

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.³⁴

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.

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.

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 forty 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.

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

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

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.

chimera

A creature of the imagination, an illusion.

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 forty 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.³⁵

The need for contemporary history

One clear implication is that contemporary history, which can be roughly defined as the period since 1945, has a strong claim on historians. 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 3). 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. But the fulfilment of history's practical functions does not mean the abandonment of more distant periods – far from it. So many facets of the contemporary scene are rooted in the remote past that the tradition of studying the classical, medieval and early modern epochs can never be given up: without it our historical perspective on current problems would be seriously defective. And as evidence of the range of human achievement and mentality in the past, those periods are indispensable.

Responding to society's expectations does not, therefore, impose a limitation as regards periods – or as regards countries. But it does suggest that the selection of themes for research should be influenced by a sensitivity to those areas of current concern that stand most in need of a historical perspective; examples such

as the history of the family or the history of Africa already discussed could easily be multiplied. Finally, the proper performance of history's social role demands that historians take seriously the task of diffusing as widely as possible their findings and the practical implications to be drawn from them. Scholarly historical writing should not just be directed at the academic community, important though the critical scrutiny of other scholars is; it concerns all who want informed perspectives on the present. One of the criticisms that can most fairly be made of the historical profession today is that too little history is written with this wider audience in view (see Chapter 6).

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 ambiances in the past has the same kind of claim on our attention as the recreation 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'³⁶ 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.³⁷

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 of 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 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 her empire were excluded.

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