

A Brief Discussion of Our Judgment on Those from the Past by the Standards of Today

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Abstract: Generally, people always judge historical events or figures by current standards, and these prejudices even appear to be mainstream ideas. So, this paper briefly discusses some biases against those from the past, mainly focusing on Hitler and Churchill - these two important historical characters, however, with completely different remarks and opposite fame, which seems to bespeak that people in the future will also prejudice us and our events, such as current environment issue, pandemic, or sexism by their standards, finally to demonstrate the importance of digging into the historical context and to remind people not to jump a conclusion but to be neutral when judging something or someone.

1. Introduction

How will historians in the future judge us? History tends to repeat itself. We need to be vigilant to avoid certain unpleasant and inappropriate moments in history from making a reappearance. There can't be a World War III because the Earth will never recover from its disastrous impact. Does that mean we blame those who started the first and second world wars? It's hard to pass a judgment, isn't it? We surely need to hold them accountable. Otherwise, it would mean overlooking and acquitting the infamous atrocities the likes of which Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin or even Winston Churchill committed back then. But it would be unfair and illogical to judge them by the standards of today.

2. Our Prejudices against Historical Events and Figures

When Hitler conducted the Holocaust - mass extermination of Jews - it wasn't only his personal whim that egged on him to do so. Anti-Semitism in Europe dates back all the way to the Middle Ages. The much-acclaimed reformist Martin Luther, who is hailed for ushering in the 16th-century protestant reformation, was an anti-Semite himself [1]. While his preaching and religious philosophies are followed widely to date, very little is known about his involvement in spewing hate against the Jews. He fervently denounced Judaism on the grounds that Jews are scheming and deceitful humans. He had advocated burning their synagogues, razing their houses, prohibiting them from conducting their business and even throwing them out of their country, if need be [2]. So this hate ideology against Jews had successfully passed down generations. When Germany suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Allies in World War One, the German nationalists were eager to pin the blame on someone. Who else than the Jews? For their nature was considered treacherous and they were blamed to be in cahoots with the Allies. Hitler was the by-product of this hate. He was convinced that if Germany wants to restore its pride and honor once again, the Jews needed to be expelled. And that's when he and his group of Nazis unleashed the worst of horrors against the Jewish population in Europe, the likes of which the world had never seen: Mass Pogroms. So, do we blame Hitler for his wrongdoings? Certainly yes. There's no doubt that what Hitler did was inhumane and heartless. But what is considered beyond the pale today was both morally and socially acceptable back then. Hitler was only acting upon what he had learned indirectly: that Jews were the source of all problems. We need to avoid a repeat of this at all cost and protect every

human being irrespective of their color, gender, caste or creed, but we can't judge people in the past by the standards of today, because morals are ever-evolving. What is appropriate today, may not even seem remotely fair tomorrow.

If Hitler is culpable then so is Victorian Britain, which colonized much of the world and subjugated the indigenous people. Winston Churchill, the celebrated war hero, has as much blood on his hands as the worst genocidal dictators of the 20th century, one of them discussed above. Churchill was an incorrigible racist at heart and was known for his oppressive policies. During the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, Churchill had ordered the diversion of essential food supplies from the drought-affected regions of Bengal to the front lines in Europe to aid the war effort. When British personnel in Bengal reported that the Bengalis are starving to death, Churchill callously remarked, "the starvation of anyhow underfed Bengalis is less than that of sturdy Greeks." The result of this policy? Three million Bengalis perished during the famine. Yet, we have the statue of Churchill in London's Parliament Square to mark and honor his immense contribution to Britain [3]. The point is racism based on color today is looked down upon, but back then it was a perfectly normal concept. The European powers such as Britain, Portugal, France, etc. were involved in years of the slave trade. So, after the George Floyd incident which sparked the #BlackLivesMatter campaign, people were ready to pull down the statues of those who believed in, encouraged and practiced the ideology of racial superiority. But what's the point of vandalizing these monuments? Racism as much as it evokes disgust today, garnered widespread support from the white people 100 years ago because it was how they were brought to believe society functions. The white man was taught that he was racially superior to the colored man. If we are ready to topple these so-called "dodgy statues", then we can't let go of the pyramids of Giza in Egypt, which were built by slave labor. But we consider them as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. So even if slavery is illegal and abhorred universally today, they were once a legal and ancient institution [4].

3. People's Views on Us in the Future

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The school of thought in the present is very different from that in the past. Inevitably it will drastically vary in the future too. Just the way we have a tendency to think people were backward in every aspect of life 100 or 200 years ago, our future generations may also have the same opinion of us. Perhaps, they may even think of us as naive and silly for the things we voluntary or involuntary let happen.

After all, it's not at all improbable that a century later a child may question our morals by the standards of that time. They may ask themselves the following questions:

How did our ancestors keep using single-use plastics and littering them on beaches, despite being very well aware of the grave implications it caused on our marine and land biodiversity?

How did our ancestors keep burning fossil fuels for energy when other more sustainable alternatives could have prevented Global Warming and Climate Change?

Even when the constitution had enshrined equal rights for all, our ancestors looked down upon same-sex marriages and considered them a 'taboo'.

The scare of coronavirus got our great-grandfathers locked up in their houses, even though science was crystal clear that our immune system is capable of tackling the virus alone. By imposing a 'lockdown' we only sounded the death knell of our economies, which in turn killed far more people than the virus ever did.

Our grandchildren point an accusatory finger at us for letting all of the above things happen and jeopardizing their future, we have to own up to our mistakes. But at the same time let them know that what they think of as 'immoral' or 'inappropriate' today was never thought of as out of place back then. Some of the measures, such as the lockdown were important considering the uniqueness of the situation and the limited knowledge of the new strain of infection we had back then.

4. The Importance of Learning from History

Although it's a cliché that we should know our history to better understand our future, it certainly holds deep relevance in each generation. History improves our understanding of societies and the motives of people in given situations. By studying history, we can establish that humans have a tendency to repeat the same things. It is because as humans we are conditioned to behave in accordance with a set of societal rules. Our response to a crisis, no matter how much we have learned from the past, will be pretty much similar. That's why even after knowing that wars create more problems than they solve, we continue to engage in conflicts with each other for territorial, economic or political supremacy - whatever the reason may be. 'Going to war', despite knowing its hazards, is still a preferred option for a few because that's how human beings are conditioned primitively: 'fight or perish'. These rules have become acceptable learned behaviors transmitted from posterity to posterity. They have even been tested by examples of the past.

5. Conclusion

Therefore, it is unfair and ahistorical to judge those in the past by the standards of today. History should always be taught and learned from a neutral perspective, otherwise, it is nothing but a biased understanding of our past. Conclusions should only be reserved after a logical study of the entire scenario and the motivating factors that played a key role in it. Because if we straightaway jump to conclusions and deride those in the past by the standards of today, we aren't going to be any better off in the future. So, I hope this paper would work as an alarm to remind people reexamining if they are trapped in their own conservative mindset when judging something or some people, especially those from the past, and to reconstruct their thinking pattern.

References

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