



Two-minute review

History for Tomorrow: Inspiration from the Past for the Future of Humanity

Author: Roman Krznaric

Why you should read the book

Krznaric takes you along a mind-boggling historical tour de force, jumping around epochs and continents.

You are desperate for a some historical hope in seemingly dark times.

Why you should not read the book

If you are a touchy right-winger: Krznaric is not hiding the fact that he is a radical progressive pushing a undisguised left-wing agenda.

Krznaric's analogies, however intriguing, are multi-interpretable and can be turned against his own arguments.

What you should learn from the book

Roman Krznaric did not want to tell cautionary tales. Instead, the political scientist and philosopher set out to write something hopeful. In eight chapters, Krznaric invites his readers to consider historical episodes which show that human collectives are 'social innovators'. Krznaric believes that history is not shaped by Great Men or groundbreaking new technologies, but by mass movements inspired by radical ideas. The past shows that communities can always break with their past.

History for Tomorrow is brimming with examples and anecdotes that underline this point. Edo Japan countered the logic of capitalism and created a zero-waste economy. Eighteenth-century coffeehouses tempered the polarisation that was fuelled by the printing press. And West African communities developed advanced democracies long before European nation states set up their parliaments. Moreover, these West African communities were even more democratic than our election-based systems, according to Krznaric, because they had direct instead of representational systems of decision-making.

With his fresh style and compositional mastery, Krznaric turns his analogies into engaging stories. On second glance, however, it is easy to reinterpret some of his historical case studies and transform them into lessons that Krznaric, I believe, did not want to teach. For instance, the philosopher admires the sustainable "Edonomy" of feudal Japan. Yet, he also notes shortly that it was a rigidly stratified society in which various ranks received different rations of goods. Samurai and lords were allowed to consume more resources than commoners, so they could uphold their inborn status. One could argue that "Edonomy" shows that a sustainable, zero-waste economy is only possible if there is no social mobility. If there is, people will emulate the consumption patterns of those with a higher status to buy themselves a better standing in the community. To solve overconsumption, a critic could argue, we should create a strict caste-like social stratification.

A similar reversal of an analogy could be done in the case of Al-Andalus. Krznaric argues that the Caliphate of Córdoba was a beacon of tolerance in medieval Europe. If he had to live anywhere in the year 1000 AD, Krznaric writes, he would chose this place. Nonetheless, the philosopher also tells us that Christians and Jews had to pay additional taxes, dwelled in separate neighbourhoods, and Arabic was the language that connected all groups. A critic might say that this relatively harmonious society was only possible because of its Arabic Leitkultur, the second-class citizenship status of religious and ethnic minorities, and the undisputed authority of the Muslim group. To be sure, I am not claiming that these contrarian readings of Krznaric's examples are more correct. I only argue that the analogies could be used to tell a rather different story.

Krznaric's book shows us how difficult it is to apply historical analogies to current-day issues without getting lost in the unique details of a historical episode. Yet, the philosopher's central lesson from the past is still very much convincing: there are always other options. History is full of them.

The best bit

The book opens with a provocative chapter on the 'radical flank effect': the idea that extreme, even violent dissent is necessary to put pressure on authorities and social elites in order to achieve social change. To Krznaric, private property and even rule of law are not sacrosanct. Without the radicals such as the Black Panthers and Emmeline Pankhurst, he argues, Martin Luther King and moderate women's rights activists would not have succeeded. Inspired by the radical figures, Krznaric joined Extinction Rebellion. 'It has history on its side, from slave rebels to suffragettes.' As an opening chapter, Krznaric makes a bold move to say the least.

The most remarkable quotes

"If nobody ever broke the law, we would be unlikely to enjoy many of the basic human rights that we take for granted today."

"[H]istory is also replete with inspiration we can draw on to face the multiple crises of our time. It is essential to remember what went right as much as what went wrong."

"[I]magine if politicians, activists and changemakers of all kinds gave a seat in their discussions to the voice of our ancestors from different epochs and countries and cultures – perhaps an actual chair, as they do for future generations in many municipal authorities across Quebec."

History for Tomorrow: Inspiration from the Past for the Future of Humanity by Roman Krznaric, WH Allen, 2024. Review by Dr Adriaan Duiveman, KU Leuven