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Re-thinking History

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incorrigibly interpretive? What are historical facts (and indeed are there any such things)? What is bias and what does it mean to say that historians ought to detect it and root it out? Is it possible to empathise with people who lived in the past? Is a scientific history possible or is history essentially an art? What is the status of those couplets that so often appear in definitions of what history is all about: cause and effect, similarity and difference, continuity and change?

In chapter 3 I pull together all the points I will by then have made by relating them to the position from which I am working; by inserting them into the context that I think informs this text. I have said already that the point of the text is to offer some assistance towards the working out of some of the arguments that gravitate around the question of what is history and so, to further this aim, I thought it appropriate to say why I consider what history is in the way that I do and not in other ways, to position myself in the discourse I have been commenting upon and consider its possibilities. I hasten to add that I do this not because my ideas are necessarily of much significance but because, not existing in a vacuum, it may well be that the times that have produced me, that have so to speak 'written me', will already have and will continue to write you too. I refer to these times as post-modern and thus end with a short contextualising chapter entitled 'Doing history in the post-modern world' – arguably the world we live in.

Chapter 1

What history is

In this chapter I want to try and answer the question 'what is history?' To do this I will look initially at what history is in theory; secondly examine what it is in practice; and finally put theory and practice together into a definition – a methodologically informed sceptical/ironic definition – that I hope is comprehensive enough to give you a reasonable grip not only on the 'history question' but also on some of the debates and positions that surround it.

ON THEORY

At the level of theory I would like to make two points. The first (which I will outline in this paragraph and then develop) is that history is one of a series of discourses about the world. These discourses do not create the world (that physical stuff on which we apparently live) but they do appropriate it and give it all the meanings it has. That bit of the world which is history's (ostensible) object of enquiry is the past. History as discourse is thus in a different category to that which it discourses about, that is, the past and history are different things. Additionally, the past and history are not stitched into each other such that only one historical reading of the past is absolutely necessary. The past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart. For the same object of enquiry can be read differently by different discursive practices (a landscape can be read/interpreted differently by geographers, sociologists, historians, artists, economists, etc.) whilst, internal to each, there are different interpretive readings over time and space; as far as history is concerned historiography shows this.

The above paragraph is not an easy one. I have made a lot of statements, but all of them revolve, actually, around the distinction between the past and history. This distinction is therefore crucial for you to understand, for if it is appreciated then it and the debates it gives rise to will help to clarify what history is in theory. Accordingly I will examine the points I have just made, by looking in some detail at the past–history difference and then by considering some of the main consequences arising from it.

Let me begin with the idea that history is a discourse about, but categorically different from, the past. This might strike you as odd for you may have missed this distinction before or, if not, you may still not have bothered too much about it. One of the reasons why this is so, why the distinction is generally left unworked, is because as English-speakers we tend to lose sight of the fact that there actually is this distinction between history – as that which has been written/recorded about the past – and the past itself, because the word history covers both things.¹ It would be preferable, therefore, always to register this difference by using the term ‘the past’ for all that has gone on before everywhere, whilst using the word ‘historiography’ for history, historiography referring here to the writings of historians. This would be good practice (the past as the object of the historians’ attention, historiography as the way historians attend to it) leaving the word ‘History’ (with a capital H) to refer to the whole ensemble of relations. However, habit might be hard to break, and I might myself use the word ‘history’ to refer to the past, to historiography and to the totality of relationships. But remember if and when I do, I keep the said distinction in mind – and you should too.

It may well be, however, that this clarification on the past–history distinction seems inconsequential; that one is left thinking, so what? What does it matter? Let me offer three illustrations of why the past–history distinction is important to understand.

1 The past has occurred. It has gone and can only be brought back again by historians in very different media, for example in books, articles, documentaries, etc., not as actual events. The past has gone and history is what historians make of it when they go to work. History is the labour of historians (and/or

those acting as if they were historians) and when they meet, one of the first questions they ask each other is what they are working on. It is this work, embodied in books, periodicals, etc., that you read when you do history (‘I am going to university to read history’). What this means is that history is quite literally on library and other shelves. Thus if you start a course on seventeenth-century Spain, you do not actually go to the seventeenth century or to Spain; you go, with the help of your reading list, to the library. This is where seventeenth-century Spain is – between Dewey numbers – for where else do teachers send you in order to ‘read it up’? Of course you could go to other places where you can find other traces of the past – for example Spanish archives – but wherever you go, when you get there you will have ‘to read’. This reading is not spontaneous or natural but learned – on various courses for example – and informed (made meaning-full) by other texts. History (historiography) is an inter-textual, linguistic construct.

- 2 Let us say that you have been studying part of England’s past – the sixteenth century – at A level. Let us imagine that you have used one major text-book: Elton’s *England under the Tudors*. In class you have discussed aspects of the sixteenth century, you have class notes, but for your essays and the bulk of your revision you have used Elton. When the exam came along you wrote in the shadow of Elton. And when you passed, you gained an A level in English history, a qualification for considering aspects of ‘the past’. But really it would be more accurate to say you have an A level in Geoffrey Elton: for what, actually, at this stage, is your ‘reading’ of the English past if not basically his reading of it?
- 3 These two brief examples of the past–history distinction may seem innocuous, but actually it can have enormous effects. For example, although millions of women have lived in the past (in Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, Africa, America...) few of them appear in history, that is, in history texts. Women, to use a phrase, have been ‘hidden from history’, that is, systematically excluded from most historians’ accounts. Accordingly, feminists are now engaged in the task of ‘writing women back into history’, whilst both men and women are looking at the interconnected constructions of masculinity.² And at this point you might pause to consider how many other groups,

people(s), classes, have been/are omitted from histories and why; and what might be the consequences if such omitted 'groups' were central to historical accounts and the now central groups were marginalised.

More will be said about the significance and possibilities of working the past-history distinction later, but I would now like to look at another argument from the earlier paragraph (p. 5) where I said that we have to understand that the past and history are not stitched into each other such that one and only one reading of any phenomenon is entailed, that the same object of enquiry is capable of being read differently by different discourses whilst, internal to each, there are different readings over space and time.

To begin to illustrate this, let us imagine that through a window we can see a landscape (though not all of it because the window-frame quite literally 'frames' it). We can see in the foreground several roads; beyond we can see other roads with houses alongside; we can see rolling fields with farmhouses in them; on the skyline, some miles away, we can see ridges of hills. In the middle distance we can see a market-town. The sky is a watery blue.

Now there is nothing in this landscape that says 'geography'. Yet clearly a geographer could account for it geographically. Thus s/he might read the land as displaying specific field patterns and farming practices; the roads could become part of a series of local/regional communication networks, the farms and town could be read in terms of a specific population distribution; contour maps could chart the terrain, climatic geographers could explain the climate/weather and, say, consequent types of irrigation. In this way the view could become something else – geography. Similarly, a sociologist could take the same landscape and construct it sociologically: people in the town could become data for occupational structures, size of family units, etc.; population distribution could be considered in terms of class, income, age, sex; climate could be seen as affecting leisure facilities, and so on.

Historians too can turn the same landscape into their discourse. Field patterns today could be compared to those pre-enclosure; population now to that of 1831, 1871; land ownership

and political power analysed over time; one could examine how a bit of the view edges into a national park, of when and why the railway and canal ceased functioning and so on.

Now, given that there is nothing intrinsic in the view that shouts geography, sociology, history, etc., then we can see clearly that whilst historians and the rest of them do not invent the view (all that stuff seems to be there all right) they do invent all its descriptive categories and any meanings it can be said to have. They construct the analytical and methodological tools to make out of this raw material their ways of reading and talking about it: discoursing. In that sense we read the world as a text, and, logically, such readings are infinite. By which I do not mean that we just make up stories about the world/the past (that is, that we know the world/the past and then make up stories about them) but rather the claim is a much stronger one; that the world/the past comes to us always already as stories and that we cannot get out of these stories (narratives) to check if they correspond to the real world/past, because these 'always already' narratives constitute 'reality'. Which means, in the example being discussed, that the landscape (which only becomes meaningful as a reading) cannot fix such readings once and for all; thus geographers may interpret and re-interpret (read and re-read) the landscape endlessly whilst arguing about just what is being said here 'geographically'. Additionally, given that geography as a discourse has not always existed, then not only have geographers' readings had to begin and not only have they differed over space and time, but geographers have themselves understood/read what constitutes the discourse they are working within differently too; that is, geography itself as a way of reading the world needs interpreting/historicising. And so it is with sociology and history. Different sociologists and historians interpret the same phenomenon differently through discourses that are always on the move, that are always being de-composed and re-composed; are always positioned and positioning, and which thus need constant self-examination as discourses by those who use them.

At this point, then, let me assume that the argument that history as a discourse is categorically different to the past has been indicated. I said at the start of the chapter, however, that at the level of theory *vis-à-vis* what is history, I would be making two points. Here is the second.

Given the past-history distinction, the problem for the historian who somehow wants to capture the past within his/her history thus becomes: how do you fit these two things together? Obviously how this connection is attempted, how the historian tries to know the past, is crucial in determining the possibilities of what history is and can be, not least because it is history's claim to knowledge (rather than belief or assertion) that makes it the discourse it is (I mean, historians do not usually see themselves as writers of fiction, although inadvertently they may be).³ Yet because of the past-history difference, and because the object of enquiry that historians work on is, in most of its manifestations, actually absent in that only traces of the past remain, then clearly there are all kinds of limits controlling the knowledge claims that historians can make. And for me, in this fitting together of past-history, there are three very problematic theoretical areas: areas of epistemology, methodology and ideology, each of which must be discussed if we are to see what history is.

Epistemology (from the Greek *episteme* = knowledge) refers to the philosophical area of theories of knowledge. This area is concerned with how we know about anything. In that sense history is part of another discourse, philosophy, taking part in the general question of what it is possible to know with reference to its own area of knowledge – the past. And here you might see the problem already, for if it is hard to know about something that exists, to say something about an effectively absent subject like 'the past in history' is especially difficult. It seems obvious that all such knowledge is therefore likely to be tentative, and constructed by historians working under all kinds of presuppositions and pressures which did not, of course, operate on people in the past. Yet, we still see historians trying to raise before us the spectre of the real past, an objective past about which their accounts are accurate and even true. Now I think such certaintist claims are not – and never were – possible to achieve, and I would say that in our current situation this ought to be obvious – as I will argue in chapter 3. Yet to accept this, to allow doubt to run, clearly affects what you might think history is, that is, it gives you part of the answer to what history is and can be. For to admit not really to know, to see history as being (logically) anything you want it to be (the fact-value distinction allows this; besides there have been so very many histories) poses the question of how

specific histories came to be constructed into one shape rather than another, not only epistemologically, but methodologically and ideologically too. Here, what can be known and how we can know interact with power. Yet in a sense this is so – and this point must be stressed – only because of history's epistemological fragility. For if it were possible to know once and for all, now and for ever, then there would be no need for any more history to be written, for what would be the point of countless historians saying it all over again in the same way? History (historical constructions not 'the past/future') would stop, and if you think that the idea of stopping history (historians) is absurd it really isn't: stopping history is not only part of Orwell's 1984 for example, but a part of European experience in the 1930s – the more immediate time and place that made Orwell consider it.

Epistemological fragility, then, allows for historians' readings to be multifarious (one past – many histories) so what is it that makes history so epistemologically fragile? There are four basic reasons.

First (and in what follows I draw on David Lowenthal's arguments in his *The Past is a Foreign Country*⁴) no historian can cover and thus re-cover the totality of past events because their 'content' is virtually limitless. One cannot recount more than a fraction of what has occurred and no historian's account ever corresponds precisely with the past: the sheer bulk of the past precludes total history. Most information about the past has never been recorded and most of the rest was evanescent.

Second, no account can re-cover the past as it was because the past was not an account but events, situations, etc. As the past has gone, no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts. We judge the 'accuracy' of historians' accounts *vis-à-vis* other historians' interpretations and there is no real account, no proper history that, deep down, allows us to check all other accounts against it: there is no fundamentally correct 'text' of which other interpretations are just variations; variations are all there are. Here the cultural critic Steven Giles is succinct when he comments that what has gone before is *always* apprehended through the sedimented layers of previous interpretations and through the reading habits and categories developed by previous/current interpretive discourses.⁵ And this insight allows us to make the point that this way of seeing things

makes the study of history (the past) necessarily a study of historiography (historians), historiography therefore being considered not as an extra to the study of history but as actually constituting it. This is an area I shall return to in chapter 2; but now to the third point.

And this is that no matter how verifiable, how widely acceptable or checkable, history remains inevitably a personal construct, a manifestation of the historian's perspective as a 'narrator'. Unlike direct memory (itself suspect) history relies on someone else's eyes and voice; we see through an interpreter who stands between past events and our readings of them. Of course, as Lowenthal says, written history 'in practice' cuts down the historian's logical freedom to write anything by allowing the reader access to his/her sources, but the historian's viewpoint and predilections still shape the choice of historical materials, and our own personal constructs determine what we make of them. The past that we 'know' is always contingent upon our own views, our own 'present'. Just as we are ourselves products of the past so the known past (history) is an artefact of ours. Nobody, however immersed in the past, can divest himself/herself of his/her own knowledge and assumptions. To explain the past, Lowenthal notes, 'historians go beyond the actual record to frame hypotheses in present day modes of thought . . . "we are moderns and our words and thought can not but be modern", noted Maitland, "it is too late for us to be early English".⁶ There are, then, few limits to the shaping power of interpretive, imagining words. 'Look' says the poet Khlebnikov in his *Decrees To The Planets*, 'the sun obeys my syntax.'⁷ 'Look', says the historian, 'the past obeys my interpretation.'

Now this might look slightly poetical itself, so the point being made about sources at one and the same time preventing the historian's total freedom and yet not fixing things such that they can really stop endless interpretations might be illustrated by a mundane example. Thus there are many disagreements as to Hitler's intentions after gaining power, and the causes of the Second World War. One such famous long-running disagreement has been between A. J. P. Taylor and H. Trevor-Roper. This disagreement was not based on their merits as historians; both are very experienced, both have 'skills', both can read documents and in this case they often read the same ones, yet still they

disagreed. Thus whilst the sources may prevent just anything at all from being said, nevertheless the same events/sources do not entail that one and only one reading has to follow.

The above three reasons for epistemological fragility are based on the idea that history is less than the past; that historians can only recover fragments. But the fourth point stresses that, through hindsight, we in a way know more about the past than the people who lived in it. In translating the past into modern terms and in using knowledge perhaps previously unavailable, the historian discovers both what has been forgotten about the past and pieces together things never pieced together before. People and social formations are thus caught up in processes that can only be seen in retrospect, and documents and other traces are ripped out of their original contexts of purpose and function to illustrate, say, a pattern which might not be remotely meaningful to any of their authors. And all this is, as Lowenthal says, inevitable. History always conflates, it changes, it exaggerates aspects of the past: 'Time is foreshortened, details selected and highlighted, action concentrated, relations simplified, not to [deliberately] alter . . . the events but to . . . give them meaning.'⁸ Even the most empirical chronicler has to invent narrative structures to give shape to time and place: '*Res gestae* may well be one damned thing after another . . . but it cannot possibly appear as such for all meaning would then be extruded from it.'⁹ And because stories emphasise linkages and play down the role of breaks, of ruptures, then, concludes Lowenthal, histories as known to us appear more comprehensible than we have any reason to believe the past was.

These then are the main (and well known) epistemological limits. I have drawn them quickly and impressionistically and you might go on to read Lowenthal and the others yourself. But I now intend to move on. For if these are the epistemological limits to what can be known, then they obviously interconnect with the ways historians try and find out as much as they can. And, with historians' methods as with epistemology, there are no definitive ways that have to be used by virtue of their being correct; historians' methods are every bit as fragile as their epistemologies.

So far I have argued that history is a shifting discourse constructed by historians and that from the existence of the past no

one reading is entailed: change the gaze, shift the perspective and new readings appear. Yet although historians know all this, most seem to studiously ignore it and strive for objectivity and truth nevertheless. And this striving for truth cuts through ideological/methodological positions.

Thus on the empirical right (somewhat), G. Elton in *The Practice of History*¹⁰ states at the start of his chapter on research: 'The study of history, then, amounts to a search for the truth.' And, although the same chapter ends with a series of qualifications – 'He [the historian] knows that what he is studying is real [but] he knows that he can never recover all of it . . . he knows that the process of historical research and reconstruction will never end, but he is also conscious that this does not render his work unreal or illegitimate' – it is obvious that such caveats do not seriously affect Elton's originally stated 'truth search'.

On the Marxist left (somewhat), E. P. Thompson in *The Poverty of Theory*¹¹ writes that, 'For some time . . . the materialist conception of history . . . has been growing in self-confidence. As a mature practice . . . it is perhaps the strongest discipline deriving from the Marxist tradition. Even in my own life-time . . . the advances have been considerable, and one had supposed these to be advances in knowledge.' Thompson admits that this is not to say that such knowledge is subject to 'scientific proof', but he holds it to be real knowledge nevertheless.

In the empirical centre (somewhat), A. Marwick in *The Nature of History*¹² appreciates what he calls the 'subjective dimension' of historians' accounts, but for him this doesn't live in, say, the historian's ideological position, but in the nature of the evidence, historians being 'forced into a greater display of personal interpretation by the imperfections of their source materials'. This being the case Marwick thus argues that it is the job of the historians to develop 'tight methodological rules' whereby they can reduce their 'moral' interventions. Thus Marwick links up to Elton: 'Elton is keen to establish that just because historical explanation does not depend upon universal laws, that does not mean it is not governed by very strict rules.' And so, for all these historians, truth, knowledge and legitimacy derive from tight methodological rules and procedures. It is this that cuts down interpretive flux.

My argument is different. For me what determines interpretation ultimately lies beyond method and evidence in ideology. For while most historians would agree that a rigorous method is important, there is a problem as to which rigorous method they are talking about. In Marwick's own section on method he reviews a selection from which one can (presumably) choose. Thus, would you like to follow Hegel or Marx or Dilthey or Weber or Popper or Hempel or Aron or Collingwood or Dray or Oakshott or Danto or Gallie or Walsh or Atkinson or Leff or Hexter? Would you care to go along with modern empiricists, feminists, the Annales School, neo-Marxists, new-stylists, econometricians, structuralists or post-structuralists, or even Marwick himself, to name but twenty-five possibilities? And this is a short list! The point is that even if you could make a choice, what would be the criteria? How could one know which method would lead to the 'truer' past? Of course each method would be rigorous, that is, internally coherent and consistent, but it would also be self-referencing. That is, it might tell you how to conduct valid arguments within itself but, given that all the choices do this, then the problem of discriminating somehow between twenty-five alternatives just will not go away. Thompson is rigorous and so is Elton; on what grounds does one choose? On Marwick's? But why his? So, is it not likely that in the end one chooses say, Thompson, because one just likes what Thompson does with his method; one likes his reasons for doing history: for all other things being equal, why else might one take up a position?

To summarise. Talk of method as the road to truth is misleading. There is a range of methods without any agreed criteria for choosing. Often people like Marwick argue that despite all the methodological differences between, say, empiricists and structuralists, they do nevertheless agree on the fundamentals. But this again is not so. The fact that structuralists go to enormous lengths to explain very precisely that they are not empiricists; the fact that they invented their specific approaches precisely to differentiate themselves from everyone else seems to have been a point somewhat ignored by Marwick and the others.

I want now to deal briefly with just one further argument regarding method which regularly occurs in introductory debates about the 'nature of history'. It is about concepts and it runs as follows: it may well be that the differences between methods

cannot be closed down, but are there not key concepts that all historians use? Doesn't this imply some common methodological ground?

Now it is certainly the case that, in all types of histories, one constantly meets so called 'historical concepts' (by not calling them 'historians' concepts' such concepts look impersonal and objective, as though they belong to a history that is somehow self-generating). Not only that, such concepts are referred to quite regularly as the 'heartlands' of history. These are concepts such as time, evidence, empathy, cause and effect, continuity and change, and so on.

I am not going to argue that you should not 'work' concepts, but I am concerned that when presenting these particular ones, the impression is strongly given that they are indeed obvious and timeless and that they do constitute the universal building blocks of historical knowledge. Yet this is ironic, for one of the things that the opening up of history ought to have done is to historicise history itself; to see all historical accounts as imprisoned in time and space and thus to see their concepts not as universal heartlands but as specific, local expressions. This historicisation is easy to demonstrate in the case of 'common' concepts.

In an article on new developments in history, the educationalist Donald Steel has considered how certain concepts became 'heartland concepts', showing how in the 1960s five major concepts were identified as constituting history: time, space, sequence, moral judgement and social realism.¹³ Steel points out that these were refined (not least by himself) by 1970 to provide the 'key concepts' of history: time, evidence, cause and effect, continuity and change, and similarity and difference. Steel explains that it was these that became the basis for School's Council History, the GCSE, certain A level developments, and which have been influential both in undergraduate courses and more generally. Apparently then these 'old' heartlands have been pumping away for less than twenty years, are not universal, and do not come out of historians' methods as such but very much out of general educational thinking. Obviously they are ideological too, for what might happen if other concepts were used to organise the (dominant) field: structure-agency, overdetermination, conjuncture, uneven development, centre-periphery, dominant-marginal, base-superstructure, rupture, genealogy,

mentalité, hegemony, élite, paradigm, etc.? It is time to address ideology directly.

Let me begin with an example. It would be possible at this point in space and time to place in any school or undergraduate history syllabus a course that would be quite properly historical (in that it looked like other histories) but in which the choice of subject matter and the methodological approach was made from a black, Marxist, feminist perspective. Yet I doubt if any such course could be found. Why not? Not because it would not be history, for it would, but because black Marxist-feminists don't really have the power to put such a course into this sort of public circulation. Yet if one were to ask those who might well have the power to decide what does constitute 'suitable courses', who might well have the power to effect such inclusions/exclusions, then it is likely that they would argue that the reason for such a non-appearance is because such a course would be ideological – that is, that the motives for such a history would come from concerns external to history *per se*; that it would be a vehicle for the delivery of a specific position for persuasive purposes. Now this distinction between 'history as such' and 'ideological history' is interesting because it implies, and is meant to imply, that certain histories (generally the dominant ones) are not ideological at all, do not position people, and do not deliver views of the past that come from outside 'the subject'. But we have already seen that meanings given to histories of all descriptions are necessarily that; not meanings intrinsic in the past (any more than the 'landscape' had our meanings already in its before we put them there) but meanings given to the past from outside(rs). History is never for itself; it is always for someone.

Accordingly it seems plausible to say that particular social formations want their historians to deliver particular things. It also seems plausible to say that the predominantly delivered positions will be in the interests of those stronger ruling blocs within social formations, not that such positions are automatically achieved, unchallenged or secured once and for all and 'that is it'. The fact that history *per se* is an ideological construct means that it is constantly being re-worked and re-ordered by all those who are variously affected by power relationships; because the dominated as well as the dominant also have their versions of the past to legitimate their practices, versions which have to be

excluded as improper from any place on the agenda of the dominant discourse. In that sense re-orderings of the messages to be delivered (often many such re-orderings are referred to academically as 'controversies') just have to be constructed continuously because the needs of the dominant/subordinate are constantly being re-worked in the real world as they seek to mobilise people(s) in support of their interests. History is forged in such conflict and clearly these conflicting needs for history impinge upon the debates (struggle for ownership) as to what history is.

So, at this point, can we not see that the way to answer the question of 'what is history?' in ways that are realistic is to substitute the word 'who' for 'what', and add 'for' to the end of the phrase; thus, the question becomes not 'what is history?' but 'who is history for?' If we do this then we can see that history is bound to be problematic because it is a contested term/discourse, meaning different things to different groups. For some groups want a sanitised history where conflict and distress are absent; some want history to lead to quietism; some want history to embody rugged individualism, some to provide strategies and tactics for revolution, some to provide grounds for counter-revolution, and so on. It is easy to see how history for a revolutionary is bound to be different from that desired by a conservative. It is also easy to see how the list of uses for history is not only logically but practically endless; I mean, what would a history be like that everyone could once and for all agree on? Let me briefly clarify these comments with an illustration.

In his novel *1984*, Orwell wrote that those who control the present control the past and those who control the past control the future. This seems likely outside fiction too. Thus people(s) in the present need antecedents to locate themselves now and legitimate their ongoing and future ways of living. (Actually of course the 'facts' of the past – or anything else – legitimate nothing at all given the fact-value distinction, but the point being addressed here is how people act as if they do.) Thus people(s) literally feel the need to root themselves today and tomorrow in their yesterdays. Recently such yesterdays have been sought for (and found, given that the past can and will sustain countless narratives) by women, blacks, regional groupings, various minorities, etc. In these pasts explanations for current existences and future programmes are made. A little further back and the working classes

too sought to root themselves by way of a historically contrived trajectory. Further back still the bourgeoisie found its genealogy and began to construct its history for itself (and others). In that sense all classes/groups write their collective autobiographies. History is the way people(s) create, in part, their identities. It is far more than a slot in the school/academic curriculum, though we can see how what goes into such spaces is crucially important for all those variously interested parties.

Do we not know this all the time? Is it not obvious that such an important 'legitimizing' phenomenon as history is rooted in real needs and power? I think it is, except that when the dominant discourse refers to the constant re-writing of histories it does so in ways that displace such needs: it muses blandly that each generation re-writes its own history. But the question is how and why? And the arguable answer, alluded to in Orwell, is because power relations produce ideological discourses such as 'history as knowledge' which are necessary for all involved in terms of conflicting legitimization exercises.

Let us conclude the discussion of what history is in theory. I have argued that history is composed of epistemology, methodology and ideology. Epistemology shows we can never really know the past; that the gap between the past and history (historiography) is an ontological one, that is, is in the very nature of things such that no amount of epistemological effort can bridge it. Historians have devised ways of working to cut down the influence of the interpreting historian by developing rigorous methods which they have then tried variously to universalise, so that if everyone practised them then a heartland of skills, concepts, routines and procedures could reach towards objectivity. But there are many methodologies; the so-called heartland concepts are of recent and partial construction, and I have argued that the differences that we see are there because history is basically a contested discourse, an embattled terrain wherein people(s), classes and groups autobiographically construct interpretations of the past literally to please themselves. There is no definitive history outside these pressures, any (temporary) consensus only being reached when dominant voices can silence others either by overt power or covert incorporation. In the end history is theory and theory is ideological and ideology just is material interests. Ideology seeps into every nook and cranny of

history, including the everyday practices of making histories in those institutions predominantly set aside in our social formation for that purpose – especially universities. Let us now look at history as that sort of practice.

ON PRACTICE

I have just concluded that history has been and will be made for many different reasons and in many places, and that one such type is professional history, that is, the history produced by (generally) salaried historians working (on the whole) in higher education and especially universities. In *The Death of the Past*¹⁴ the historian J. H. Plumb described such (Elton-like) professional history as the process of trying to establish the truth of what happened in the past and which could then be pitched over against popular memory/common-sense/recipe-knowledge 'pasts' in order to get such half-formed, half-digested (and for Plumb) half-baked constructions out of the way. In *On Living in an Old Country*,¹⁵ Patrick Wright has argued that not only is Plumb's task impossible because, as we have seen, there are no unproblematic historical (historians') truths as such; and that not only is Plumb's aim possibly undesirable because in, say, popular memory, there may well lie strengths and alternative readings which it might be necessary to oppose at times to 'official' histories (Wright suggests we think here of the proles' memories in Orwell's 1984) but also because one type of institution where such eradication might be carried out, the educational institution, is itself intimately involved in popular memory-type socialisation processes. For although professional historians overwhelmingly present themselves as academic and disinterested, and although they are certainly in some ways 'distanced', nevertheless, it is more illuminating to see such practitioners as being not so much outside the ideological fray but as occupying very dominant positions within it; to see professional histories as expressions of how dominant ideologies currently articulate history 'academically'. It seems rather obvious that, seen in a wider cultural and 'historical' perspective, multi-million pound institutional investments such as our national universities are integral to the reproduction of the on-going social formation and are thus at the forefront of cultural guardianship (academic standards) and

ideological control; it would be somewhat careless if they were not.

Given that I have tried so far to locate history in the interstices of real interests and pressures, I need to consider 'scholarly' pressures too, not only because it is their type of history that predominantly defines the field as to what 'history really is', but also because it is the type of history studied on A level and undergraduate courses. On such courses you are, in effect, being inducted into academic history; you are to become like the professionals. So what are the professionals like and how do they make histories?¹⁶

Let us start this way. History is produced by a group of labourers called historians when they go to work; it is their job. And when they go to work they take with them certain identifiable things.

First they take themselves personally: their values, positions, their ideological perspectives.

Second they take their epistemological presuppositions. These are not always held very consciously but historians will have 'in mind' ways of gaining 'knowledge'. Here will come into play a range of categories – economic, social, political, cultural, ideological, etc. – a range of concepts across/within these categories (thus within the political category there may be much use of, say, class, power, state, sovereignty, legitimacy, etc.) and broad assumptions about the constancy, or otherwise, of human beings (ironically and a-historically referred to very often as 'human nature'). Through the use of these categories, concepts and assumptions, the historian will generate hypotheses, formulate abstractions, and organise and reorganise his/her materials to include and exclude. Historians also use technical vocabularies and these in turn (aside from being inevitably anachronistic) affect not only what they say but the way they say it. Such categories, concepts and vocabularies are constantly being reworked, but without them historians would not be able to understand each others' accounts or make up their own, no matter how much they may disagree about things.

Third, historians have routines and procedures (methods, in the narrow sense of the term) for close working on material: ways of checking it for its origins, position, authenticity, reliability. . . . These routines will apply to all the materials worked on albeit

with various degrees of concentration and rigour (many slips and mis-takes occur). Here are a range of techniques running from the elaborate to the nitty-gritty; these are the sorts of practices often referred to as 'historians' *skills*', techniques which we can see now, in passing, as but themselves passing moments in that combination of factors that make histories. (In other words history is not about 'skills'.) So, armed with these sorts of practices, the historian can get down more directly to 'make up' some history – 'making histories'.

Fourth, in going about their work of finding various materials to work on and 'work up', historians shuttle between other historians' published work(s) (stored up labour-time as embodied in books, articles, etc.) and unpublished materials. This unpublished 'newish' material can be called the traces of the past (literally the remaining marks from the past – documents, records, artefacts, etc.), these traces being a mixture of the known (but little used) trace, new, unused and possibly unknown traces, and old traces; that is, materials used before but, because of the newish/new traces found, now capable of being placed in contexts different to those they have occupied before. The historian can then begin to organise all these elements in new (and various) ways – always looking for that longed-for 'original thesis' – and so begins to transform the traces of the once concrete into the 'concrete in thought', that is, into historians' accounts. Here the historian literally re-produces the traces of the past in a new category and this act of transformation – the past into history – is his/her basic job.

Fifth, having done their research, historians then have to write it up. This is where the epistemological, methodological and ideological factors again come into play, interconnecting with everyday practices, as they will have done throughout the research phases. Obviously such pressures of the everyday will vary but some include:

- 1 Pressures from family and/or friends ('Not another weekend working!' 'Can't you give your work a rest?');
- 2 Pressures from the work-place, where the various influences of heads of faculty, departmental heads, peer group, institutional research policies and, dare it be said, the obligation to teach students, all bear down;

3 Pressures from publishers with regard to several factors:

wordage: the constraints on wordage are considerable and have effects. Think how different historical knowledge could be were all books a third shorter or four times longer than 'normal' size!

format: the size of page, print, with or without illustrations, with or without exercises, bibliography, index, etc.; in loose-leaf, with accompanying tape or video – all these have effects too.

market: who the historian sees as his/her market will influence what is said and how: think how the French Revolution of 1789 would have to be 'different' for young school children, sixth-formers, non-Europeans, 'revolutionary specialists', the interested layman.

deadlines: how long the writer has in total to do the research and write it up, and how that time is allocated (one day a week, a term off, at weekends) affects, say, the availability of sources, the historian's concentration, etc. Again, the sorts of conditions the publisher sets regarding completion are often crucial.

literary style: how the historian writes (polemically, discursively, flamboyantly, pedantically, and in combinations of these) and the grammatical, syntactical and semantic reach, all affect the account and may well have to be modified to fit the publisher's house-style, series format, etc.

referees: publishers send manuscripts to readers who may call for drastic changes in terms of the organisation of material (this text, for example, was originally nearly twice as long); again, some referees have been known to have axes to grind.

re-writing: at all stages until the text goes to print re-writings take place. Sometimes sections will require three drafts, sometimes thirteen. Bright ideas that seemed initially to say it all become weary and flat when you have tried to write it all a dozen times; again, things you were originally putting in are left out and things left in often seem hostages to fortune. What kinds of judgements are involved here as the writer 'works' all those traces read and noted (often imperfectly) so long before?

And so on. Now, these are obvious points (think here how

many outside factors, that is, factors outside 'the past', operate on you and influence what you write in essays and studies), but the thing to stress here is that none of these pressures, indeed none of the processes discussed in this chapter, operated on the events being accounted for; on, say, manpower planning in the First World War. Here, again, the gaps between the past and history yawn.

Sixth, what has been written so far has been about the production of histories. But texts also have to be read; consumed. Just as you can consume cake, in many different ways (slowly, gulping it), in a variety of situations (at work, driving a car), in relation to other courses (have you already had enough, is digestion hard) and in a variety of settings (if you're on a diet, at a wedding), none of which ever comes round in exactly the same way again, so the consumption of a text takes place in contexts that do not repeat themselves. Quite literally no two readings are the same. (Sometimes you might write comments in the margins of a text and then, returning to it some time later, not remember why you wrote what you did; yet they are exactly the same words on the same page, so just how do meanings retain meaning?) Thus no reading, even by the same person, can be guaranteed to produce the same effects repeatedly, which means that authors cannot force their intentions/interpretations on the reader. Conversely, readers cannot fully fathom everything the authors intend. Further, the same text can be inserted first into one broad discourse and then into another: there are no logical limits, each reading is another writing. This is the world of the deconstructionist text where any text, in other con-texts, can mean many things. Here is a 'world of difference'.

And yet these last remarks seem to raise a problem (but on your reading did a problem arise for you; and is yours different to mine?). The problem raised for me is this: although the above seems to suggest that all is interpretive flux, in fact we 'read' in fairly predictable ways. So, in that sense, what pins readings down? Well, not detailed agreement on all and everything because the details will always float free – specific things can always be made to mean more or less – but general agreements do occur. They do so because of power; here we return to ideology. For what arguably stops texts from being used in totally arbitrary ways is the fact that certain texts are nearer to some texts than

others; are more or less locatable into genres, into slots; are more or less congenial to the needs that people(s) have and which are expressed in texts. And so, *après* Orwell, they find affinities and fixing posts (booklists, recommended readings, Dewey numbers) that are themselves ultimately arbitrary, but which relate to the more permanent needs of groups and classes: we live in a social system – not a social random. This is a complicated but essential area to consider and you might note here texts by theorists such as Scholes, Eagleton, Fish and Bennett, wherein how this might well work is discussed.¹⁷ You might also reflect upon how this somewhat baffling situation – of the wayward text which does not logically have to settle down but which does so in practice – relates to an interpretive anxiety which students often have. Their anxiety is this: if you understand that history is what historians make; that they make it on slender evidence; that history is inescapably interpretive and that there are at least half a dozen sides to every argument so that history is relative, then you might think well, if it seems just interpretation and nobody really knows, then why bother doing it? If it is all relative what is the point? This is a state of mind we might call 'hapless relativism'.

In a sense this way of looking at things is a positive one. It is liberating, for it throws out old certainties and those who have benefited from them are capable of being exposed. And in a sense everything is relative (historicist). But, liberating or not, this still sometimes leaves people feeling as if they are in a dead end. Yet there is no need to. To deconstruct other peoples' histories is the precondition of constructing your own in ways which suggest you know what you are doing; in ways which remind you that history is always history for someone. For although, as I have said, logically all accounts are problematic and relative, the point is that some are actually dominant and others marginal. All are logically the same but in actuality they are different; they are in evaluative (albeit ultimately groundless) hierarchies. The question then becomes 'why?' and the answer is because knowledge is related to power and that, within social formations, those with the most power distribute and legitimate 'knowledge' *vis-à-vis* interests as best they can. This is the way out of relativism in theory, by analyses of power in practice, and thus a relativist perspective need not lead to despair but to the beginning of a

general recognition of how things seem to operate. This is emancipating. Reflexively, you too can make histories.

ON A DEFINITION OF HISTORY

I have just argued that history in the main is what historians make. So why the fuss; isn't this what history is? In a way it is, but obviously not quite. What historians do in a narrow working sense is fairly easy to describe; we can draw up a job description. The problem, however, comes when this activity gets inserted, as it must, back into the power relations within any social formation out of which it comes; when different people(s), groups and classes ask: 'What does history mean for me/us, and how can it be used or abused?' It is here, in usages and meanings, that history becomes so problematic; when the question 'What is history?' becomes, as I have explained, 'Who is history for?' This is the bottom line; so, what is history for me? A definition:

History is a shifting, problematic discourse, ostensibly about an aspect of the world, the past, that is produced by a group of present-minded workers (overwhelmingly in our culture salaried historians) who go about their work in mutually recognisable ways that are epistemologically, methodologically, ideologically and practically positioned and whose products, once in circulation, are subject to a series of uses and abuses that are logically infinite but which in actuality generally correspond to a range of power bases that exist at any given moment and which structure and distribute the meanings of histories along a dominant-marginal spectrum.¹⁸

Chapter 2

On some questions and some answers

Having given a definition of history I now want to work it such that it might give answers to the sort of basic questions that often arise with regard to the nature of history. Because this text is short my comments will be brief; but brief or not, I hope that the answers I will be suggesting point both in the direction and to the way in which more sophisticated, nuanced and qualified responses can be made. Besides, I think a guide such as this (a sort of 'rough guide to history') is needed, not least because, although questions on the nature of history are regularly raised, the tendency is to leave them open so that you can then 'make up your own mind'. Now I too want that, but I am aware that very often the various 'nature of history' debates are perceived only dimly (I mean there seems so many alternatives to fit in, so many possible orderings of the basic constituents) such that some doubt and confusion can remain. So for a change as it were, here are some questions and some answers.

- 1 What is the status of truth in the discourses of history?
- 2 Is there any such thing as an objective history (are there objective 'facts' etc.), or is history just interpretation?
- 3 What is bias and what are the problems involved in trying to get rid of it?
- 4 What is empathy; can it be done, how, why, and if it cannot be achieved, why does it seem so important to try?
- 5 What are the differences between primary and secondary sources (traces) and between 'evidence' and 'sources': what is at stake here?
- 6 What do you do with those couplets (cause and effect,