



Crossing Channels

Interdisciplinary answers to today's challenging questions

A Podcast series hosted by
Rory Cellan-Jones

Presented by



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Episode X

WHAT CAN POLITICAL LEADERS LEARN FROM HISTORY?

With

Lucy Delap (Cambridge)

Victor Gay (IAST)



What can political leaders learn from history?

GUEST SPEAKERS

Lucy Delap is a Professor in Modern British and Gender History at the University of Cambridge.

Victor Gay is an Assistant Professor at the Toulouse School of Economics and a Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse.

HOST

Rory Cellan-Jones

Rory Cellan-Jones 0:05

Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels, a podcast collaboration between Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. This series is all about using the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore some of the many complex challenges facing our societies. I'm Rory Cellan-Jones and today's episode asks the question "What can political leaders learn from history?" We're going to look at how history can teach us what works when it comes to policymaking, and discuss just how much our leaders should rely on the lessons of the past and when they should ignore them perhaps.

Rory Cellan-Jones 0:51

To explore these issues, we have Victor Gay from the IAST. Victor, remind us of your main research interests.

Victor Gay 0:58

Hi, so I'm Victor Gay, I'm a professor of economics at Toulouse School of Economics and IAST, and my main research is about economic history of France and in particular, I've been interested

in understanding the short and long run consequences of World War One on female labour and norms related to gender roles in France. And currently, I'm also developing a new research agenda slightly different from that one, trying to understand the role of the state and the consolidation of the state in 18th century France for long run development,

Rory Cellan-Jones 1:31

Well, we'll be interested to see whether 18th century France can tell us anything about 21st century France or anywhere else. And our other panellists from the University of Cambridge, we have Lucy Delap, Lucy, what do you focus on?

Lucy Delap 1:43

Thanks, I am a historian of the 20th century. I'm super interested in the history of gender and sexuality, and for me, that has meant a lot of work on labour, and the experiences of groups such as women or disabled people in labour markets. But I'm also interested in how ideas get activated at the kind of grassroots level, so I work a lot on social movements, such as women's movements.

Rory Cellan-Jones 2:06

And we'll be trying to take advantage of your great analysis of those different trends and how they relate to what's happening today.

So let's begin with the big question of why does history matter? Why should political leaders today take any notice of what happened 20, 50, 100, maybe 1000 years ago? Victor, why don't you kick us off?

Victor Gay 2:31

Thanks. I think it's a great question. I mean, beyond the pure, I think intellectual value of being interested in history, I think it carries a lot of value to understand better the present. I mean, in general, I think looking at history, especially Economic History provides us with many more experiences, better facts and more facts. So people will be surprised but when I say better facts, oftentimes, the data and statistics that we can gather from history are actually of better quality than the ones we have now. If we think about demographic facts, because of the anonymity or the anonymity rules, sorry, we can have a lot of much more information about people in the past than today. So all of this enables us to kind of study the concept longer and consequences of historical events in much more depth. And we'll come back to that but let me just take the example of suppose we want to try and understand the very long run consequences at the individual level of being born during the current COVID crisis. So one might want to look at the past influenza epidemics of 1918 in Europe. And because we have all this information at the individual level in the past, we can we can understand much better and follow people over time, 40, 50, 60 years and we are able to understand these consequences. Why is this important for policymakers? Well, we have a lot of different episodes that repeat themselves over and over again, and we'll come back to that. But with some methods, I think we can learn from this and develop better economic policy.

Rory Cellan-Jones 4:04

You've anticipated one area which we are going to look at. But let's look big picture first with you, Lucy. I mean, why do you think what you've been spending your career looking at, which is mainly the 20th century and gender? Why might that have relevance for what political leaders are deciding in various areas today?

Lucy Delap 4:25

Well, political leaders are often a bit reluctant to look historically, I think they often think my whole focus is on the future and delivering better in the future. So, you know, we're trying to transcend history, not look back at history. And yet looking back historically can sometimes really provide the key to thinking differently about a topic. So I think historians often work very holistically. They try to understand the kind of full complexity of an event or set of processes and that works to really counter the kind of silo thinking that you often get amongst both political leaders and, and policymakers of all kinds, civil servants, who tend to be thinking about, you know, the very specific remit that they've been given to kind of deliver in, in economic policy, and they fail to kind of put it in its full picture. I also think sometimes history can get us to look back and find better ways of doing things. So a good example of the work that I'm doing at the moment on disabled people's experiences of employment is, to my surprise, finding that far more people who had disabilities were, you know, not kept in hospitals or sort of, you know, isolated in care facilities, but were working, and we're living in communities. So looking back to, let's say, mid 20th century Birmingham, where the record suggests that about 70% of people with disabilities were actually employed on the open labour market. That is a real success story, and much more successful than the figures that we see today. So without wanting to say, oh look, we can draw easy lessons from history, I do think sometimes history can give us real kind of hopes and dreams about how things might be different. And policymakers might be surprised to sometimes look back and discover that it was working better in the past, and therefore we can we can take things away from the past.

Rory Cellan-Jones 6:17

And how far back should policymakers look? I mean, you're talking about the 20th century, is there any validity in going back much further than that? Because the circumstances are so different, the technology for one thing is so different.

Lucy Delap 6:32

Things have changed. But I work very closely with history and policy, which is a national initiative trying to sort of bridge that gap between the policy world and historians. And we've had any number of papers that look back to mediaeval history to early modern history to think about specific episodes or specific political events where there are clear parallels. So for example, looking at the gin craze in the 18th century, can help us thinking about addiction and binge drinking in today's times.

Rory Cellan-Jones 7:01

Tell us more. I'm fascinated by the gin craze. What can that teach us?

Lucy Delap 7:05

Well, gin was a was a worry to policymakers in the 18th and 19th centuries, because it was very cheap, it was very widely available, it was leading to really high levels of of addiction. So looking at how they tried to regulate gin drinking and how they tried to set limits on people's access to gin or to Absinthe in France, Victor can perhaps tell us more about Absinthe, gives us a sense of really how the modern state was invented, and how it started to intervene more directly into the lives of of working people as can World War One when there were efforts made to prevent people from drinking, for example, early in the morning, regulations, water down the strength of beer, all designed to try to curtail people's drinking and regularise their lives and get make them more productive as workers essentially, even though I think workers have very good reason to drink because sometimes, beer for example, was the best source of hygienic drinking matter at a time when water waterborne diseases were very common.

Rory Cellan-Jones 8:03

Victor, if you go too far back, aren't there just too many external variables, as it were, that are different for politicians to learn from them today?

Victor Gay 8:14

No, yeah, that's very true. And actually, that's one of the key issue challenge that we face, as economic historians, at least in my field of economics is about the what we call the external validity of the mechanisms that we try to, to identify empirically. So there is always this trade off. So on the one hand, the more you go far back in history, the more you're going to have access to new to more facts, two more episodes that might relate to the present. But of course, context is going to change and the mechanisms you're going to, you're going to be able to look at perhaps are going to be conditioned by a historical phenomena, the context in different ways that is going to be harder and harder to observe, and to interpret, because you're going to be further and further away. However, on the other hand, it might sometimes help. So whenever you go far back, further back in history, and you're studying market mechanisms, for instance, you arrive at a time where markets were only emerging and forming. And this provides you the unique opportunity to try to understand better how markets work, because they were initially in their, what we could call their purest form.

Rory Cellan-Jones 9:22

In some sense, it's a better kind of laboratory as it were the past.

Victor Gay 9:25

Exactly, I mean, there is one way to think about it exactly as a laboratory. A good example here is, I always give this example to my students is about suppose you want to understand the role of information flows or new information on stock market volatility, okay, so it's extremely hard to do it currently. Because information is all around and goes extremely fast. So if you go back in history, you can say study how new information at a time were in the 18th century where you didn't have constant communication. You can look at how information was travelling from England, to the Netherlands and see how this might affect stock prices here. And you can actually test what economic theory predicts because you can easily understand this information flow. So on the one hand to answer your question is true that the further back you go in history, the harder it is to get some lesson. But sometimes it might be easier. The key here is to really be very aware about the context you're looking at. And this requires historical expertise.

Rory Cellan-Jones

Lucy, you wanted to come in there

Lucy Delap 10:26

Well, just to say that, we might think that everything is kind of super different in the past. But if we think about modern politics today, there's a sense of those kinds of febrile political cultures at 10 Downing Street, or Washington, where there are these charismatic figures, there are these flurry of advisors, it actually looks very like to me what a court would have looked like in, say, the 13th century, you know, with the King, and or the Queen and all these people who are, you know, desperately trying to keep up with them and desperately trying to keep them on the right path and guide them? I mean, yes, we live in a democracy and things are different. But the rise of Special Advisers, and the kind of lack of accountability in some ways of our political leaders at the moment makes to me, thinking about mediaeval courts, or early modern courts, really very relevant to thinking about how power is actually being exercised today.

Rory Cellan-Jones 11:22

And they're a vivid way of describing what's happening too.

Lucy Delap 11:25

Absolutely, and gives us kind of fascinating glimpses of how things might end up for figures like like Trump or Macron, or or Johnson, who, you know, are not necessarily so powerfully governed by democratic structures, as our constitution might lead us to think.

Rory Cellan-Jones 11:42

Now you've, you've already given this both of you some specific examples, but I do want to zero in on two areas, the global inflation crisis that's just emerging, and the global pandemic that hopefully is receding. Let's start with the economic crisis. Victor, should leaders as they look at soaring energy prices and the prospect of a major global slowdown, and the impact of the war in Ukraine on food prices, for example, should they be looking back to say 2008, which was the beginning of the last global financial crisis, or maybe to the 1970s, when I was growing up when oil prices soared, as they are doing today?

Victor Gay 12:21

And that's a very good question. Nowadays, there is what I think it's generalised in France, in Europe, continental European and Britain, in general, you have this spike in inflation, and this was a major issue during the legislative campaign in France. So yeah, many people have done this parallel with the 1970s, where in 1973, and 1979, 1980, you had oil price shocks, making this part. So is it worth making some parallels and trying to draw some lessons, well you need, you need a clear method, a comparative method of trying to find commonalities and differences. And that's true, the main commonalities, I would say, is the rise in prices, and also the fact that monetary policy at the time where it had very low interest rates, so those are two common elements. But then, if you go a bit deeper, you have to always be careful about differences. So further price shocks, we might not really realise today, because we might look at it in nominal terms, but in real terms of price shocks in 1973, was much stronger than today, prices were multiplied by four, essentially, in the I mean energy prices, and by two in in the late 1970s. So today, they increased sharply, but it was not as strong. Moreover, we can see that inflation at the time in the in the 1970s, were generalised on all the sectors of the economy, and today is much more localised on energy prices. And on some very specific sectors. Also, another difference is that I think central banks and policymakers in those institutions now have much more experience and have much more transparency when they try to devise monetary policy, which is also now much more explicitly targeted at inflation. So I think there is some, a little bit of, value in making parallels with the inflation in the 1970s. But I think those parallels are not not extremely fruitful now. Because monetary policymakers, I wouldn't say political leaders, because those are policymakers in those institutions hopefully, have learned from from the from the past.

Rory Cellan-Jones 14:22

Lucy, what's your view on what they could learn about past economic crisis from past economic crises?

Lucy Delap 14:28

Well, leaving aside the really interesting economic factors that Victor was talking about, if we focus for a second on the political impact of economic change, I would say that in some ways, the political impact was sharper than the economic data might have merited, and that there was a kind of choppiness to the political response, whereby leaders were scrambling to you know,

cancel all infrastructure investments to challenge the the trade unions and to radically shift the political architecture in place in Britain, or in some cases to go and borrow money from the IMF, and that had very serious political ramifications. Where in fact, the the, you know, the oil shocks were were genuinely external, it was perhaps, you know, they jumped too rapidly to make those adjustments to shocks that turned out to be quite short lived. So we sometimes have in our heads, this idea of the 70s is, you know, the kind of key decade of disruption and conflict and sort of, you know, everything came tumbling down. But actually, if we look at the patterns of that decade, the British economy recovered quite well, from some of the earlier shocks in the 1970s, the IMF loan was not really needed. So I guess the takeaway is, don't necessarily jump too quickly to assume that everything's gone south.

Rory Cellan-Jones

Keep calm and carry on.

Lucy Delap

Keep the ship of state just kind of moving, only make small adjustments to the tiller.

Rory Cellan-Jones 16:30

Let's turn to the global pandemic, which arrived, very unexpected, at the beginning of 2020. And there were a lot of people who immediately looked back to the 1918 Spanish flu. First of all, was that a good parallel, Lucy?

Lucy Delap 16:49

Well, not a very close parallel. So the 1918/19 pandemic killed about 50 million people worldwide. The the effect of the COVID pandemic, although it's been terrible, has so far, we think amounted to about 6.3 million excess deaths. So it's considerably smaller.

Rory Cellan-Jones 17:09

Very different state of medical science, of course, today, compared with 100 years ago.

Lucy Delap 17:13

Yes, but in some ways, the kind of initial medical care provided for each was kind of the same. You see people in 1918/19, practising social distancing, masking, you know, trying to deal with a pandemic, where they had very little other than sort of keep fluids up, and try to isolate people in the same way that at the start of this pandemic, there wasn't much to do except except take those obvious measures. I think the condition of war that was globally impacting in 1918, and the kind of demobilisation and the ongoing disruption of that period, made an enormous difference to both the spread of that influenza virus and the world's response, there wasn't the same kind of coordination. So in some ways, yes, I'd say it's quite a different kind of experience.

Rory Cellan-Jones 23:13

Is there any evidence, Lucy, that during the pandemic political leaders did turn to history, and in fact, should they not have turned to history? Shouldn't they have been far more concerned with what both the models and the data, the live data, were telling them about what was happening now if they started worrying about what happened in 1918, they could put too much weight on that and not enough weight on what's actually developing in front of their eyes right now.

Lucy Delap 23:39

They certainly talked a lot about the 1918 influenza epidemic. I mean, that was the go-to pandemic that seemed relevant. So in that sense, they were historically-minded, but I do think

that mostly that was just a sort of gesture at the past. I don't think there was a significant incorporation of historians into policymaking processes, rather, they turned to scientists, to epidemiologists, and that's a pity, because actually, I think historians are quite good at talking to policymakers at bringing that kind of critical perspective to bear the kind of comparative work that Victor's been talking to us about and in some cases, there are historians already embedded in government. So for example, the foreign commonwealth and development State Department already has historians working there FCDO. And the Admiralty, for example, has its own historians. So it's not that there's not a tradition of historians being in government, but I did not see any historians up there at the nightly press conference.

Rory Cellan-Jones 24:37

Do you think the general public would have taken it well if historian had been lecturing at the daily press conferences instead of a health expert?

Lucy Delap 24:47

Well, I'd like to think that they would have been they would have enjoyed it. After all, there's a huge presence of history in our in our public life. One of the problems is that our political leaders often think that they are historians. They write often rather kind of poorly done history books, they've got their eye to history themselves, they want to be in history, and therefore they try and write it. Winston Churchill famously said, you know, history will be kind to me because I intend to write it, other political leaders have kind of taken it from there. So perhaps that's why they don't want to talk to historians, because they think that they've already got history taped. I think that what they should have done is look back to the HIV AIDS crisis. Now, it's a very different kind of epidemic. In its global scale, though, it's not unreasonable to ask, what did it do to the economies, to society? How did governments respond to it? And what's interesting about HIV AIDS is that like, the 1918-19 pandemic, it took out the economically active, so it had a very kind of specific impact across many societies. So you know, I think historians would have had lots to say about about lots of different kinds of experiences of pandemics, as well as non pandemics that could easily have been relevant to this experience. Do we think historically, absolutely, we do. Look at the crown, and its popularity in giving us a sort of....

Rory Cellan-Jones

... The TV series, the Netflix...

Lucy Delap

The TV Series, The Crown, I talk about it all the time with my students, it shapes the way they think about history. So certainly, we're thinking historically, all the time. And one of the things that we need to do is just draw that out and make sure that we're doing good history and not what Margaret MacMillan historian has called nursery history, which is kind of, you know, the history that makes us feel good.

Rory Cellan-Jones 26:24

Victor, do economic historians get listened to? Because it often does seem to me that that is an area where journalists certainly always look to the past to warn people that, you know, it could be like the 1970s. And that's a big theme around at the moment in the newspapers and broadcasters.

Victor Gay 26:42

No, for sure, whenever there is a financial crisis, or an economic crisis of some sorts, you hear a lot about economic historians, or financial historians. And also, as policymakers, I think they are

listened to. I mean, a good example is Ben Bernanke, who was chairman of the Fed was a specialist of the Great Depression of the 1930s. So I think that listen to us policymakers. But here I will draw a line between policymakers in institutions, independent institutions, and political leaders, who oftentimes tell the history they want to tell. And I mean, we've heard that a lot in the past election in France, they all have their own version of history. But I think having an ideological view of history is always dangerous.

Rory Cellan-Jones 27:26

Well, that's exactly where I was coming to that. If we talk about learning from history, we've got to work out whose history we want to learn from, haven't we Lucy? I mean, they're added, it's changing all the time. I'm sure your work on gender in the 20th century, has highlighted, you know, very different views of history from a woman's point of view than may have been the accepted version.

Lucy Delap 27:49

Absolutely. I'm really pleased to hear you say, Rory, that history changes all the time, because that exactly corresponds to how historians work. But one of the reasons why history is so controversial in public life today is because our political leaders often say you can't change history. They're referring there, of course, to the sum of facts about the past. Whereas for us history is a analytic discipline, which is about interpreting what happened in the past, and it changes all the time. So absolutely, critical historians like, critical histories like women's history and feminist history, have completely turned on its head what we think about the past, it's helped to bring in new kinds of historical actors. It's helped us to see the limits of say, political appeal of political parties in the past.

Rory Cellan-Jones 28:35

And Victor, in terms of economic history, as you kind of indicated, that is a huge live political battleground right now, and has been for some years between the so called free marketeers and those who believe in more government intervention. So, presumably, which lesson you take from history depends on which camp you're in?

Victor Gay 28:59

Or hopefully, hopefully not.

Rory Cellan-Jones 29:01

But but as a political leader?

Victor Gay 29:04

Oh, yes. No, apparently it is. Apparently it is. And I mean, all of them try to say no, these are the facts. This is history. But suppose that even as accurate as they would like to be, well, you have to really think about how those facts I mean, so because historical facts were constructed in the first place. So if you think about female labour in the early, early 20th century, so I studied that for for for my dissertation, and you realise that even those facts, you have to be very careful about them. So if you think about categories of female labour in the census, for instance, these were categories that were only emerging at the time, so the concept of labour market was actually new. I think in the census in Britain, the concept of gainful occupations only came about in the late 1870s, I think, and the definition changed a little bit over and over and to define what was female labour, in some sense, was extremely hard on the part of statisticians, especially because they, in some sense, they don't care that much about it. They care much more about his industrialisation and the work of men. So if you look at the census, in the most detailed returns,

you have about 1500 occupations detailed, and you would have on those 1300 occupations by men, in some sense. And the rest were female occupations. What we can see from the statistics was really generated by some biased view of reality at the time, and reflected the concerns of those who are building those statistics. So all this to say, even if we try to say, well, politicians shouldn't use a biased view of history, I am not sure there is an objective, objective view of history.

Rory Cellan-Jones 30:41

Lucy, I see you nodding. But on the other hand, you have spoken on wanting a broader view of history and have indicated where that could come from.

Lucy Delap 30:51

Yeah, I think that what history can do is it can talk to us about the kind of short term, medium term and long term effects of specific episodes. So let's focus again on women's mobilisation during World War One. They were widely drawn into the labour force in certain workplaces and roles that women hadn't previously done. They were also drawn in to do jobs like clerical work, some of those jobs were new jobs. What I'm interested in is how World War One saw a press response to women's work that was really glowing, you know, people celebrated their contributions, they, they were delighted to see women step up to that citizenship role, but also that they could turn on a dime and as soon as hostilities ended, start saying that women needed to get out of those jobs, that they were blocking jobs that should be men's jobs. That's super interesting for us thinking about the re-valuation of workers that went on during the pandemic, how grateful we all were to the people staffing hospital staff in care homes, emptying our bins continuing to make the trains run, for example. But again, we get a bit of that same sense of like turning on a dime and opinion being very changeable. When we think today about how much demonization there is in the press of the railway workers in the UK, we were very grateful to those workers during the pandemic, now we're concerned about them bringing Britain's trains to a halt. So I think the history here can tell us about how public opinion is very variable. But in the medium and long term, women's work during World War One and of course, during World War Two, led to a much stronger labour market position for them. So even though they were turfed out of jobs in 1918, or 1945, actually, the long term effects were that they had gained new skills, that they were imaginable in roles where previously perhaps they wouldn't have been seen. And the big shift that happens in the second half of the 20th century is about the rise of women working, particularly married women working. Those jobs weren't always good jobs, they were sometimes pretty poorly paid, they were part time jobs, but nonetheless, there was a big shift in the medium to long term, I suspect we're gonna see the same kind of shift around those key workers who emerged as so absolutely crucial during the pandemic, and who I think are going to see an improvement in the working conditions in the longer term.

Rory Cellan-Jones 33:10

The other debate, of course, Victor is about how we work policymakers arguing about whether everyone should be back in an office or whether technology enables them to work effectively from home. And there, you know, there aren't that many lessons from history are there because the technology is there now, and it wasn't 20, 30, 50 years ago?

Victor Gay 33:31

Well, no, that's true that at, at first, it looks like there are no parallels in history. And here I'm just thinking thinking out loud. But Lucy was talking about labour during World War One. And here, perhaps one one lesson here is that you had a permanent shift, I think of conditions of labour, at least in France, new methods of work, at least in the manufacturing sector in France arrived for

the first time during during the war, because you had the lack of, of male labour. At first they tried to substitute with foreign workers, then women and then soldiers with industrial skills, but of course, they could not cope with the demands. And so they had to implement new methods. And after the war, we see that you had these kind of threshold effects where these new methods were permanently adopted, and perhaps helped shift a transition from self employment female labour market dominated by so called self employment, toward being working in the manufacturing manufacturing sector, at least in France, there are some parallels to be drawn, I would have to think more about what kind of lesson we can draw from this.

Lucy Delap 34:32

I would say that that's one of the places where we might go further back in history and recognise that actually, it's quite recent and quite contingent that we have a kind of clear sense of the workplace that we travel to every day. Look back to the 18th century and we see enterprises embedded in the home we see home workers and in fact the persistence of home working across the 19th and 20th century if we look to certain places in the labour market, often people quite marginalised, have been working from home so you know, history gives us examples of like a much wider variety of ways of working. And that is really the nub of what history can do. It gives us contingency, it gives us otherness, how the world might be different, and that is super useful to politicians today.

Rory Cellan-Jones 37:12

Well that's all we have time for on this episode. Thanks to our expert panel, Victor Gay from the IAST and Lucy Delap from the University of Cambridge.

Let us know what you think of this edition of crossing channels. You can contact us via Twitter, that Bennett Institute is @BennettInst, the Institute for Advanced Study is @IASToulouse and I am @Ruskin147.

If you enjoyed this programme then do listen to our other crossing channels episodes covering topics from happiness to decision making to ethical AI.

This is last episode of this, the first season of Crossing Channels. We hope it's shown you at least some of the ways that interdisciplinary work can help us solve some of society's biggest questions.