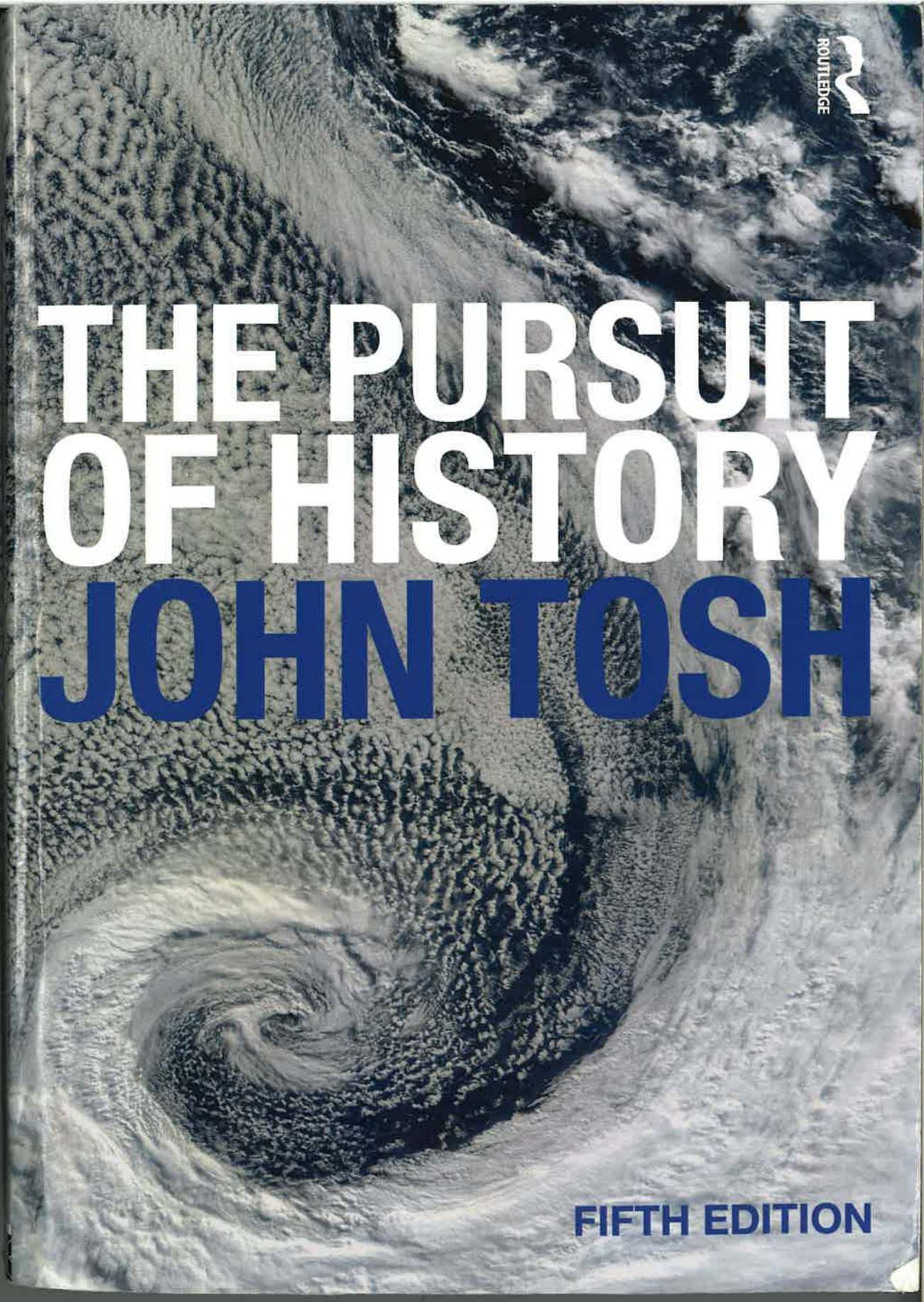
ROUTLEDGE
THE PURSUIT OF HISTORY
JOHN TOSH
FIFTH EDITION

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CHAPTER TWO

# The uses of history

This chapter looks at some of the different ways in which historians have tried to explain the purpose of their work. Some see history as a study in itself which needs no wider justification; others see it in terms of the inexorable march across time of great forces, human or even divine, which explain both how we got to where we are and where we might be heading; others deny that history has any lessons for us at all. Historians explain the past in response to present-day concerns and questions. History can certainly allow us to experience situations and face alternatives that we would not otherwise encounter, and in that sense it serves a useful purpose; it can also reveal that aspects of modern life are not as old, or as new, as we have assumed. But how can we learn any useful lessons from history – especially for the future – when so much depends on the details of the historical context? And if history does not repeat itself, what sort of a guide can it provide for the present?

None of the issues discussed in this book has drawn a greater variety of answers than the question 'What can we learn from history?' The answers have ranged from Henry Ford's celebrated aphorism 'history is bunk' to the belief that history holds the clue to human destiny. The fact that historians themselves give very different responses suggests that this is an open-ended question which cannot be reduced to a tidy solution. But anyone proposing to spend several years – and in some cases a lifetime – studying the subject must reflect on what purpose it serves. And one cannot get very far in understanding how historians set about their work, or in evaluating its outcome, without first considering the rationale of historical enquiry.

# I

## Metahistory – history as long-term development

At one extreme lies the proposition that history tells us most of what we need to know about the future. Our destiny is disclosed in the grand **trajectory** of human history, which reveals the world today as it really is, and the future course of events. This belief requires a highly schematic interpretation of the course of human development, usually known as *metahistory*. A spiritual version of it predominated in Western culture until the seventeenth century. Medieval thinkers believed that history represented the inexorable unfolding of **Divine Providence**, from the Creation through the redeeming life of Christ to the **Last Judgement**; the contemplation of the past revealed something of God's purposes and concentrated the mind on the reckoning to come. This view became less tenable with the gradual secularization of European culture from the eighteenth century onwards. New forms of metahistory developed which attributed the forward dynamic of history to human rather than divine action. The **Enlightenment belief in moral progress** was of this kind. But the most influential metahistory of modern times has been Marxism. The driving force of history became the struggle by human societies to meet their material needs (which is why the Marxist theory is known as 'historical materialism'). Marx interpreted human history as a progression from lower to higher forms of production; the highest form was currently industrial capitalism, but this was destined to give way to socialism, at which point human needs would be satisfied abundantly and equitably (see Chapter 8). Since the fall of international communism, belief in historical materialism has sharply declined, but metahistorical thinking continues to hold an appeal: Marxism has been turned on its head by certain free-market theorists, for whom the 1990s signal the global triumph of liberal democracy, or 'the end of history'.[1]

**trajectory**
The line of an object in flight. It can be applied, as here, to a perceived 'path' of a theme traced over a long period of time.

**Divine Providence**
The idea of a benevolent God who watches over and protects people on earth.

**Last Judgement**
In Christian, especially Catholic, theology the Last Judgement is the moment at the end of time when all humans come before God for judgement on their lives on earth, some being allowed to enter heaven, others being condemned for eternity to hell. It was a common theme in medieval art and is dramatically presented in Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican.

**Enlightenment belief in moral progress**
The eighteenth-century Enlightenment believed that the exercise of human reason would liberate people from the mental and political oppression of organized religion and superstition. By aiming for greater human liberty and happiness, reason was thereby equated with moral progress.

**totalitarianism**
Dictatorship, associated particularly with European regimes of the 1920s and 1930s, which stressed the all-encompassing role of the state.

## The rejection of history

At the other extreme is the view that *nothing* can be learned from history: not that history is beyond our reach, but that it offers no guidance. This rejection of history takes two forms. The first is essentially a defence against **totalitarianism**. For many intellectuals during the Cold War, the practical consequences of invoking the past to legitimate communist ideology had been so appalling that any idea that history might hold clues for the present became completely discredited; some historians recoiled so far from any idea of pattern or meaning that they refused to find in history anything more than accident, blunder and contingency.[2]



The second basis for rejecting history is a commitment to modernity: if one is committed to the new, why bother with the past? This point of view has a much longer pedigree. The equation of modernity with a rejection of the past was first put into effect during the French Revolution of 1789–93. The revolutionaries executed the king, abolished the aristocracy, attacked religion and declared 22 September 1792 the beginning of Year 1. All this was done in the name of reason, untrammelled by precedent or tradition. The early twentieth century was another high point in the **modernist** rejection of history. In ***avant-garde*** thinking human creativity was seen as opposed to the achievements of the past, rather than growing out of them; ignorance of history liberated the imagination. During the inter-war period these ideas became the dominant strand in the arts, under the banner of 'modernism'. Fascism and Nazism adapted this language to the political sphere. They reacted to the catastrophe of the First World War and the **alarming instability of the world economy** by claiming the virtue of a complete break with the past. They lambasted the corruption of the old society and demanded the conscious creation of a 'new man' and a 'new order'.[3] Today, **root-and-branch** totalitarianism is completely discredited. But 'modernism' retains some of its allure. It validates a technocratic approach to politics and society and underwrites the fascination with the new in the arts.

Neither metahistory nor the total rejection of history commands much support among practitioners of history. Metahistory may cast the historian in the gratifying role of prophet, but at the cost of denying, or drastically curtailing, the play of human agency in history. Marxism has had great influence on the writing of history over the past fifty years, but as a theory of socio-economic change rather than as the key to human destiny. Ultimately the choice between free will and determinism is a philosophical one. There are many intermediate positions. If most historians would tip the balance in favour of free will, this is because determinism sits uncomfortably with the contingencies and rough edges that loom so large in the historical record. Metahistory involves holding on to one big conviction at the expense of many

**modernists**
In this context, those whose concerns are concentrated on the modern day to the exclusion of any consideration of the past.

***avant-garde***
(French) The troops at the front who spearhead an army's advance into battle. The term was applied to radical and pioneering artistic movements in the early twentieth century and has since come to denote any new or radical ideas.

**alarming instability of the world economy**
The international economic slump of the 1930s that followed on from the New York Stock Exchange crash of October 1929.

**root-and-branch**
Thorough-going. The term derives from a seventeenth-century religious group who wanted a comprehensive reform of the Church of England.

less ambitious insights. It is an outlook profoundly at odds with the experience of historical research.

Historians are no happier to have their findings dismissed as a complete irrelevance. The rejection of history would obviously limit its study to a self-indulgent **antiquarian** pursuit. In fact the claims for historical awareness have for 200 years been asserted in a continuing **dialectic** with the modernist rejection of history. Historicism itself was to a considerable extent a reaction against the French Revolution. To conservatives such as Ranke, the political excesses in France were a terrifying instance of what happens when radicals turn their backs on the past; to apply first principles without respect for inherited institutions was a threat to the very fabric of the social order. As the Revolution went off course, many of the radicals acquired a new respect for history too. Those who still believed in freedom and democracy came to realize that humans were not so free from the hand of the past as the revolutionaries had supposed, and that progressive change must be built on the cumulative achievements of earlier generations.

Only a visionary would accept the full implications of metahistory; only an antiquarian would be content to surrender all claim to practical utility. The most convincing claims of history to offer relevant insights lie somewhere between these two extremes. And they hinge on taking seriously the principles of historical awareness established by the nineteenth-century founders of the discipline. The historicists have become a by-word for disinterested historical enquiry without practical application, but this is not an accurate picture of their position. They did not disclaim all claims to practical relevance but merely insisted that the faithful representation of the past must come first. In fact the three principles of difference, context and process (discussed in the previous chapter) point to the specific ways in which the scholarly study of history can yield useful knowledge. The end result is not a master-key or an overall schema but rather an accumulation of specific practical insights consistent with a sense of historical awareness.

**antiquarian**
Interest in historical details and artefacts without reference to their wider context or significance.

**dialectic**
The conflict of one idea (the thesis) and another diametrically opposed to it (the antithesis). The resulting amalgamation of the two is known as the synthesis.



## II

## The uses of history – an inventory of alternatives

Historical *difference* lies at the heart of the discipline's claim to be socially relevant. As a memory-bank of what is unfamiliar or alien, history constitutes our most important cultural resource. It offers a means – imperfect but indispensable – of entering into the kind of experience that is simply not possible in our own lives. Our sense of the heights to which human beings can attain, and the depths to which they may sink, the resourcefulness they may show in a crisis, the sensitivity they can show in responding to each other's needs – all these are nourished by knowing what has been thought and done in the very different contexts of the past. Art historians have long been familiar with the idea that the creative achievements of the past are an inventory of assets whose value may be realized by later generations – witness the way that Western art has repeatedly reinvented and rejected the **classical tradition** of Greece and Rome. But creative energy can be drawn from the past in many other fields. History reminds us that there is usually more than one way of interpreting a predicament or responding to a situation, and that the choices open to us are often more varied than we might have supposed. Theodore Zeldin has written a magpie's feast of a book, called *An Intimate History of Humanity* (1994), ranging over such subjects as loneliness, cooking, conversation and travel. His aim is not to lay bare a pattern, still less to predict or prescribe, but to open our eyes to the range of options that past experience places at our disposal. Most historians probably have serious misgivings about a fragmented exposition such as Zeldin's, which lacks any topographical or chronological coherence. But his rationale is not unusual. Natalie Zemon Davis – a leading cultural historian of early modern Europe – has said, 'I let [the past] speak and I show that things don't have to be the way they are now ... I want to show that it could be different, that it was different, and that there are alternatives'.[4] As the process of historical change unfolds, old arguments or programmes may once more become relevant. This has been a persistent theme in the work of the foremost historian of the English Revolution, Christopher Hill:

> Since capitalism, the **Protestant ethic, Newtonian physics**, so long taken for granted by our civilization, are now at last coming under

**classical tradition**
'Classical' refers to the ancient world of Greece and Rome. Their ideas and philosophy were often revived by later ages, notably during the fifteenth and sixteenth-century Renaissance and again in the eighteenth century.

**Protestant ethic**
Also known as the Protestant work ethic. First analysed in detail by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), this held that Protestant theology, with its stress upon an individual relationship with God (as opposed to the Catholic stress on the collective community of the Church), was uniquely well suited to the development of an independent, self-reliant approach to work.

**Newtonian physics**
The understanding of the operation of the natural world developed by Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727). Newton's theories were unchallenged until the writings of Albert Einstein (1879–1955).

> general and widespread criticism, it is worth going back to consider seriously and afresh the arguments of those who opposed them before they had won universal acceptance.[5]

The point is not to find a precedent but to be alert to possibilities. History is an inventory of alternatives, all the richer if research is not conducted with half an eye to our immediate situation in the present.

## Lessons from the familiar

Of course not all the past is exotic. In practice our reaction to a particular moment in the past is likely to be a mixture of estrangement and familiarity. Alongside features that have changed out of all recognition, we may encounter patterns of thinking or behaviour that are immediately accessible to us. The juxtaposition of these two is an important aspect of historical perspective, and it is often the point at which the more thoughtful professional scholar engages most directly with the claims of social relevance. Peter Laslett's path-breaking work on the history of the English family offers a striking instance. Since the 1960s – beginning with *The World We Have Lost* (1965) – he has written a succession of books about the nature of early modern English society. He emphasizes two general conclusions. First, the residential extended family, which we fondly believe existed in the pre-modern world, is a figment of our nostalgic imagination: our forebears lived in nuclear households seldom spanning more than two generations. Second, the care of the elderly was not notably more family-based than it is today, but the scale of the problem was vastly different – indeed old age was not regarded as a problem at all because few people survived for very long after their productive life was over. Our view of the nuclear family is changed when we recognize that it was not a response to industrialization but was rooted in much earlier English practice. On the other hand, policy towards the old will get nowhere if it is guided by past models: 'Our situation remains irreducibly novel', writes Laslett; 'it calls for invention rather than imitation'.[6] He does not trace the evolution of family forms over time – the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are missed out entirely. His point is rather that the first step to understanding is comparison *across* time, which throws into relief what is transient and what is enduring about our present circumstances.



The ability to distinguish between the enduring and the transient is vital to any realistic programme of social action in the present. Consider, for example, another aspect of the history of old people – state provision in the form of a pension. Historical perspective is usually limited to the establishment of the Welfare State after the Second World War, with perhaps a backward glance to the introduction of old age pensions by **Lloyd George** in 1908. But these antecedents do not explain why the level of the pension has consistently been fixed at below subsistence level. Here, as Pat Thane explains, the relevant past is the nineteenth-century Poor Law administration, accountable to local rate-payers, and concerned to allocate the barest minimum to every category of claimant.[7] History here is not being quarried for 'meaning' to validate particular values but is treated as an instrument for maximizing our control over our present situation. To be free is not to enjoy total freedom of action – that is a Utopian dream – but to know how far one's action and thought are conditioned by the heritage of the past. This may sound like a prescription for conservatism. But what it offers is a realistic foundation for radical initiatives. We need to know when we are pushing against an open door and when we are beating our heads against a brick wall. Grasping what one historian has called 'the distinction between what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own contingent arrangements' offers important practical dividends.[8]

**Idi Amin (1925–2003)** General Amin seized power in Uganda in 1971 in a military coup. He proved a brutal dictator and massacred large numbers of his own people. He expelled Uganda's entire Asian population and was finally overthrown by a military invasion by neighbouring Tanzania in 1979.

**Pol Pot (1925–1998)** Communist leader of Cambodia 1975–9. He instituted a reign of terror in which the entire urban population was forced into the countryside and some two million people were massacred. He was overthrown by an invasion from neighbouring Vietnam.

## Facing up to pain: history as therapy

The concept of historical difference has one other rather surprising application – as a means of grappling with aspects of the very recent past that we might prefer to forget. It is a measure of the almost incredible extremes of human behaviour over the past century that a real effort of the imagination is now needed to understand what happened under the Third Reich or in the Soviet Union under Stalin (more recent instances include **Idi Amin**'s Uganda and **Pol Pot**'s Cambodia). In cases such as these the gulf between present and past is, as it were, compressed into a single life-span. Those who lived through these experiences of mass death, incarceration and forced removal suffer from a collective trauma. The line of least resistance may be to leave the past alone, and in the Soviet Union 'forgetting' was the official line for

most of the period between the death of Stalin and the collapse of communism. Individuals did not forget, but there was no way in which their pain could be shared or publicly marked. A nation that cannot face up to its past will be gravely handicapped in the future. This understanding was central to the policy of *glasnost* ('openness') proclaimed by **Mikhail Gorbachev** in the late 1980s. He realized how crippling the psychological burden of the past was as long as it remained buried. After some initial hesitation, he opened up the archives to historians and allowed the Soviet people to acknowledge publicly the terrible sufferings of the Stalin era. Whatever else happens in Russia in the future, that collective owning of the past cannot be undone. James Joll saw this kind of painful engagement with the recent past in therapeutic terms:

> Just as the psycho-analyst helps us to face the world by showing us how to face the truth about our own motives and our own personal past, so the contemporary historian helps us to face the present and the future by enabling us to understand the forces, however shocking, which have made our world and our society what it is.[9]

**Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–)**
Soviet leader 1985–91. Gorbachev instituted the policy of *glasnost* (openness) in discussing the failures of the Soviet system, and of fundamental reconstruction (*perestroika*) of Soviet society. This precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev resigned in the aftermath of an attempted coup in 1991.

Historical difference provides an indispensable perspective on the present, whether as an inventory of experience, as evidence of the transience of our own time, or as a reminder of the deeply alien elements in our recent past.

## III

## Understanding behaviour in its context

The practical applications of historical *context* are much less likely to make the headlines, but they are no less important. As explained in Chapter 1, the discipline of context springs from the historian's conviction that a sense of the whole must always inform our understanding of the parts. Even when historians write about specialized topics in economic or intellectual history, they should respect this principle, and they open themselves to major criticism if they fail to do so. The same principle informs the practice of **social anthropology**, where fieldwork is concerned as much with the entire social structure or cultural system as with particular rituals or beliefs. The problem both history and anthropology face is how to interpret behaviour that may be founded on quite different premises from our own. It would, for example, be a great mistake to suppose that commercial transactions in

**social anthropology**
Academic discipline that analyses small-scale societies by the techniques of participant observation.



thirteenth-century England – or twentieth-century Polynesia – were guided solely by what we define as economic rationality; looking at these societies as wholes will give us a grasp of how trade and exchange were informed by religion, social morality and social hierarchy (to specify only the most likely dimensions). The reason why this mode of thinking has contemporary application is not, of course, that our own society is alien or 'different'. Rather, the problem today is the baffling complexity of society, which leads us to place exaggerated faith in specialist expertise, without proper regard to the wider picture. E.J. Hobsbawm deplores how modern policy-making and planning are in thrall to 'a model of scientism and technical manipulation'.[10] This is more than prejudice born of a demarcation dispute between arts and sciences (Hobsbawm himself has always been respectful of science and technology). The argument here is that the technical approach to social and political problems compartmentalizes human experience into boxes marked 'economics', 'social policy' and so on, each with its own technical lore, whereas what is really required is an openness to the way in which human experience constantly breaks out of these categories.

The lateral links between different aspects of society are much easier to discern with the benefit of hindsight. In our own time it is clearly harder to spot the connections, given our lack of detachment and our lack of hindsight. But at the very least a historical training should encourage a less blinkered approach to current problems. The **Gulf War** in 1991 illustrates this point – if in a regrettably negative way. The history of Western imperialism has been the subject of some highly sophisticated analysis over the past forty years. Historians do not see the process of European expansion merely as an expression of maritime flair and technical superiority. They link it to economic structures, patterns of consumption and international relations – and increasingly to codes of masculinity and constructions of racial difference as well. All too little of this kind of contextualization was applied by the media to the escalation of conflict in the Gulf. For most commentators it was hardly seen outside the frame of international law and the politics of oil. Historians can claim with some justice to be specialists in lateral thinking, and this has underpinned their traditional claim to train graduates for management and the civil service, where the ability to think beyond the boundaries of particular technical perspectives is at a premium. A similar case

**Gulf War**
In 1990 President Saddam Hussain of Iraq invaded and annexed the small oil-rich kingdom of Kuwait. The invasion was condemned by the United Nations, and the Iraqis were forced out of Kuwait the following year by a counter-invasion by a broad international coalition led by the United States.

can be made in relation to the education of the participating citizen, who inevitably approaches most public issues as a non-specialist.[11]

## Does history repeat itself?

Context is also the principle that historians invoke against the common, but mistaken, belief that history repeats itself. Human beings strive to learn from their mistakes and successes in their collective life just as they do in everyday individual experience. Historical biography is said to feature prominently in the leisure reading of British politicians. Indeed a few of them have written distinguished works of this kind – **Winston Churchill** and **Roy Jenkins**, for example.[12] That politicians have a lively interest in the historical context in which posterity will judge their own standing is only part of the explanation. The real reason for their study of history is that politicians expect to find a guide to their conduct – in the form not of moral example but of practical lessons in public affairs. This approach to history has a long pedigree. It was particularly pronounced during the Renaissance, when the record of classical antiquity was treated as a storehouse of moral example and practical lessons in statecraft. **Machiavelli**'s prescriptions for his native Florence and his famous political maxims in *The Prince* (1513) were both based on Roman precedent. He was justly rebuked by his younger contemporary, the historian Francesco Guicciardini:

> How wrong it is to cite the Romans at every turn. For any comparison to be valid, it would be necessary to have a city with conditions like theirs, and then to govern it according to their example. In the case of a city with different qualities, the comparison is as much out of order as it would be to expect a jackass to race like a horse.[13]

Guicciardini put his finger on the principal objection to the citing of precedent, that it usually shows scant regard for historical context. For the precedent to be valid, the same conditions would have to prevail, but the result of the passage of time is that what looks like an old problem or a familiar opportunity requires a different analysis because the attendant circumstances have changed. The gulf that separates us from all previous ages renders the citing of precedents from the distant past a fruitless enterprise.

Only in the case of the recent past have historians seriously attempted to draw on historical analogies, on the grounds that much of the context may remain essentially the same over a short period and that the changes which have occurred are comparatively well documented. During the later stages of the Cold War there was something of a vogue for 'applied' history of this kind.[14] But even here the task is a daunting one. Consider the case of the arms race. The decade before the Second World War is commonly regarded as an object lesson in the dangers of military weakness and of appeasing an aggressive power. But one could equally cite the precedent of the First World War, one of whose causes was the relentless escalation in armaments from the 1890s onwards. Which precedent is valid? The answer must be: neither as it stands. Even within the time-span of a hundred years, history does not repeat itself. No one historical situation has been, or ever can be, repeated in every particular. If an event or tendency recurs, as the arms race has done, it is as a result of a unique combination of circumstances, and the strategies we adopt must have regard primarily to those circumstances.[15] The key historicist notion of the 'otherness' of the past is not suspended merely because we stand at only two or three generations' distance from our object of study. As Hobsbawm has reminded us, the atmosphere of the 1930s (through which he lived) was utterly different from today's, which makes any comparison between the original Nazis and their imitators today pretty pointless.[16] At the same time, the drawing of historical analogies, often half consciously, is a habitual and unavoidable part of human reasoning to which people in public life are especially prone. It is not necessarily futile, provided we do not look for a perfect fit between past and present, or treat precedent as grounds for closing critical debate about the options available now.

The truth that history never repeats itself also limits the confidence with which historians can predict. However probable it may seem that a recurrence of this or that factor will result in a familiar outcome, the constant process of historical change means that the future will always be partly shaped by additional factors that we cannot predict and whose bearing on the problem in hand no one could have suspected. Moreover, when people do perceive their situation as 'history repeating itself', their actions will be affected by their knowledge of what happened the first time. As E.H. Carr pointed out, historical precedent gives us some insight into what kind of conditions make for a revolution, but whether and when the revolution breaks out in a specific instance will depend

**Winston Churchill (1874–1965)**
As well as his multi-volume histories of the two World Wars, Churchill also wrote a detailed biography of his famous ancestor, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough.

**Roy Jenkins (1920–2003)**
Served as Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer under the Labour Prime Ministers Wilson and Callaghan, as President of the European Commission, and was one of the founders of the short-lived Social Democratic Party (SDP). He also found time to write critically acclaimed biographies of Gladstone and Churchill.

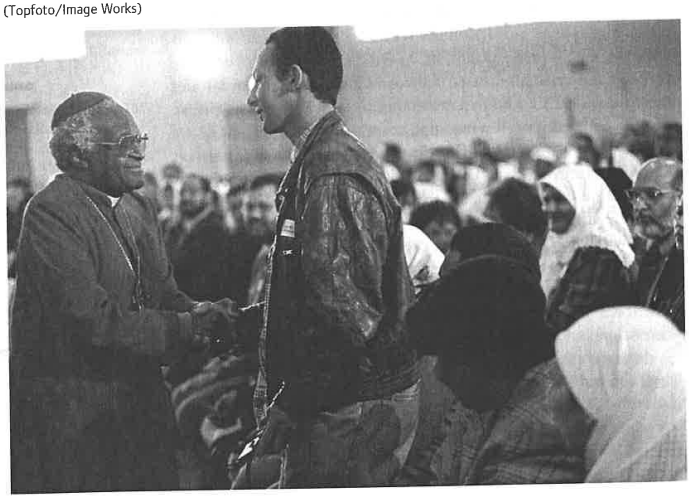
**Machiavelli (1469–1527)**
Niccolò Machiavelli, Florentine statesman and philosopher. When Florence overthrew the ruling Medici dynasty and declared itself a republic in 1493 Machiavelli served the new regime, but he was arrested and tortured when the Medici returned. Machiavelli is best known for his book of advice for rulers, *The Prince*, which suggests that the most successful rulers should know how to deceive and dissemble. It earned him a quite unjust reputation as a promoter of unprincipled tyranny.

on 'the occurrence of unique events, which cannot themselves be predicted'.[17] The dismal record of well-informed intelligent people who have made false predictions, or have failed to predict what with hindsight seems obvious, does however suggest one lesson of history: that control of the future is an illusion, and that living with uncertainty is part of the human condition.

## IV

## The way ahead: history and sequential prediction

*Process* – the third principle of historicism – is equally productive of insights into the present day. Identifying a process does not mean that we agree with it, or believe that it made for a better world. But it may help to explain our world. Situating ourselves in a trajectory that is still unfolding gives us some purchase on the future and allows a measure of forward planning. In fact this mode of historical thinking is deeply rooted in our political culture. As voters and citizens, almost instinctively, we interpret the world around us in terms of historical process. Much of the



South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided a forum where those who had committed crimes in the name of apartheid could admit openly what they had done and receive forgiveness from their victims. This process of facing up to a painful recent past proved helpful in allowing South Africans to work together to face the future. (Topfoto/Image Works)



time our assumptions are not grounded in historical reality; they may amount to little more than wishful thinking projected backwards. But if conclusions about historical process are based on careful research, they can yield modest but useful predictions. We might call these *sequential* predictions, in order to distinguish them from the discredited *repetitive* or *recurrent* variety. These prevailing beliefs about historical process need to be brought into the light of day, tested against the historical record, and if necessary replaced by a more accurate perspective.

One prediction based on historical process which has stood the test of time concerns the political destiny of South Africa. During the 1960s, when most colonies in tropical Africa were securing their political independence, it was widely assumed that majority rule would shortly come about in South Africa too. Despite the weight of white oppression, mass nationalism was visibly the outcome of a process that dated back to the foundation of the **African National Congress** in 1912, and that had been marked by a growing sophistication in both political discourse and techniques of mass mobilization. Moreover, the South African case could be seen as part of a worldwide phenomenon of anti-colonial nationalism which had been building up since the late nineteenth century. In that sense history might be said to be 'on the side' of African nationalism in South Africa. What could not be predicted was the form of the succeeding political order, and the manner in which it would be achieved, whether by revolution from below or by devolution from above: those were matters of detail which only the future could divulge. But the direction in which the historical process was unfolding in South Africa seemed clear. The time-scale turned out to be more extended than had been supposed – thus demonstrating the crab-like way in which a historical process may unfold – but the general prediction was accurate enough.[18]

**African National Congress**
The black South African political party, founded in 1912, which led resistance to apartheid.

Sometimes identifying the valid and appropriate historical process is complicated by the presence of more than one possible trajectory. Take the current debate about the 'breakdown' of the family. Processual thinking is certainly very evident in the way the media handle this issue. The relevant process is generally seen to be the decline of personal morality, aided and abetted by misguided legislation, beginning with the **Matrimonial Causes Act** of 1857, which set in train the liberalization of divorce.[19] Historians, on the other hand, bring into play a much more

**Matrimonial Causes Act**
This act of 1857 enabled couples to seek divorce through the newly created divorce courts. Previously, it had only been obtainable through a specially passed Act of Parliament.

fundamental and long-term process, namely the changing role of the home in production. Some 250 years ago most work was done in or adjacent to the home. In selecting a mate, prospective spouses were influenced as much by the home-making and bread-winning skills of their partners as by their personal attractions; the ending of a marriage through separation or desertion meant the end of a productive unit, and for this reason most marriages endured until death. The Industrial Revolution changed all this: the growth of the factory (and other large firms) meant that most production no longer took place in a domestic setting, and control over domestic dependants ceased to be economically central. Now that personal fulfilment is by far the most compelling rationale of marriage, there is far less reason for people to stay in family relationships that no longer bring them happiness. The decline of the productive household, rather than a collapse of individual morality, would seem to be the critical historical process involved here; and given that the separation of work from home shows little sign of being reversed, it is a reasonable prediction that our society will continue to experience a comparatively high rate of marital breakdown.[20]

## Questioning assumptions

But the most important role of processual thinking is in offering an alternative to the assumptions of permanence and timelessness that underpin so many social identities. As we saw in the last chapter, nations tend to imagine themselves as unchanged by the vicissitudes of time. The fallacy of essentialism does not hold up well against historical research. 'British', for example, was in the eighteenth century a newly minted category to take account of the recent **Union of Scotland and England**, and it was built on the exclusion of Roman Catholics and the French. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the cultural meaning of Britishness is probably less certain than it has ever been, while the British state seems set for disintegration as Scotland edges closer to independence.[21] In the same way, any notion of what it means to be German has to come to terms not only with the multitude of states under which most Germans lived until the mid-nineteenth century but also with the political calculations that led to the exclusion of many German-speaking lands (notably Austria) from the German Empire in 1871. A historical perspective requires us

**Union of Scotland and England**
The Act of Union between England and Scotland was passed by both countries' Parliaments in 1707. Although there were economic advantages to both sides, the English wanted it primarily to prevent the Catholic pretender, Prince James Edward Stuart, becoming king of Scotland. The act only passed through the Scottish Parliament with the help of wholesale bribery.



to abandon the idea that nations are organic; it is nearer the truth to regard them, in the words of an influential text, as 'imagined communities'.[22]

The term 'race' raises similar problems. In its modern form, 'race' was originally developed as a category that justified the growing ascendancy of the West over other peoples. It treated as fixed and biologically determined what is socially constructed, and it has been most strongly developed as a means of reinforcing political and economic control over subordinate groups (as in colonial Africa and Nazi Germany). The way in which an earlier generation of historians wrote about Western global expansion strongly implied that the 'native' peoples at the receiving end were inferior both in their indigenous culture and in their capacity to assimilate Western techniques; and these negative stereotypes served in turn to sustain a flattering self-image of the British – or French or German – 'race'. More recently, minorities with a strong ethnic identity have constructed what might be called a 'reverse discourse'; they too embrace the concept of 'race', because the term brings biological descent and culture together in a powerful amalgam that maximizes group cohesion and emphasizes distance from other groups. Among blacks in America and Britain there is today rising support for Afrocentrism – the belief in an absolute sense of ethnic difference and in the transmission of an authentic cultural tradition from Africa to blacks of the modern **diaspora**. A stress on common ancestry and a downplaying of outside influences lead to a kind of 'cultural insiderism'. The appropriate response is to point out that no nation has ever been ethnically **homogeneous** and to stress the formative experience of slavery and other forms of culture contact between black and white in Europe and the New World. The purpose of historical work is not to undermine black identity but to anchor it in a real past instead of a mythical construction. The outcome is likely to bear a rather closer relation to the circumstances in which black and white people live today. The formation of racial and national identities is never a once-and-for-all event, but a continuous and contingent process.[23]

**diaspora**
The dispersal of a people over a wide area.

**homogeneous**
All of the same sort.

## Challenging notions of 'natural'

What is true of the nation applies still more to the 'natural'. When unwelcome changes in our social arrangements are afoot,

we often express our attachment to what is being replaced by asserting that it has always been there – that what is changing is not one particular phase with a limited time-span but something traditional, or fundamental, or 'natural'. This is especially true of gender. The 'traditional' role of women looks less and less tenable when we read about the **entrepreneurial widow** of seventeenth-century England, or the groundswell of women's organizations that worked for the **abolition of slavery** in the nineteenth century, well ahead of the agitation for women's suffrage.[24] The new history of men and masculinity is equally unsettling of received truths. Traditional fatherhood is often thought to have combined an emotionally hands-off approach with a distinctly hands-on approach to family discipline. That is usually what is meant by 'Victorian' fatherhood. But in so far as the Victorians kept their distance from their children and meted out harsh punishments to them, this was a reaction *against* the past, rather than the climax of a long tradition. The celebrated political journalist William Cobbett recalled that his time as a young father was spent 'between the pen and the baby'; he remembered how he had fed and put his babies to sleep 'hundreds of times, though there were servants to whom the task might have been transferred'.[25] Cobbett was writing in 1830, just when the tide was beginning to turn against the close paternal involvement with young children that had been so common when he was a young man thirty years before. It makes a difference now to know that a fully engaged fatherhood today is not some Utopian fantasy but a pattern that has existed within English culture in the comparatively recent past. In fact codes of fatherhood have been in continuous flux throughout the past 200 years, and probably earlier.[26] One of the most salutary influences on the practice of history in recent years has been the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault. His cardinal principle was that no aspect of human culture is God-given or lies outside history, and in his historical work he plotted some of the major shifts that have occurred in the human experience of sexuality, sickness and insanity. In selecting major themes of this kind in pursuit of what he called 'an archaeology of the present', Foucault achieved an influence that extended far beyond academia.[27]

**entrepreneurial widow**
We now know that many widows in seventeenth and eighteenth-century England ran their own businesses, and that it was by no means unusual for women to assume positions of influence that historians had long assumed were reserved for men.

**abolition of slavery**
The campaign for the abolition first of the transatlantic slave trade, then of slavery itself, and later of the internal African slave trade, constituted one of the most important and influential lobbying movements of the nineteenth century. Church groups and women played a prominent role in the process on both sides of the Atlantic.



# V

## History for its own sake?

Granted, then, that history has a varied and significant practical relevance, the question remains whether this should influence the way in which historians set about their work. Prior to the Rankean revolution, this question could hardly have arisen. Historians believed what their audience assumed, that a historical education offered a training for citizens and statesmen alike. They took it for granted that history furnished the basis for a rational analysis of politics; indeed, many of the best historians, from Guicciardini in the sixteenth century to **Macaulay** in the nineteenth, were active in public life. All this was changed by the professionalization of history. By the late nineteenth century the subject featured prominently in the university curriculum all over Europe, controlled by a new breed of historians whose careers were largely confined to academic life. Their subject's traditional claim to offer practical guidance seemed irrelevant – almost an embarrassment. They adhered strictly to the central tenet of historicism, that history should be studied for its own sake, without paying much attention to the practical benefits that could accrue from this approach. This attitude has been very influential with the historical profession in Britain. A generation of conservative historians was inspired by the philosopher Michael Oakeshott, who deplored what he called the 'practical attitude to the past;' he regarded it as 'the chief undefeated enemy of "history"'.[28] G.R. Elton was an outspoken champion of the prevailing orthodoxy:

> Teachers of history must set their faces against the necessarily ignorant demands of 'society' … for immediate applicability. They need to recall that the 'usefulness' of historical studies lies hardly at all in the knowledge they purvey and in the understanding of specific present problems from their prehistory; it lies much more in the fact that they produce standards of judgement and powers of reasoning which they alone develop, which arise from their very essence, and which are unusually clear-headed, balanced and compassionate.[29]

Apart from providing an intellectual training, the study of history is represented as a personal pursuit which at most enables the individual to achieve some self-awareness by stepping outside his or her immediate experience; in the austere formulation of V.H. Galbraith, 'the study of history is a personal matter, in which

**Macaulay (1800–59)**
Thomas Babington Macaulay, British historian, poet and administrator. As well as writing a best-selling *History of England*, Macaulay served on the Council of the Governor-General of India, as MP for Edinburgh, and as Secretary at War in the government of Lord Melbourne.

the activity is generally more valuable than the result'.[30] Neither of these justifications is peculiar to history: training the mind is part of all academic disciplines worth the name, while the claim to enlarge the individual's experience can be argued with equal, if not greater, conviction by teachers of literature.

It should be noted that there was a political context to this fastidious recoil from 'relevance'. Both Elton and Galbraith had in mind the excesses of propaganda to which relevant history had led under the regimes of Hitler and Stalin (Elton was a refugee from Nazi Germany): Nazi and Soviet historians were state employees, expected to repeat crude party dogma about the past. In Europe totalitarian excesses on that scale are a thing of the past, but in many countries historical scholarship is still vulnerable to political pressure, especially of a nationalist kind. Against that background, scholarly detachment can seem virtuous. As Peter Mandler has suggested, 'historians shy away from considering the uses of their discipline for fear of stirring up dying chauvinist embers'.[31]

One positive result of 'history for its own sake' is a wholehearted commitment to the re-creation or resurrection of the past in every material and mental dimension. There are historians for whom a fascination with the past as it was really lived and experienced overrides all other considerations. A notable case was Richard Cobb, a leading historian of the French Revolution:

> The historian should, above all, be endlessly inquisitive and prying, constantly attempting to force the privacy of others, and to cross the frontiers of class, nationality, generation, period, and sex. *His principal aim is to make the dead live*. And, like the American 'mortician', he may allow himself a few artifices of the trade: a touch of rouge here, a pencil-stroke there, a little cotton wool in the cheeks, to make the operation more convincing.[32] [emphasis added]

**Death in Paris**
Richard Cobb (1917–96) was a colourful British authority on the history of France. *Death in Paris* gives a glimpse of the social history of nineteenth-century Paris through a collection of police records relating to dead bodies fished out of the Seine.

Cobb's marvellously evocative studies of the seamy side of life in revolutionary France, notably ***Death in Paris*** (1978), certainly vindicate his approach. Probably all historians can trace their vocation back to a curiosity about the past for its own sake, often aroused in childhood by the visible relics of the past around them. And there will always, one hopes, be historians like Cobb with special gifts in the re-creation of the past. But it is quite wrong to suppose that historians in general should be content with this. For most of them it is the essential preliminary to *explaining* the past. Their purpose



is to identify trends, to analyse causes and consequences – in short to interpret history as a process and not just as a series of brightly coloured lantern-slides. Thus historians of the English Revolution approach their work with a view to discovering not only what happened in the Civil War or what it felt like to be a soldier in the **New Model Army** but also why the war occurred and what changes it brought about in the nature of English politics and society. Or to take a more distant example: the events of the **Anglo-Zulu War** of 1879, which saw the dissolution of the Zulu kingdom and the destruction of an entire British regiment, were tragic enough; but a whole other dimension of irony and pathos is revealed when we consider the betrayals, the mutual misunderstandings and the culture conflict that set the two sides on a collision course.[33] This represents the other side of historicism. Without it, history's practical explanatory functions could not be fulfilled at all. (The distinction between re-creation and explanation is further explored in Chapter 6.)

**New Model Army**
The highly trained professional army created by Parliament during the English Civil Wars (1642–9). It is usually credited with having turned the tide of the war against King Charles I.

**Anglo-Zulu War**
Also known as the Zulu War (1879). It began with a completely unprovoked British military invasion of Zululand in South Africa, after which an entire British army column was wiped out by the Zulu at Isandhlwana. In the end, superior technology and firepower enabled the British to defeat the Zulu.

## The rejection of relevance

However, it is perfectly possible for historical explanation to be pursued without reference to the claims of social relevance, and this, rather than the strictly 'resurrectionist' position, represents the mainstream academic view. For explanation, too, can be sought 'for its own sake'. Topics such as the origins of the First World War or the social welfare provision of the Victorians can be tackled in an entirely self-contained way without any recognition that they might have a bearing on the choices available to us today. Academic syllabuses are sometimes drawn up on the assumption that history consists of a number of core themes and episodes of permanent significance which, because they have generated extensive research and debate, offer the best material for training the intellect. New areas of study such as the history of Africa or the history of the family are dismissed as passing fancies peripheral to 'real history'. Commenting on the gradual retreat from big, contentious topics in university teaching, David Cannadine writes:

> The belief that history provides an education, that it helps us understand ourselves in time, or even that it explains something of how the present world came into being, has all but vanished.[34]

It is hard not to detect a fundamental conservatism in these attitudes: if history is defined to exclude anything that smacks of 'relevance', it is less likely to call into question the dominant mythologies of today or suggest radical alternatives to current institutions. This explains why 'relevant' historical enquiry attracts charges of irreverent muckraking.[35] There can be little doubt that conservatives are disproportionately represented in the ranks of the historical profession. As noted earlier, the triumph of historicism during the nineteenth century owed much to the strength of the conservative reaction to the French Revolution. It remains the case that the study of the past often attracts those who are hostile to the direction of social and political change in their own day and who find comfort in an earlier and more congenial order. This outlook has been marked in English local history: the writings of W.G. Hoskins, a formative influence on this field, are suffused with a nostalgic regret for the passing of the old English rural society.[36]

Disclaimers of social relevance are not, however, usually couched in explicitly conservative terms. They are more commonly defended on the grounds that 'relevant' history is incompatible with the historian's primary obligation to be true to the past, and with the requirements of scholarly objectivity. This argument has a wide currency among academic historians, being supported by many who are not conservative in other respects but who see their professional integrity at stake. But whether grounded in a conservative attitude or not, the denial of practical relevance is unduly cautious. It is entirely understandable that the original champions of the new historical consciousness should have distanced themselves from topicality, because they were only too aware how severely their subject had suffered at the hands of prophets and propagandists in the past. But the battle for scholarly standards of historical enquiry within the profession has long since been won. Practical purposes can be entertained without sacrificing standards of scholarship – partly because professional historians are so zealous in scrutinizing each other's work for bias.

## Relevant fields of historical study

Historians should, of course, strive to be true to the past; the question is, which past? Faced with the almost limitless evidence



of human activity and the need to select certain problems or periods as more deserving of attention than others, the historian is entirely justified in allowing current social concerns to affect his or her choice. International history originated in the 1920s as a very positive contribution by historians to the new – if short-lived – ethos of internationalism. The notable broadening of the scope of historical enquiry during the past fifty years is largely the result of a small minority of historians responding to the demands of topicality. **The crisis in America's cities** during the 1960s brought into being the 'new urban history', with its stress on the history of social mobility, minority group politics and inner-city deprivation. African history was developed at about the same time in Africa and the West by historians who believed that it was indispensable both to the prospects of the newly independent states and to the outside world's understanding of the '**dark continent**'. More recently, women's history has grown rapidly as traditional gender roles have been modified in the family, the workplace and public life. In each of these areas the door has been opened to alternative possibilities, to paths not taken, and to conditioning factors whose influence still weighs on the present. In none of these areas has historical enquiry simply confirmed the obvious. As Harold James has put it, 'history has a peculiar legitimacy when it tells us something unexpected about current problems'.[37]

Obviously new areas of history which proclaim their relevance run the risk of being manipulated by ideologues. But the responsibility of historians in these cases is clear: it is to provide a historical perspective that can inform debate rather than to service any particular ideology. Responding to the call of 'relevance' is not a matter of falsifying or distorting the past but rather of rescuing from oblivion aspects of that past that now speak to us more directly. Historians of Africa, for example, should be concerned to explain the historical evolution of African societies, not to create a nationalist mythology, and one of the consequences of five decades of research and writing is that it is now much easier to distinguish between the two than it used to be. Our priorities in the present should determine the questions we ask of the past, but not the answers. As will be shown later in the book, the discipline of historical study makes this a meaningful distinction. At the same time, it is a fallacy to suppose that the aspiration to reconstruct the past in its own terms carries the promise of objectivity:

**crisis in America's cities**
The mid-1960s saw serious rioting in a large number of American cities. The riots began in 1965 in the Watts district of Los Angeles, where young working-class blacks were protesting against the poverty and squalor in which they lived, but soon spread across the whole nation. The country erupted in further violence after the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King in 1968.

**dark continent**
The standard Victorian nickname for Africa. It referred both to the colour of Africans' skin and to the fact that so little was known in the West about the interior of the continent.

no essay in historical re-creation is proof against the values of the enquirer (see Chapter 7).

## Public history

**chimera**
A creature of the imagination, an illusion.

But historians who renounce relevance in the cause of objective knowledge are not only pursuing a **chimera**; they are also evading a wider responsibility. Intellectual curiosity about the past for its own sake is certainly one reason why people read history, but it is not the only one. Society also expects an interpretation of the past that is relevant to the present and a basis for formulating decisions about the future. Historians may argue that since their expertise concerns the past not the present, it is not their job to draw out the practical import of their work. But they are in fact the only people qualified to equip society with a truly historical perspective and to save it from the damaging effects of exposure to historical myth. If professionally trained historians do not carry out these functions, then others who are less well informed and more prejudiced will produce ill-founded interpretations. What Geoffrey Barraclough, a veteran champion of contemporary values in history, said more than fifty years ago applies with equal force today:

> Man is an historical animal, with a deep sense of his own past; and if he cannot integrate the past by a history explicit and true, he will integrate it by a history implicit and false. The challenge is one which no historian with any conviction of the value of his work can ignore; and the way to meet it is not to evade the issue of 'relevance', but to accept the fact and work out its implications.[38]

One of those implications is to develop channels through which a wider public can be addressed. If some (at least) of historians' work touches on questions of topical interest, they surely have an obligation to write for a readership that goes well beyond their academic peers and their students; they should engage in *public history*. Thirty years ago this was an unfamiliar concept. It is now well understood, but with a somewhat broader definition than the context in which I am using it here. Public history is an umbrella term to cover the varied ways in which historians make a public impact. The best known of these is the advisory work that scholars carry out for heritage institutions, particularly museums. 'Public history' is also sufficiently elastic to include both community projects (working with local history groups, for example)



and policy advice for government departments. All these activities help to raise the profile of the profession with the public; all of them contribute to the level of historical knowledge in society. But advocates of public history sometimes lose sight of what, in a liberal democracy, is its most critical function: disseminating historical perspective on weighty or contentious public issues.

Very occasionally a court case provides the means of doing so. In 2000 the historicity of the Holocaust was put to the test when a leading 'revisionist' historian, David Irving, claimed that Deborah Lipstadt, an American academic, and her publisher, Penguin Books, had libelled him by describing him as a 'Holocaust denier' who suppressed and distorted the documentary record. In order to rebut the charges, the defence needed to prove both that Irving was dishonest in his use of evidence, and that the historical events which he denied had actually taken place. As a result, the views of professional historians were as central to the case as the arguments of legal counsel. One historian, Richard Evans, was retained specifically to investigate the validity of Irving's research procedures by tracing his statements back to the sources on which they were purportedly based. For three months the court heard a mountain of evidence of this kind. The verdict, delivered in a 350-page judgment, was an unequivocal defeat for Irving: he was found to have flouted accepted research methods and to have manipulated the evidence to suit his political prejudices. The case not only diminished the credibility of Holocaust denial; it also showed that what professional historians do matters – that some events in the past can be authenticated beyond reasonable doubt, and that society has a vested interest in the maintenance of scholarly standards.[39]

Alongside a high-profile event of this kind, historians fulfil their public history brief by writing for a lay readership books that bring a critical and informed perspective to current affairs. Most promising – because it testifies to an ongoing commitment – is the History and Policy website, founded in 2002 as a window of topical historical research aimed at policy-makers and the general public.[40] It has now posted over sixty papers. The majority put forward a historical perspective on social issues – policing, adolescent crime, girls' performance in school, and so on; a smaller number engage with international topics like the Iraq war. The format of these papers – a maximum of 4,000 words and no footnotes – has drawn allegations of dumbing down. But if historians

are to fulfil their social obligations and reach a public audience, they have to modify their mode of presentation accordingly. Treating the conventions of academic discourse as non-negotiable is a sure way of cutting off historians from their public audience.

## The need for contemporary history

One implication of public history is that the recent past has a strong claim on historians. This is the province of *contemporary history*, usually defined as the period within living memory (a favoured starting point is the end of the Cold War in 1989–92). It can be argued that scholars today are too close to the events of this period to achieve sufficient detachment, and that they are further handicapped by their limited access to confidential records (see Chapter 4). But although the job cannot be done as well as historians would like, it is important that they do it to the best of their ability. For it is the recent past on which people draw most for historical analogies and predictions, and their knowledge of it needs to be soundly based if they are to avoid serious error. The recent past has also often proved a fertile breeding ground for crude myths – all the more powerful when their credibility is not contested by scholarly work. Academic neglect of contemporary history therefore has dangerous consequences.

# VI

## A cultural subject, or a social science?

The argument of this chapter can be briefly summed up by situating history in the context of its neighbours among the academic disciplines. Traditionally history has been counted, along with literary and artistic studies, as one of the humanities. The fundamental premise of these disciplines is that what mankind has thought and done has an intrinsic interest and a lasting value irrespective of any practical implications. The re-creation of episodes and ambiences in the past has the same kind of claim on our attention as the re-creation of the thought expressed in a work of art or literature. The historian, like the literary critic and art historian, is a guardian of our cultural heritage, and familiarity with that heritage offers insight into the human condition – a means to heightened self-awareness and empathy with others. In this sense history is, in Cobb's phrase,



'a cultural subject, enriching in itself'[41] and any venture in historical reconstruction is worth doing.

By contrast the social sciences owe their position to their promise of practical guidance. Economists and sociologists seek to understand the workings of economy and society with a view to prescribing solutions to current problems, just as scientists offer the means of mastering the natural world. Historians who believe in their subject's practical functions habitually distance it from the humanities and place it alongside the social sciences. E.H. Carr did so in *What is History?* (1961):

> Scientists, social scientists, and historians are all engaged in different branches of the same study: the study of man and his environment, of the effects of man on his environment and of his environment on man. The object of the study is the same: to increase man's understanding of, and mastery over, his environment.[42]

On this reading, historical re-creation has value primarily as a preliminary to historical explanation, and the kinds of explanation that matter are those which relate to questions of social, economic and political concern.

In this discussion I have given pride of place to the practical uses of history because these continue to arouse such strong resistance among many professional historians. But the truth is that history cannot be defined as either a humanity or a social science without denying a large part of its nature. The mistake that is so often made is to insist that history be categorized as one to the exclusion of the other. History is a hybrid discipline which owes its endless fascination and its complexity to the fact that it straddles the two. If the study of history is to retain its full vitality, this central ambivalence must continue to be recognized, whatever the cost in logical coherence. The study of history 'for its own sake' is not mere antiquarianism. Our human awareness is enhanced by the contemplation of vanished eras, and historical re-creation will always exercise a hold over the imagination, offering as it does vicarious experience to writer and reader alike. At the same time, historians also have a more practical role to perform, and the history that they teach, whether to students in schools and colleges or through the media to the wider public, needs to be informed by an awareness of this role. In this way a historical education achieves a number of goals at once: it trains the mind, enlarges the sympathies *and* provides a much-needed perspective on some of the most pressing problems of our time.

## Marxism and the English Revolution

Marxism, the philosophy of Karl Marx (1818–83), was one of the most influential political and intellectual movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Marx held that all human history can be explained in terms of *dialectic*, the conflict between different social classes for control of the main means of economic production. This produces a succession of stages from feudalism to capitalism, and from capitalism to a communist society, in which workers enjoy the benefits of their own labour. The English Civil Wars (1642–9) were for many years understood essentially as a conflict for authority between king and Parliament. Marxist historians working in the twentieth century, notably Christopher Hill (1912–2003), saw it in much more radical terms, as an attempt to create a new society on principles of equality and individual liberty. In this sense it constitutes an English Revolution in the same way as the later revolutions in France and Russia, as a shift from aristocratic to bourgeois and even working-class hegemony.

## Renaissance

The Renaissance was a fifteenth-century European cultural and intellectual movement which began in Italy and eventually spread to France, Germany, the Netherlands and England. It drew inspiration from new discoveries in the art and writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Artists experimented with perspective and depth, while sculptors created remarkably lifelike reproductions of human and animal forms. Renaissance writers explored Greek philosophy and sought to marry its ideas with those of Christianity.

## Transformation: by peace and by war

In 1948 the white Afrikaaner government of South Africa imposed a policy of strict racial segregation known as apartheid. Black African resistance came to centre on the imprisoned African National Congress leader, Nelson Mandela. By the 1980s South Africa seemed close to civil war, but concessions by the government of F.W. de Klerk, and especially the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, enabled the country to undergo a remarkable peaceful transition to democracy. In 1994 Nelson Mandela became the first black President of South Africa.

Nineteenth-century Germany presents a contrasting example. Germany consisted of a large number of separate states. German nationalists wanted to amalgamate them into a single, unified German empire, but Austria, the largest and most powerful German state, presented a problem, partly because it had a large non-German empire of its own, and partly because it had long dominated Germany and was unlikely to welcome the creation of a large, independent German state. In the event, in 1871 Germany was united into a single empire under the leadership of the militaristic north German kingdom of Prussia; Austria and its empire were excluded.



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