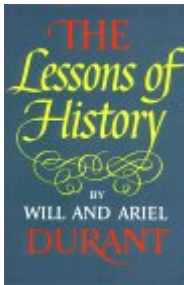


## Excerpts from Will and Ariel Durant's The Lessons of History © 1968



The goal for Will and Ariel Durant was not to summarize over 3,000 years of recorded history into a hundred pages. The goal was to question what it means to study history; how important it is to know our heritage; and whether or not we can understand the nature of individuals, groups, and entire nations? Most fascinating is the possibility that accumulated human experience may tell us where are we heading.

The authors warn us in the first chapter "Hesitations" that "Historians are not free from bias and prejudice . . . most history is guessing, and the rest is prejudice".

Note from the site host:

[Realize that much of the Durant's interpretation of the past and projection of the future is based on the world as it stood in 1968, a turbulent period where it looked as if the forces of capitalism and communism were in an all-out struggle. Though this filter somewhat tempers how the reader should approach the following excerpts, this knowledge should not take away from the brilliance or "relative truth" of these noted historians summations].

### CHAPTER I: HESITATIONS

Have you found such regularities in the sequence of past events that you can predict the future actions of mankind or the fate of states? Is it possible that, after all, "history has no sense," <sup>1</sup> that it teaches us nothing, and that the immense past was only the weary rehearsal of the mistakes that the future is destined to make on a larger stage and scale (11)?

Do we really know what the past was, what actually happened, or **is history a "fable"** not quite "agreed upon"? Our knowledge of any past event is always incomplete, probably inaccurate, beclouded by ambivalent evidence and biased historians, and perhaps distorted by our own patriotic or religious partisanship. "**Most history is guessing, and the rest is prejudice.**" <sup>2</sup> Even the historian who thinks to rise above partiality for his country, race, creed, or class betrays his secret predilection in his choice of materials, and in the nuances of his adjectives. "**The historian always oversimplifies,** and hastily selects a manageable minority of facts and faces out of a crowd of souls and events whose multitudinous complexity he can never quite embrace or comprehend." <sup>3</sup> —Again, our **conclusions from the past to the future are made more hazardous than ever by the acceleration of change.** In 1909 Charles Peguy thought that "the world changed less since Jesus Christ than in the last thirty years" <sup>4</sup>; and perhaps some young doctor of philosophy in physics would now add that his science has changed more since 1909 than in all recorded time before. Every year—sometimes, in war, every month—some new invention, method, or situation compels a fresh adjustment of behavior and ideas. —Furthermore, **an element of chance, perhaps of freedom, seems to enter into**

**the conduct of metals and men.** We are no longer confident that atoms, much less organisms, will respond in the future as we think they have responded in the past. The electrons, like Cowper's God, move in mysterious ways their wonders to perform, and some quirk of character or circumstance may upset national equations, as when Alexander drank himself to death and let his new empire fall apart (323 B.C.), or as when Fredrick the Great was saved from disaster by the accession of a Czar infatuated with Prussian ways (1762) (11-12).

Obviously historiography cannot be a science. It can only be an industry, an art, and a philosophy—an industry by ferreting out the facts, an art by establishing a meaningful order in the chaos of materials, a philosophy by seeking perspective and enlightenment. "The present is the past rolled up for action, and the past in the present unrolled for understanding" –or so we believe and hope (12).

Only a fool would try to compress a hundred centuries into a hundred pages of hazardous conclusions. We proceed (13).

## **CHAPTER II: HISTORY AND THE EARTH**

Human history is a brief spot in space, and its first lesson is modesty. At any moment a comet may come too close to the earth and set our little globe turning topsy-turvy in a hectic course, or choke its men and fleas with fumes or heat . . .[Yet] According to Pascal: "When the universe has crushed him, man will still be nobler than that which kills him, because he knows that he is dying, of its victory the universe knows nothing."

5

History is subject to geology. Every day the sea encroaches somewhere upon the land, or the land upon the sea; cities disappear under the water, and sunken cathedrals ring their melancholy bells. Mountains rise and fall in the rhythm of emergence and erosion; rivers swell and flood, or dry up, or change their course; valleys become deserts, and isthmuses become straits (14).

Man's ingenuity often overcomes geological handicaps: he can irrigate deserts and air-condition the Sahara; he can level or surmount mountains and terrace the hills with vines; he can build a floating city to cross the ocean, or gigantic birds to navigate the sky. But a tornado can ruin in an hour the city that took a century to build; an iceberg can overturn or bisect the floating palace and send a thousand merrymakers gurgling to the Great Certainty. Let rain become too rare, and civilization disappears under sand, as in Central Asia; let it fall too furiously, and civilization will be choked with jungle, as in Central America (15).

## **BIOLOGY AND HISTORY**

The laws of biology are the fundamental lessons of history. We are subject to the processes and trials of evolution, to the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest to survive (18).

If the human brood is too numerous for the food supply, **Nature has three agents for restoring the balance: famine, pestilence, and war.** . . . Though he was a clergyman and a man of good will, Malthus pointed out that the issuance of relief funds or supplies to the poor encouraged them to marry early and breed improvidently, making the problem worse (21).

**Is there any evidence that birth control is dysgenic** – that it lowers the intellectual level of the nation practicing it? Presumably it has been used more by the intelligent than by the simple. . . . But much of what we call intelligence is the result of individual education, opportunity, and experience; and there is no evidence that such intellectual acquirements are transmitted in the genes. Even the children of Ph.D.s must be educated and go through their adolescent measles of errors, dogmas, and isms; nor can we say how much potential ability and genius lurk in the chromosomes of the harassed and handicapped poor. Biologically, physical vitality may be, at birth, of greater value than intellectual pedigree; Nietzsche thought that the best blood in Germany was in peasant veins; philosophers are not the fittest material from which to breed the race (23).

#### **CHAPTER IV: RACE AND HISTORY**

There are some two billion colored people on the earth, and some nine hundred million whites. However, many palefaces were delighted when Comte Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau, an an *Essai sur l'inegalite des race humaines* (1853-55), announced that the species man is composed of distinct races inherently different (like individuals) in physical structure, mental capacity, and qualities of character; and that one race, the “Aryan,” was by nature superior to all the rest (25).

If the Negroes of Africa have produced no great civilization it is probably because climatic and geographical conditions frustrated them; would any of the white “races” have done better in those environments? It is remarkable how many American Negroes have risen to high places in the professions, arts, and letters in the last one hundred years despite a thousand social obstacles (30).

In the long run such differences of tradition or type yield to the influence of the environment. Northern peoples take on the characteristics of southern people after living for generations in the tropics, and the grandchildren of peoples coming from the leisurely South fall into the quicker tempo of movement and mind which they find in the North (31).

“Racial” antipathies have some roots in ethnic origin, but they are also generated, perhaps predominately, by differences of acquired culture – of language, dress, habits, morals, or religion. There is no cure for such antipathies except a broadened education. A knowledge of history may teach us that civilization is a co-operative product, that nearly all peoples have contributed to it; it is our common heritage and debt; and the civilized soul will reveal itself in treating every man or woman, as a representative of one of these creative and contributory groups (31).

## CHAPTER V: CHARACTER AND HISTORY

Society is founded not on the ideals but on the nature of man, and the constitution of man rewrites the constitutions of states. But what is the constitution of man?

Human beings are normally equipped by “nature” (here meaning heredity) with six positive and six negative instincts, whose function it is to preserve the individual, the family, the group, or the species. (Action, Fight, Acquisition, Association, Mating, Parental Care) . . . Each instinct generates habits and is accompanied by feelings. Their totality is the nature of man (32).

But how far has **human nature** changed in the course of history? Theoretically there must have been some change; natural selection has presumably operated upon psychological as well as physiological variations. Nevertheless, known history shows little alteration in the **conduct** of mankind. The Greeks of Plato’s time behaved very much like the French of modern centuries; and the Romans behaved like the English. Means and instrumentality change; motives and ends remain the same . . . (34).

The “great man,” the “hero,” the “genius” –regains his place as a formative force in history. . . . When he is a hero of action, the demands of his position and the exhalation of crisis develop and inflate him to such magnitude and powers as would in normal times have remained potential and untapped. But he is not merely an effect. Events take place through him as well as around him; his ideas and decisions enter vitally into the course of history (34).

Intellect is a vital force in history, but it can also be a dissolvent and destructive power. Out of every hundred new ideas ninety-nine or more will probably be inferior to the traditional responses which they propose to replace. No one man, however brilliant or well-informed, can come in one lifetime to such fullness of understanding as to safely judge and dismiss customs or institutions of his society, for these are the wisdom of generations after centuries of experimentation in the laboratory of history. A youth boiling over with hormones will wonder why he should not give full freedom to his sexual desires; and if he is unchecked by custom, morals, or laws, he may ruin his life before he matures sufficiently to understand that sex is a river of fire that must be banked and cooled by a hundred restraints if it is not to consume in chaos both the individual and the group (35-36).

So the conservative who resists change is as valuable as the radical who proposes it—perhaps as much more valuable as roots are more valuable than grafts (36).

## VI: MORALS AND HISTORY

Morals are the rules by which a society exhorts (as laws are the rules by which it seeks to compel) its members and associations to behavior consistent with its order, security, and growth (37).

**Moral codes differ because they adjust themselves to historical and environmental conditions.** If we divide economic history into three stages—hunting, agriculture, and industry—we may expect that the moral code of one stage will be changed by the next. In the **hunting stage** a man had to be ready to chase and fight and kill. When he had caught his prey he ate to the cubic capacity of his stomach, being uncertain when he might eat again; insecurity is the mother of greed, as cruelty is the memory—if only in the blood—of a time when the test of survival (as now between states) was the ability to kill. Presumably the death rate in men—so often risking their lives in hunt—was higher than in women; some men had to take several women, and every man was expected to help women to frequent pregnancy. Pugnacity, brutality, greed, and sexual readiness were advantages in the struggle for existence. Probably every vice was once a virtue—i.e., a quality making for the survival of the individual, the family, or the group. Man's sins may be the relics of his rise rather than the stigmata of his fall(38).

. . . when man passed from hunting to **agriculture** . . . We may reasonably assume that the new regime demanded new virtues, and changed some old virtues into vices. Industriousness became more vital than bravery, regularity and thrift more profitable than violence, peace more victorious than war. Children were economic assets; birth control was made immoral. On the farm the family was the unit of production under the discipline of the father and the seasons, and paternal authority had a firm economic base (38). Each normal son matured soon in mind and self-support; at fifteen he understood the physical tasks of life as well as he would understand them at forty; all that he needed was land, a plow, and a willing arm. So he married early, almost as soon as nature wished; he did not fret long under the restraints placed upon premarital relations by the new order of permanent settlements and homes. As for young women, chastity was indispensable, for its loss might bring unprotected motherhood. Monogamy was demanded by the approximate numerical equality of the sexes. For fifteen hundred years this agricultural moral code of continence, early marriage, divorceless monogamy, and multiple maternity maintained itself in Christian Europe and its white colonies. It was a stern code, which produced some of the strongest characters in history (38).

The **Industrial Revolution** changed the economic form and moral superstructure of European and American life. Men, women, and children left home and family, authority and unity, to work as individuals, individually paid, in factories built to house not men but machines. Every decade the machines multiplied and became more complex; economic maturity (the capacity to support a family) came later; children no longer were economic assets; marriage was delayed; premarital continence became more difficult to maintain. The city offered every discouragement to marriage, but it provided every stimulus and facility for sex. Women were “emancipated”—i.e. industrialized; and contraceptives enabled them to separate intercourse from pregnancy. The authority of father and mother lost its economic base through the growing individualism of industry. The rebellious youth was no longer constrained by the surveillance of the village; he could hide his sins in the protective anonymity of the city crowd. The progress of **science** raised the authority of the test tube over that of the crosier; the mechanization of economic production suggested mechanistic **materialistic**

**philosophies; education** spread religious doubts; morality lost more and more of its supernatural supports. The old agricultural code began to die (39).

We must remind ourselves again that history as usually written is quite different from history as usually lived: the historian records the exceptional because it is interesting – because it is exceptional . . . **Behind the red façade** of war and politics, misfortune and poverty, adultery and divorce, murder and suicide, were millions of orderly homes, devoted marriages, men and women kindly and affectionate, troubled and happy with children. Even in recorded history we find so many instances of goodness, even of nobility, that we can forgive, though not forget, the sins. The gifts of charity have almost equaled the cruelties of battlefields and jails (41).

Meanwhile **much of our moral freedom is good**: it is pleasant to be relieved of theological terrors, to enjoy without qualm the pleasures that harm neither ourselves nor others, and to feel the tang of the open air upon our liberated flesh (42).

## CHAPTER VII: RELIGION AND HISTORY

Even the skeptical historian develops a humble respect for religion, since he sees it functioning, and seemingly indispensable, in every land and age. To the unhappy, the suffering, the bereaved, the old, it has brought supernatural comforts valued by millions of souls as more precious than any natural aid. It has helped parents and teachers to discipline the young. It has conferred meaning and dignity upon the lowliest existence, and through its sacraments has made for stability by transforming human covenants into solemn relationships with God. It has kept the poor (said Napoleon) from murdering the rich. For since the natural inequality of men dooms many of us to poverty or defeat, some supernatural hope may be the sole alternative to despair. Destroy that hope, and class war is intensified. **Heaven and utopia are buckets in a well**: when one goes down the other goes up; when religion declines Communism grows (43).

**Some recusants have doubted that religion ever promoted morality**, since immorality has flourished even in ages of religious domination. Certainly sensuality, drunkenness, coarseness, greed, dishonesty, robbery, and violence existed in the Middle Ages; but probably the moral disorder born of half a millennium of barbarian invasion, war, economic devastation, and political disorganization would have been much worse without the moderating effect of the Christian ethic, priestly exhortations, saintly exemplars, and a calming, unifying ritual. The Roman Catholic Church labored to reduce slavery, family feuds, and national strife, to extend the intervals of truce and peace, and to replace trial by combat or ordeal with the judgments of established courts. It softened the penalties exacted by Roman or barbarian law, and vastly expanded the scope and organization of charity.

Though the Church served the state, it claimed to stand above all states, as morality should stand above power. It taught men that patriotism unchecked by a higher loyalty can be a tool of greed and crime (44).

The majestic dream broke under the attacks of nationalism, skepticism, and human frailty. **The Church was manned with men, who often proved biased, venal, or extortionate.** France grew in wealth and power, and made the papacy her political tool. Kings became strong enough to compel a pope to dissolve that Jesuit order which had so devotedly supported the popes. The Church stooped to fraud, as with pious legends, bogus relics, and dubious miracles . . . More and more the hierarchy spent its energies promoting orthodoxy rather than morality, and the Inquisition almost fatally disgraced the Church. Even while preaching peace, the Church fomented religious wars in sixteenth-century France and the Thirty Years' War in seventeenth-century Germany. It played only a modest part in the outstanding advance of modern morality—the abolition of slavery. It allowed the philosophers to take the lead in the humanitarian movements that have alleviated the evils of our time (45).

The **replacement of Christian with secular institutions** is the culminating and critical result of the Industrial Revolution. . . . Laws which were once presented as the decrees of a god-given king are now frankly the confused commands of fallible men. Education, which was the sacred province of god-inspired priests, becomes the task of men and women shorn of theological robes and awe, and relying on reason and persuasion to civilize young rebels who fear only the policeman and may never learn to reason at all. Colleges once allied to churches have been captured by businessmen and scientists. The propaganda of patriotism, capitalism, or communism succeeds to the inculcation of a supernatural creed and moral code. Holydays give way to holidays. Theaters are full even on Sundays, and even on Sundays churches are half empty (49).

One lesson of history is that **religion has many lives**, and a habit of resurrection. How often in the past have God and religion died and been reborn! . . . Atheism ran wild in the India of Buddha's youth, and Buddha himself founded a religion without a god; after his death Buddhism developed a complex theology including gods, saints, and hell. Philosophy, science, and education depopulated the Hellenic pantheon, but the vacuum attracted a dozen Oriental faiths rich in resurrection myths. In 1793 Hebert and Chaumette, wrongly interpreting Voltaire, established in Paris the atheistic worship of the Goddess of Reason; a year later Robespierre, fearing chaos and inspired by Rousseau, set up the worship of the Supreme Being; in 1801 Napoleon, versed in history, signed a concordat with Pius VII, restoring the Catholic Church in France (50).

[Perhaps] a **natural ethic is too weak** to withstand the savagery that lurks under civilization and emerges in our dreams, crimes, and wars. Joseph de Maistre answered: "I do not know what the heart of the rascal may be; I know what is in the heart of an honest man; it is horrible." There is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion (51).

If the socialist regime should fail in its efforts to destroy relative poverty among the masses, this new religion may lose its fervor and efficacy, and the state may wink at the restoration of supernatural beliefs as an aid in quieting discontent. "As long as there is poverty there will be gods " (51).

## CHAPTER X: GOVERNMENT AND HISTORY

Alexander Pope thought that only a fool would dispute over forms of government. History has a good word to say for all of them, and for government in general. Since men love freedom, and the freedom of individuals in society requires some regulation and conduct, **the first condition of freedom is its limitation**; make it absolute and it dies in chaos (68).

Today **international government** is developing as industry, commerce, and finance override frontiers and take international forms (68).

**Monarchy seems to be the most natural kind of government**, since it applies to the group the authority of the father in a family or of the chieftain in a warrior band. If we were to judge forms of government from their prevalence and duration in history we should have to give the palm to monarchy; democracies, by contrast, have been hectic interludes (68).

**The services of the aristocracy did not save it when it monopolized privilege and power too narrowly**, when it oppressed the people with selfish and myopic exploitation, when it retarded the growth of the nation by a blind association with ancestral ways, when it consumed the men and resources of the state in the lordly sport of dynastic or territorial wars. Then the excluded banded together in wild revolt; the new rich combined with the poor against obstruction and stagnation; the guillotine cut off a thousand noble heads; and democracy took its turn in the misgovernment of mankind (71).

Most governments have been **oligarchies** – ruled by a minority, chosen either by birth as in aristocracies, or by a religious organization, as in theocracies, or by wealth, as in democracies. It is unnatural (as even Rousseau saw) for a majority to rule, for a majority can seldom be organized for united and specific action, and a minority can (70).

**Does history justify revolution?** This is an old debate . . . America would have become dominant factor in the English-speaking world without any revolution. The French Revolution replaced the landowning aristocracy with the money-controlling business class as the ruling power: but a similar result occurred in nineteenth-century England without bloodshed, and without disturbing the public peace. To break sharply with the past is to court the madness that may follow the shock of sudden blows or mutilations. The sanity of the individual lies in the continuity of its traditions; in either case a break in the chain invites a neurotic reaction, as in the Paris massacres of September, 1792 (72).

## **CHAPTER XI: HISTORY AND WAR**

**The causes of war are the same as the causes of competition among individuals:** acquisitiveness, pugnacity, and pride; the desire for food, land, materials, fuels, mastery. The state has our instincts without our restraints. The individual submits to restraints laid upon him by morals and laws, and agrees to replace combat with conference, because the state guarantees him basic protection in his life, property, and legal rights.



The state itself acknowledges no substantial restraints, either because it is strong enough to defy any interference with its will or because there is no superstate to offer it basic protection, and no international law or moral code wielding effective force (81).

In every century the generals and the rulers (with rare exceptions like Ashoka and Augustus) have smiled at the philosophers' timid dislike of war. In the military interpretation of history war is the final arbiter, and is accepted as natural and necessary by all but cowards and simpletons (82).

Note from the site host:

[The general's response below is part of an imaginary dialogue between an American President and the rulers of China and Russia. It follows an impassioned appeal by an imaginary American President seeking to forge a peaceful world bond. His tools are reason and respect. The general's response is cryptic and pragmatic.]

The general smiles. "You have forgotten all the lessons of history," he says, "and all that nature of man which you described. Some conflicts are too fundamental to be resolved by negotiation; and during the prolonged negotiations (if history may be our guide) subversion would go on. A world order will come not by a gentlemen's agreement, but through so decisive a victory by one of the great powers that it will be able to dictate and enforce international law, as Rome did from Augustus to Aurelius. Such interludes of widespread peace are unnatural and exceptional; they will soon be ended by changes in the distribution of military power. You have told us that man is a competitive animal, that his states must be like himself, and that natural selection now operates on an international plane. States will unite in basic co-operation only when they are in common attacked from without. Perhaps we are now restlessly moving toward that higher plateau of competition; we may make contact with ambitious species on other planets or stars; soon thereafter there will be interplanetary war. Then, and only then, will we of this earth be one" (86).

## CHAPTER XII: GROWTH AND DECAY

**History repeats itself, but only in outline and in the large.** We may reasonably expect that in the future, as in the past, some new states will rise, some old states will subside; that new civilizations will begin with pasture and agriculture, expand into commerce and industry, and luxuriate with finance . . . New theories, inventions, discoveries, and errors will agitate the intellectual currents; that new generations will rebel against the old and pass from rebellion to conformity and reaction; that experiments in morals will loosen tradition and frighten its beneficiaries; and that excitement of innovation will be forgotten in the unconcern of time (88).

On one point all are agreed: civilizations begin, flourish, decline, and disappear – or linger on as stagnant pools left by once life-giving streams. What are the causes of decay (90)?

A group is no organism physically added to its constituent individuals; it has no brains or stomach of its own; it must think or feel with the brains or nerves of its members. When the group or civilization declines, it is through no mystic limitation of a corporate life, but through the failure of its political or intellectual leaders to meet the challenges of the group (92).

### CHAPTER XIII: IS PROGRESS REAL?

Against the panorama of nations, morals, and religions rising and falling, the idea of progress finds itself in dubious shape. Is it only the vain and traditional boast of each "modern" generation? Since we have admitted no substantial change in man's nature during historic times, all technological advances will have to be written off as merely new means of achieving old ends—the acquisition of goods, the pursuit of one sex by the other (or by the same), the overcoming of competition, the fighting of wars. One of the discouraging discoveries of our disillusioning century is that science is neutral: it will kill for us as readily as it will heal, and will destroy for us more readily than it can build. How inadequate now seems the proud motto of Francis Bacon, "Knowledge is power"! Sometimes we feel that the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, which stressed mythology and art rather than science and power, may have been wiser than we, who repeatedly enlarge our instrumentalities without improving our purposes (95).

To those who study history not merely as a warning reminder of man's follies and crimes, but also as an encouraging remembrance of generative souls, the past ceases to be a depressing chamber of horrors; it becomes a celestial city, a spacious country of the mind, wherein a thousand saints, statesmen, inventors, scientists, poets, artists, musicians, lovers and philosophers still love and speak, teach and carve and sing (102).

If a man is fortunate he will, before he dies, gather up as much as he can of his civilized heritage and transmit it to his children. And to his final breath he will be grateful for this inexhaustible legacy, knowing that it is our nourishing mother and our lasting life (102).

Notes:

#### Chapter 1

1. Sedillot, Rene, *L'Historie n'a pas de sens*.
2. Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage*, 12
3. Durant, *Age of Faith*, 979
4. Sedillot, 167
5. Pascal, *Pensees*, No. 347