

## NOVEMBER 2010 MONTHLY BLOG/ 2

### *Why is the Formidable Power of Continuity so often Overlooked?*

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My discussion-points aim to alternate between big themes relating to Education and big themes relating to Interpreting History. So, since the October debate highlighted the current mania for wrongly prizing Skills over Knowledge (instead the two go integrally together), this November discussion-point takes a different tack, in order to ask *Why is the Formidable Power of Continuity so often Overlooked?*

One central point of definition needs to be made immediately. ‘Continuity’ is not the same as ‘Conservatism’ as a political philosophy. It is true that the latter ideology does gain much support by appealing to many people’s desire for the former. But it is equally clear that Conservatives in power may also have their own highly interventionist programmes.

To take a current example, the UK’s Conservative-Liberal Coalition has launched radical cuts in welfare spending as well as drastic institutional reorganisations, in order to ‘roll back the state’. But government is not an ‘intruder’ from an alien world. Its mechanisms have been developed (or, to its critics, overdeveloped) over many years by many governments. So the state and society are closely meshed - not only via institutions, laws and tax systems but also via people’s daily expectations, customary routines and a range of differing vested interests.

As a result – interestingly - one of many factors ranged against the current government’s plans will be the force of Continuity, also known as tradition or, unkindly, ‘inertia’. Its power may appear in many guises, from outright resistance to more-or-less concealed foot-dragging.

Furthermore, Continuity also works unexpectedly by twisting apparent innovations back into ‘more of the same’. An awareness of such slipperiness prompted a famous snappy dictum from a French journalist, named Alphonse Karr (see below). He viewed the string of abortive revolutions across Europe in 1848 and concluded pensively that ‘The more things change, the more they stay the same’. [*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*].



Of course, Karr was not completely right. Changes undoubtedly do happen, both gradually and dramatically. But they are always tempered by the power of Continuity. In fact, innovations may fail or prove to be counterproductive – either because opponents consciously

strive to circumvent change – or because the innovations are imperfectly planned and/or implemented – or because the innovations have anyway little intrinsic chance of success.

An example was the policy of Prohibition in the USA in 1920, when the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to prevent the sale, manufacture and transportation of alcohol eventually failed. (Prohibition was repealed in 1933). On the other hand, controls or even bans on disputed drugs can work when public opinion is broadly supportive. The gradual demise of cigarette smoking in many Western countries is a counter-example to the case of alcohol.

Where do the forces of Continuity come from? Some are embedded within from time-invariant features of the universe, like the laws of physics, which are constants. These features hold the world together stably from moment to moment. Even within the turbulence of quantum physics, there is one tiny invariant facture, known as Plank's Constant, which operates as a marker, against which other changes can be measured. But other elements of Continuity come from human societies, in the form of traditions, customs, and habitual expectations. These also can and do change. But much persists, as it would be too exhausting and confusing if everyone altered everything in their lives from moment to moment.

So, lastly, why are the forces of Continuity so strangely overlooked? The answer is that Continuity acts as the universe's 'default system', which is simply taken for granted. It is so constant and so ubiquitous that it becomes invisible. Next time that you do something automatically, without thinking about it, you are enacting Continuity. It's not the only force in the world – and it's by no means all-powerful. But it's more important than is often realised – and it operates not only throughout the wider world but also within you.