCES

It is hard not to be struck, when perusing these reams of impassioned arguments and correspondence, by the eerie similarities with some of our current polemics over the study of the classics, or indeed of many of the texts long considered canonical in the history of western statecraft. Just as in seventeenth century France, bitter controversies now rage over the moral salubriousness of key figures in the history of political thought. Fevered debates swirl around whether one should 'cancel Aristotle' for his abhorrent views on slavery or rebrand university buildings named after David Hume because of the latter's comments on race. Meanwhile, American foreign policy pundits and political scientists have taken aim at some of their contemporaries' seeming obsession with quoting Thucydides, arguing that the works of fifth-century BCE Athenian no longer provide a useful or relevant guide for our supposedly more enlightened, evolved, and complex present. Thus, over the course of the summer an editor of the magazine *Foreign Policy*, in a much-discussed article, made the assertion that the study of Thucydides should be sidelined because, 'conflicts between city-states in a backwater Eurasian promontory 2,400 years ago are an unreliable guide to modern geopolitics.' Noting that the epicenter of global geopolitical activity was now in Asia rather than Europe, the journalist argued in favor of a broader intellectual pivot toward the study of Asian diplomatic and military history. These arguments were reprised by a number of academics on social media, one of whom scoffed that 'the Peloponnesian War was fought 2500 years ago with swords and spears,' 'was not a model for Sino-American rivalry,' and that one might as well 'go back to when cavemen hit each other with clubs and rocks.'

At first glance, the discomfort and frustration lurking behind such sentiments may appear somewhat understandable. As the contemporary classicist Mary Beard has noted, studying the ancient world from our 21st century vantage point can be akin to,

...walking on a tightrope – a careful balancing act, which demands a very particular sort of imagination. If you look down on one side, everything does look reassuringly familiar, or can be made to seem so. (...) On the other side of the tightrope, however, is completely alien territory.

This normatively alien territory, with its casual institutionalization of slavery, infanticide, and teenage marriage, amongst other distressing practices, can naturally appear both repellent and foreign to a modern reader. A certain level of moral discomfort, however, should not, in and of itself, be viewed as justification for an abrupt intellectual untethering from some of the more foundational texts in the history of political thought. As Longepierre, Boivin, and other *Ancients* eloquently argued over three centuries ago, educated readers are perfectly capable of maintaining a certain critical distance when engaging with key texts. The main pitfall – one which should always be studiously avoided – is to read the text, or an excerpt of said text (say, the Melian Dialogue in the *Peloponnesian War*), in relative isolation.

Indeed, before analyzing the work of any thinker, one should first acquire a fine-grained understanding of the cultural 'eco-system' and specific historical context within which said texts or ideas were produced. This approach should ideally be complemented – as Quentin Skinner and other members of the so-called Cambridge school have contended – by a granular study of the author's principal intellectual influences and contemporaries. When embarking on the study of a text that has proven to be hugely influential over the course of the centuries – such as Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* or Vegetius's *De Re Militari* – one should not hesitate to adopt a more philological approach, exploring how exactly that same text's meaning or message has been reinterpreted or repurposed. Much like a great wine, the meaning and value assigned to a foundational text can evolve over the course of time, as well as in accordance with the intellectual terroir within which it is resampled.

Provided one is willing to engage in such preliminary intellectual efforts, it is perfectly possible to, for instance, draw valuable insights from Aristotle's discussions of practical wisdom in the *Nicomachean Ethics* while utterly rejecting his theses on natural slavery in *Politics*. To suggest otherwise is infantilizing. It underestimates our collective capacity for what Francesco Giucciardini in his *Ricordi* termed 'discretion' or 'discernment,' i.e. the ability to delve into, and learn from the shared reservoir of human experience, all while retaining a '*perspicacious eye*,' by recognizing the specificity of certain local and temporal conditions.

In his *Essays*, Montaigne advocated for a similar approach – one in line with the Renaissance-era emphasis on active reading. 'A dozen students have already caught syphilis,' the earthy philosopher chortled, 'before they reach Aristotle's lessons on temperance.' Rather, a discerning reader should learn how to engage critically with a classical text, to '*pass everything through a sieve, and lodge nothing in his head on mere authority and trust.*' Always one for colorful metaphors, Montaigne compared his more pedantic acquaintances to bloated figures who, holding forth at their dinner parties and lavish receptions, continuously belched out undigested fragments of knowledge in the hope of impressing a wide-eyed and gullible audience. An enlightened approach to learning, he argued, involved taking the time to more fully digest and metabolize one's acquired knowledge.

We take other men's knowledge and opinions upon trust; which is an idle and superficial learning. We must make it our own. We are in this very like him, who having need of fire, went to a neighbor's house to fetch it, and finding a very good one there, sat down to warm himself without bringing any home... What good does it do us to have a stomach full of meat, if it is not digested, if it be not incorporated it with us, if it does not nourish or support us?

Were Montaigne alive today, he would no doubt chuckle at the sheer volume of regurgitated Thucydides regularly splattered across various foreign policy outlets. Indeed, trotting out the same passages of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* when commenting on Sino-US rivalry has become something of a tired trope, not so dissimilar to those entrepreneurial self-help manuals that begin every chapter with the same circumlocutory quotes from Clausewitz or gnomish aphorisms from Sun Tzu. It can appear even more tiresome when this smattering of erudition serves as a fig-leaf for a lack of regional expertise, or to project a thin veneer of cultural sophistication.

The problem, however, is not that too many people draw on Thucydides, Clausewitz or Sun Tzu, but rather that they often do so superficially, self-servingly, and seem to not have fully read the texts in question. Unfortunately, the same charges can also often be levied at their critics – especially those in the field of political science – who frequently fail to properly engage with the relevant primary and secondary literature. (Consider, for example, this recent academic roundtable on the so-called 'Thucydides Trap,' which does not incorporate a single classicist or ancient historian).

In this, those who now breezily dismiss the value of the classics differ greatly from the Moderns in ancien régime France or Restoration-era England, who all possessed, at least, a solid working knowledge of the texts whose relevance they were criticizing. The similarities between them, perhaps, lie more in the self-satisfaction underlying some of the more knee-jerk dismissals of the relevance of ancient history to America's contemporary challenges. It is perhaps not a coincidence that this form of epochal exceptionalism, which so closely resembles that of the proud *Moderns* of the court of Louis XIV, has progressively become more, rather than less, prominent within America's intellectual class. Decades spent comfortably perched in a position of primacy, it seems, can sometimes lead to the spiritual equivalent of a torticollis, preventing one from looking backward as well as sideways.

Indeed, it takes an almost whimsical degree of self-regard to purport to devote one's life to the study of war and peace, and yet blithely affirm that a seminal figure such as Thucydides is no longer worthy of examination. The Athenian is one of the great pillars of the Western strategic and historiographical tradition and his work has inspired generation upon generation of political theorists and statesmen. Its enduring resonance is tied, precisely, to the universality and timelessness of some of its observations on politics, war, and the human condition. As Tufts University professor Daniel Drezner recently noted, the ancient historian's sweeping narrative constitutes a veritable '*Rosetta Stone of tragic narratives in world politics.*' That *The History of the Peloponnesian War* has been occasionally plundered, misinterpreted, or crudely simplified should not be a reason for its sudden excision from international relations curricula. Au contraire, the solution to sloppy history or crude analogical reasoning is not to abandon the field of study in question, but to redouble one's efforts to acquire a more fine-tuned sense of discernment. Whereas grand theories of international relations, much like philosophy, depend on universals and seek to teach by reason, history – in the words of Francesco Patrizi – '*depends on particulars and teaches through experience.*'

It is also somewhat surprising that Thucydides should continue to remain such a focus of attention and controversy when there is a plethora of other classical historians or political philosophers who were equally – if not more – influential in the history of western statecraft; and whose works could also be relied upon to furnish rich insights on contemporary challenges. Polybius, the perceptive exile, on the virtues of historiography, the challenges of alliance management, and the dangers tied to unipolarity. Sallust, the saturnine stylist, on how Rome's destruction of its prime peer competitor Carthage, led to the dissipation of the Tiberine city-state's 'fear-rooted' internal consensus and eventually to decadence and overexpansion. Tacitus, the wry political operator, and ancient history's finest anatomist of life under authoritarian rule. One can only hypothesize that if Thucydides is so disproportionately cited, it is because his works often form the lone classical text shoehorned into contemporary international relations curricula. The net result is a sadly impoverished intellectual debate: one which could greatly benefit from a more interdisciplinary exchange of ideas and from a reinvigorated effort to engage in applied history.

THE NEED FOR APPLIED HISTORY

For centuries, a solid grounding in history was considered essential both to the conduct of statecraft, and to the prosecution of military strategy. From the Ancient Greeks to the Victorians, the careful study of past events lay at the heart of 'practical wisdom,' or prudence, and the mastering of such a historical *techné* was perceived as one of the finest political arts. Not only did history teach humility, it was also a school of statesmanship, that provided a mental '*workshop within which basic ideas about core policy issues (could) be hammered out,*' thus enhancing future strategic performance. As Polybius famously noted in the *Histories*,

There are two ways by which all men can reform themselves, the one through their own mischances, and the other through those of others (...) For it is the mental transference of similar circumstances to our own times that gives us the means of forming presentiments of what is about to happen, and enables us at certain times to take precautions and at others, by reproducing former conditions, to face with more confidence the difficulties that menace us.

And indeed, for statesmen grappling with the uncertainty of their present circumstances, the business of liaising between the universal and the particular has often been conceptualized in terms of a temporal process, with the hope that the lessons of yesteryear hold the promise of better ascertaining future outcomes. As Yaacov Vertzberger has rightly observed, history teaches by analogy, enlightens by metaphor, and educates by extrapolation; but analogy can mislead, metaphor can be misplaced and extrapolation misguided. The acquisition of a historical sensibility should thus go hand in hand with a certain degree of intellectual caution – one that avoids succumbing to deterministic historical narratives, and that does not systematically rely on analogical reasoning as a means of predictive inference.

Perhaps most importantly, the accomplished historian is a skilled manager of complexity and a processor of information – someone trained to detect patterns of cause and effect. The great Harvard historian John Clive thus once wondered whether,

...historians, especially those dealing with abstract entities like groups and classes and movements, have to possess a special metaphorical capacity, a plastic or tactile imagination that can detect shapes or configurations where others less gifted see only jumble and confusion.

If so, then it would seem as though the historically trained mind reflects many of the mental processes most prized by generals and statesmen. Political and military judgment, like historical study, demands a capacity for integration, for perceiving qualitative similarities and differences, and a '*sense of the unique fashion in which various factors combine in the particular situation.*'

And yet despite the seemingly obvious benefits to be derived from its study, applied history appears to have fallen out of favour. As much of American political science has become more positivist in its intellectual leanings – with a heightened focus on quantitative methods, and theoretical abstraction – it has also become more narrowly self-referential. When contemporary political scientists do draw on military history, they often do so in a limited and self-serving way, retroactively selecting case studies that appear to confirm their parsimonious theories. The past is thus often viewed as a '*treasure house, to be plundered in search of illustrative effect, rather than being examined and analyzed for its own sake.*' This dispiriting state of affairs, however, should not solely be attributed to the evolution of political science. Indeed, within the embattled academic field of history itself, the study of military and diplomatic history has been shunted to the sidelines, and the production of policy-relevant works of historical analysis is often frowned upon. On popular national security or foreign policy websites, military and diplomatic historians remain heavily outnumbered by political scientists.

Meanwhile, many of the most well-examined case studies in the security studies literature – from America's approach to carrier warfare to the Wehrmacht's adoption of the blitzkrieg strategy during World War II – are by now overly familiar. Vast spans of military history, from late antiquity to the early modern era, are considered less relevant to contemporary concerns and almost uniformly ignored, with contemporary international relations scholars drawing the overwhelming majority of their historical case studies from the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. The great French historian Marc Bloch famously inveighed against this tendency for analysts to consider only the more recent historical periods to be the most relevant, caustically asking,

What would one think of the geophysicist who, satisfied with having computed their remoteness to a fraction of an inch, would then conclude that the influence of the moon upon the earth is far greater than that of the sun? Neither in outer space, nor in time, can the potency of a force be measured by the single dimension of distance.

One could apply the same metaphorical association – of distance versus relevance – to geography as well as time. Granted, there is most definitely, as scholars such as David Kang have repeatedly urged, a pressing need for more substantive work focused on Asian diplomatic and military history. Acquiring a better understanding of China and India's military pasts, along with seminal texts such as the *Arthashastra* or *The Three Kingdoms*, for example, is essential to understanding both Asian behemoths' respective strategic cultures and ideational outlook. That being said, the oft-subsidiary assumption that one should automatically dismiss certain periods in history or strategic traditions as irrelevant to contemporary challenges in Asia, is not only shortsighted, but also somewhat disconcerting. Is the underlying premise of such culturally freighted arguments that the lessons to be derived from European history are somehow solely for Europeans, and the lessons and insights from Asian history only for Asians? Can we not somehow all pool and learn from our collective historical experiences rather than hive them off into our respective sub-disciplinary corners?

Moreover, there is an additional risk nested within such culturalist assumptions: that of falling victim to the more insidious variant of regional essentialism promoted by authoritarian state actors such as the People's Republic of China. Indeed, Beijing has long insisted that its supposedly exceptional historical trajectory entitles it to an unprecedented degree of deference on the basis of a so-called 'different historical model of international relations.' It is not immediately apparent, however, that China's much-touted 'tributary model' of international relations provides a better repository of insights into its current behavior in the South China Sea, than, say – the Valois and Plantagenet dynasties' sophisticated use of lawfare for purposes of territorial contestation in the fraught decades leading up to the Hundred Years War. Lessons can be gleaned and applied across different cultures as well as across different periods. There are most certainly rich seams of world history that remain woefully underexplored, but the default posture should not be to argue in favour of further disciplinary siloization, but rather to read more, to read deeper, and to read across traditions.

BREAKING THROUGH COBWEBS OF LEARNING: THE IMPORTANCE OF A MORE HUMANIST APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In 1704, Jonathan Swift published a mordant satire on the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns entitled *The Battle of the Books*. Written in the form of a mock epic, and set in St. James Library, it described a war in-between two armies of books – the Ancients and the Moderns – over a real estate squabble far away on Mount Parnassus, the home of the Muses in Greek mythology. The neighborly quarrel begins when the Moderns complain that the soaring heights of the Ancients' ancestral land obstruct their view, and demand that their august predecessors *'remove themselves down to the lower summit, which the moderns would graciously surrender to them.'* The Ancients are both baffled and indignant, pointing out *'how little they expected such a message from a colony whom they had admitted, out of their own free grace, to so near a neighborhood.'* Moreover, the Ancients' elevated neighborhood had long provided the very shade and shelter that allowed the ungrateful Moderns to flourish in the first place. As the dispute grows in intensity, leading to *'whole rivulets of ink being exhausted,'* it begins to spread to public libraries such as St. James, where the books come to life and engage in an unseemly brawl.

Swift is far from an impartial narrator, and his own intellectual sensitivities skew heavily toward those of the Ancients. His bias is made most evident during the highlight of the narrative, which consists in a public battle of wits in-between the library's resident spider and a visiting bee which, in the course of its merry itinerancy, careens through a meticulously erected cobweb. Each critter serves as the figurative champion for the two papered hosts facing off on the bookshelves below.

The spider – representing the moderns – derides the bee's cross disciplinary and supposedly indiscriminatory approach, his dependence on all manners of foreign sustenance, and describes his opponent as a *'vagabond without house or home, without stock or inheritance.'* The self-important arachnid *'having swelled himself into the size and posture of a disputant,'* and *'fully predetermined his mind against all conviction,'* proudly draws attention to his intellectual autonomy and to the mathematical precision of his cobwebs, which are clearly the fruit of cartesian reason and the scientific method,

Your livelihood is a universal plunder upon nature; a freebooter over fields and gardens; and for the sake of stealing, will rob a nettle as easily as a violet. Whereas I am a domestic animal, furnished with a native stock within myself. This large [cobweb] castle, to show my improvements in the mathematics, is all built with my own hands, and the materials extracted altogether out of my own person.

The bee remains unflappable, and his response, in its searing wit, constitutes one of the more memorable defenses of the humanist approach to wisdom and learning. Conceding that with regard to the spider's *'skill in architecture and mathematics,'* he had little to say, the Ancients' apian defender concludes by posing the following query,

...the question comes all to this; whether it is the nobler being of the two, that which, by a lazy contemplation of four inches round, by an overweening pride, feeding and engendering on itself, turns all into excrement and venom, producing nothing at all but flybane and cobweb; or that which, by a universal range, with long search, much study and judgment, and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax.

In short, it is both humbler and more worthwhile to view the pursuit of political and literary wisdom as a continuous, wide-ranging journey across time and disciplines, rather than as an immediately achievable and scientifically bounded endeavor. Less parsimonious theories, methodological fetishism and disciplinary prejudices, suggests Swift. Rather, the path to excellence resides in a combination of curiosity and humility: one which recognizes the immense debt owed to one's intellectual forebears, as well as the fact that in some fields of human endeavour there are no monocausal explanations or elegant theoretical solutions. Without such an attitude toward knowledge, one risks spinning increasingly elaborate – but ultimately flimsy – designs from one's own guts and producing an endless stream of banalities. Indeed, if one opts to ignore the wealth of insights already contained in canonical texts, how can one be sure that one is not merely restating what has already been articulated by one's predecessors, and perhaps even with far more sophistication and eloquence? International relations theories can certainly be of use in momentarily simplifying a complex world, much as two-dimensional paper maps can help guide the befuddled traveler. An overreliance on such mental crutches, however, can cause one to durably lose one's sense of orientation.

From Petrarch to Ben Jonson, the allegory of the bee and of its peripatetic existence had long been used by humanist theorists of knowledge. Perhaps the earliest, and most famous, example is contained in the writings of Seneca, in his *Letters to Lucilius*, when the Roman scholar-practitioner described how true wisdom could only stem from extensive reading, and from a slow, almost alchemical process of intellectual distillation;

We (scholars) also, I say, ought to copy those bees, and sift whatever we have gathered from a varied course of reading... Then, by applying the supervising care with which our nature has endowed us – in other words, our natural gifts – we should so blend these several flavours into one delicious compound that even though it betrays its origin, yet nevertheless it is clearly a different thing from whence it came.

This is where applied history, with its prudential rejection of presentism, teleological certainty, and overweening positivism, can prove most useful. It furnishes a healthy skepticism in the face of those who, starting from grand theories or first principles, are determined to engineer tidy sets of explanations applicable across all circumstances. It recognizes that threads of wisdom are woven throughout the tapestry of history, and that our epoch is not necessarily more complex, unique or enlightened than any other. Last but not least, it renews with the humanist belief – so dear to figures such as Montaigne, Charron or Locke – that there is an abiding beauty in the expression of doubt, and in the recognition of complexity. And lest one fear that – by detaching oneself from one's snug disciplinary harness – one's thoughts might drown in the vast ocean of past human endeavor, the great, churning wake left by figures such as Thucydides can always help guide us to shore. For as Francis Bacon once lyrically expounded,

...the images of men's wits and knowledges remain in books, exempted from the wrong of time, and capable of perpetual renovation. Neither are they fit to be called images, because they generate still, and cast their seeds in the minds of others, provoking and causing infinite actions and opinions in succeeding ages; so that, if the invention of a ship was thought so noble...how much more are (such works) to be magnified, which, as ships, pass through the vast seas of time, and make ages so distant to participate of the wisdom, illuminations, and inventions, the one of the other.