

Common Genius - Preface

The Lessons of History

Above all, the reader should understand that to date all attempts to learn “the lessons of history” have met with no more success than the sixteenth century Hernando DeSoto’s search for the fountain of youth. The subject has absorbed many great minds and no clear pattern has ever been established. The cyclical “Rise and Fall” paradigm has been often referred to but never with a satisfactory explanation of “why” did societies rise or fall. In light of that record, this book is undertaking to do what has never been done--In Captain Kirk’s words, “to go where no man has gone,” never an easy task..

Common Genius ---- Preface ---- A Warning To The Reader

A few of those people who were kind enough to review the early drafts of this book have expressed skepticism concerning the entirely new interpretation of history presented herein. While they are willing to acknowledge the historical importance of the common people in creating progress, it is with great difficulty that they are shorn of their ingrained belief that it was really the great minds, the geniuses among us, that contributed the most to modern Western civilization. Their most common criticism is that I do not give history’s “great men” more respect. This preface is designed to anticipate such reservations and prepare the reader for what is to follow, to urge him or her to suspend disbelief for a few hours--to consider this new hypothesis--and join in a refreshingly new quest for answers revealing the causes and nature of history’s sublime spectacle--the march of mankind forward from oppression and poverty to freedom and prosperity. But, to do that, you must set aside all biases favoring the common explanations whether they be a love of Plato, all encompassing faith in science, an over-riding concern about geography and climate, a theory based upon divine guidance, or a nihilistic idea that it’s all blind and random chance. Such explanations must be at least temporarily set aside, because none of them get to the basic positive force that led to the modern world.

The search for a pattern in history has concerned many of the world’s best minds and remains a puzzle because no one before has ever gotten to the bottom of it. Many have said religion had a role, or geography and climate mattered, or the language and education in different locales, etc. But most scholars have suggested that each such factor played only a part. Almost nobody argues that climate or geography or religion alone was determinant. Many point to the great philosophers such as Locke, Plato, Hegel or Montesquieu, but a cursory look reveals that these writers only played supportive (or unsupportive) roles. But this melange of possible causes is so fixed in most people’s minds that it may be difficult for such a reader to accept a wholly new

approach. And yet, throughout history, many blind alleys standing in the way of knowledge were only overcome by taking a radically different approach. That is what Common Genius endeavors to do.

Because the theme of this book is so controversial, and can only be convincingly demonstrated by overturning a vast number of misconceptions, the reader must bear with the historical facts laid out herein, until gradually and inexorably, the fundamental lessons of history are fully revealed. Some readers may still, at the end, remain unconvinced, but it is my fervent belief that the journey will open their eyes and give them food for thought--and even that goal is a worthy objective for any author.

A recurring dilemma in outlining this new theory is that in order to establish the essentiality of the common people's role, it is necessary to disabuse readers of the false notion that it was the best and brightest that made all good things happen. This disabusement should not be read as an "attack" on those of great intellect--it is merely suggesting that the fundamental push to progress came from somewhere else. The point is that, helpful as some of the geniuses may have been, even their best efforts relied fundamentally and initially on the physical and financial settings established by ordinary people. After all, we are looking for the primal cause of progress; we must not be satisfied with merely identifying contributing factors. The extraordinary accomplishments of a Galileo or Einstein didn't occur in the bush--they were only empowered by the glories of the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, societal peaks that we will show were the product of more ordinary beings. This underlying truth explains why Madame Curie's lab was not housed in a tent, a manyatta, or an adobe structure.

Understanding the hypothesis presented here relies heavily on coming to grips with a certain fuzziness of thinking when we talk about intellectuals, geniuses, innovators, pioneers, etc. This is not a homogeneous class of characters. Thomas Sowell has written about the differences between "hard-scientists" and "soft-scientists." These two types of deep thinkers are well exemplified by two legendary Greeks--Pythagoras and Plato. The former was a physical or hard scientist who developed useful mathematic models in the heady early days of Greek civilization; Plato was a soft-scientist who emerged 150 years later, in the final declining days of Athens, and wrote interesting but relatively useless material on vague topics like the nature of good and evil. Pythagorus relied on the scientific method--observation, tests, repeatable experiments or formulas that proved timeless. Plato speculated on vague undefined subjects, using abstractions and conceptualizations that were not based on reality or provable, and which, when employed later by his readers often did great harm. In following the theory presented in Common Genius it is important to keep this distinction in mind. There is no denigration of hard-scientists as long as they stick to the scientific method of observation and demonstration. Indeed they have played a vital role in helping alleviate the work and discomforts inflicted by life on the common people. But, while they may have accelerated progress in already advancing societies, they were never the fundamental underlying cause of advances in freedom or prosperity.

Furthermore, even the soft-scientists are not as a group harmful--they are not a homogeneous group, but can be divided into three levels of competencies, and these are described in Chapter two. But even the best of these, "giants" like John Locke or Adam Smith, were merely "reporters" attempting to describe what common people had already done. Comparative dates are used to demonstrate that nothing "original" was ever included in such philosophers' writings. They did try to summarize general principles from what had occurred, but most of them did even that poorly, and too frequently wandered off into idle speculation. Many such reporters and analyzers played a useful role in mankind's advance, but they never were the cause of the advances. There has never been a useful innovation in government or economic freedom that emanated from an armchair; all such innovations were the product of involved individuals cooperating and arguing and compromising in a working environment, and very few of these, if any, were ever members of an intelligentsia. The summaries produced in the armchairs may have helped promulgate useful ideas but they never originated the ideas. And unfortunately, many of the philosophers' reports and summaries were so inaccurate or distorted from reality that they led many readers far astray.

In investigating and developing the hypothesis of this book it became evident that a number of soft-scientists have been more or less accurate in describing societal mechanics and institutions that had helped or hurt advances in freedom and prosperity. Such writers are cited throughout this book as support for specific facts as well as for their interpretations of history. Taken together, there are hundreds of such historians whose observations come very close to the conclusions drawn in *Common Genius*, but they all miss the common denominator--the unifying linkage that goes to the heart of the matter--the doings of the common man and woman.

Above all, the reader should understand that to date all attempts to learn "the lessons of history" have met with no more success than the sixteenth century Hernando DeSoto's search for the fountain of youth. The subject has absorbed many great minds and no clear pattern has ever been established. The cyclical "Rise and Fall" paradigm has been often referred to but never with a satisfactory explanation of "why" did societies rise or fall. In light of that record, this book is undertaking to do what has never been done--In Captain Kirk's words, "to go where no man has gone," never an easy task.

This search has resulted in a revision of the rise and fall cyclical explanations and replaces those with a "stepping stone" pattern. The rise and fall of the Greek and Roman eras, as well as the decline of Italian city-states and eventually most of the subsequent European societies, should be looked at as the stepping stones to Western civilization. Each fallen nation state was irreparably set back, but the forward march of Western progress continued unabated. Quite differently, when most of the great non-European empires grew and then stagnated, or were rolled over with new leaders, there was no over-all gain and little progress--the stagnation was virtually timeless. By contrast, in the West, even when one flourishing society collapsed, another nearby locale rose to begin the upward course anew. Indeed, the nature of each such "new" enclave is what establishes the Radzewicz Rule: each new enclave was a fresh young community, populated by ambitious citizens, and relatively unhindered by intellectuals or

aristocracies. It had to be that way, because only in each new isolated almost primitive locale did people gain de facto freedom--once the society had grown by their efforts to prosperity, the weight of bureaucracies and thinkers came in to undue the bases of progress.

When viewed this way, the Rise of the West continues, surviving the Fall of many predecessor stepping stones, always simply sidestepping to another more enabling locale. But this beneficial historical sequence should not be labeled "The Rise of the West." It has been more precisely "The Rise of Freedom"--because it was always the freedom of the populace that made a society Rise. It has never been a purely ethnic matter. The peoples of Phoenicia, Greece and the Basques were quite different from those who populated Iceland and Scotland. If the Chinese or the Kenyans or the Argentines, or even the Iraqis adopt the mechanics and institutions that built progress in the West, the next stepping stone could well be theirs to stand upon. There are ten "tipping points" in world history that are referred to in Common Genius and each one went in the direction of the emerging Western nations. The next divergence could favor a different region--the blueprint is there for all to see--carved out by the enterprising free common men and women that built each ascending step during the past 3,000 years of history.

The conclusions drawn and the theory presented herein represent a suggested solution to the problem of interpreting mankind's history. The theory outlines what worked and, equally important, what did not work. It is comprehensive, encompassing most of the significant societies of the world during the past 3,000 years, but it remains a hypothesis that may or may not bear up forever. But in reading along, keep an open mind and share the adventure of a great search. There may be a sense of discovery--there will be "Aha!" moments, and even if you end in disagreement, you will comprehend the inherent weakness of most currently popular explanations.