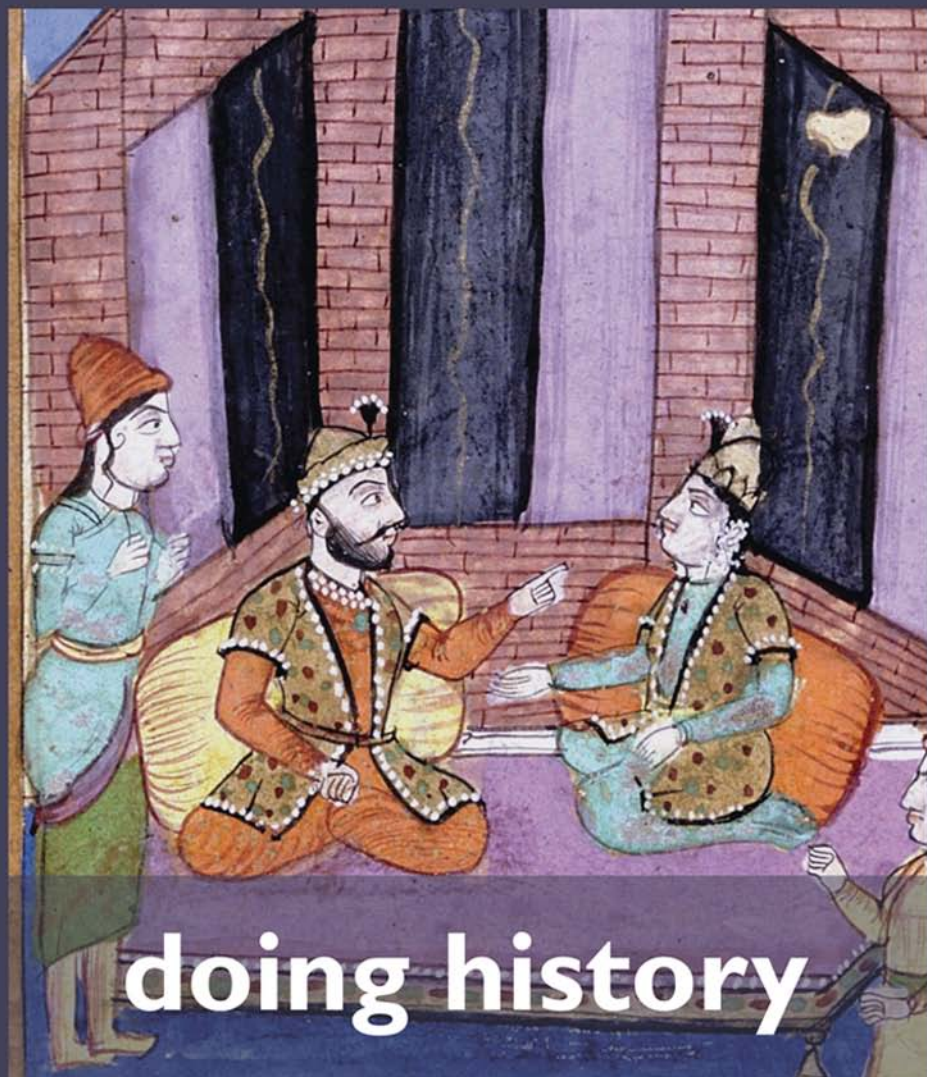




doing history

**MARK DONNELLY and
CLAIRE NORTON**

Doing History

History as an academic discipline has dramatically changed over the last few decades and has become much more exciting and varied as a result of ideas from other disciplines, the influence of postmodernism and historians' incorporation of their own theoretical reflections into their work. The way history is studied at university level can vary greatly from history at school or as represented in the media, and *Doing History* bridges that gap.

Aimed at undergraduate and postgraduate students of history, this is the ideal introduction to studying history as an academic subject at university.

Doing History presents the ideas and debates that shape how we do history today, covering arguments about the nature of historical knowledge and the function of historical writing, whether we can really ever know what happened in the past, what sources historians depend on, and whether the historians' versions of history have more value than popular histories.

This practical and accessible introduction to the discipline introduces students to these key discussions, familiarises them with the important terms and issues, equips them with the necessary vocabulary and encourages them to think about, and engage with, these questions. Clearly structured and accessibly written, it is an essential volume for all students embarking on the study of history.

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For James, with all my love.

And for my mum and dad, Ann and Ken Norton, two teachers who inspired, supported and encouraged me.

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Preface

How students are taught to ‘do history’ at university level differs from what they are taught before they begin their degree. This is understandable and, we would argue, desirable. Degree-level study *should* challenge students to think about subjects in new ways, even if sometimes the experience of working with unfamiliar concepts is initially disorienting. School history curricula largely assume that the historian’s task is to write as accurately and fairly as possible about ‘important’ historical topics – the ones deemed worthy of attention by curriculum designers. In this context, the key questions about how historians write history are really about the acquisition and performance of particular skills and methods. At university, however, students are confronted (in most cases for the first time) with more philosophical issues relating to historical research and writing. What is history? Who is history for? What are the social and political functions of historical knowledge? Why do historians write about their subject in the way that they do? Is history the same thing as the past? Why are some historians writing about the past in radically unorthodox ways, producing texts that would not have been regarded as legitimate histories until fairly recently?

This book aims to introduce students to the kinds of questions described above, and to help them to take part in the discussions that such questions provoke. Most history degree courses include some theoretical or reflexive component, in which attention focuses on what historians are actually doing when they produce knowledge about the past. We are aware that some historians view such enquiry into their practices as self-indulgent, and a distraction from the more important business of researching the actual past. But in our view, historians (and history students) *should* be able to discuss their research and writing in theoretical or philosophical terms (how do

they know what they know? what is their role in the creation of historical knowledge? on what grounds might we accept or reject knowledge claims?) as well as being able to answer more conventional historical questions. Our justification for making this point is that all history writing is based (consciously or not) on philosophical assumptions about what historians do and what it means to write 'history'. In order to think critically about these assumptions, historians require some familiarity with key texts and writers in the 'philosophy of history' field. However, we are also aware that such texts are often austere, abstract and for many students problematic as an entry point into unfamiliar territory. *Doing History* is designed to serve as a better entry point, one that assumes that its readers do not already possess an extensive vocabulary of philosophical terms. We aim here to introduce students to the key historiographical debates that historians are currently concerned with, using a question- or problem-centred format. We want to familiarise students with the main concepts and terminology involved in these debates and to equip them to take part in discussions about the nature (and future) of history as a discipline on their own terms.

Doing History does not argue that students necessarily should 'side' with any particular approach or theoretical model of history writing. But it does argue that students should be aware that debates about these theoretical models have now been underway for several decades at least, and should show some understanding of why these debates continue to divide the historical profession. Equally, this book is not intended to be a philosophical monograph; it does not advance a thesis as such about the 'proper' way to write history, neither does it attempt to provide an overview of the discipline's various theoretical schools.

Of course, we do not pretend that we are neutral or disinterested observers of an academic debate from which we stand apart. In the chapters that follow our intellectual sympathies are always fairly clear. But as Barbara Herrnstein Smith wrote, it is probably impossible to describe or represent the positions with which one disagrees as well as those one endorses.¹ Moreover, to claim that such supposed intellectual 'objectivity' and impartiality is possible would conflict with the wider arguments that we make throughout this book. We do believe, however, that we have critically and thoughtfully analysed the arguments of others, considered the evidence equally, and tried to represent the views of those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree as fairly as possible.

One argument that we do endorse throughout this book is that philosophical issues about 'doing history' relate to all forms of historical practice. We do

not see them as abstractions or as somehow isolated from the 'real' work of historians. We hope that readers will apply the terminology and concepts that they encounter here (and in their further reading) to their thinking about all other features of their work as historians. We have tried to show here how different perspectives about 'doing history' produce more than simply different interpretations of historical events, periods or processes. They determine whose stories from the past are told, whose voices from the past are heard, what counts as 'legitimate' history, who can become a professional historian, and which cultures and intellectual traditions are deemed worthy of our attention. In contrast to many other books that deal with similar historiographical issues, we have therefore tried to think about history writing in global terms rather than assume that scholarly history writing is a predominantly European and North American tradition. The single theme that runs through this book is the idea that how we 'do' history is always tied to particular times, places and cultures; it is never universal, invariant or somehow above the contingencies of a tradition.

PART I

WHAT IS HISTORY?

Introduction

Is history the same as the past?

The words ‘history’ and ‘the past’ are sometimes used interchangeably. When campaigners used the slogan ‘Make Poverty History’ in 2005, it was a more economical way of saying ‘Make Poverty a Thing That Belongs Only to the Past’. Similarly, saying that someone has a ‘troubled history’ or a ‘troubled past’ is to make the same point, whichever term is used. But at other times ‘history’ and ‘the past’ are used to suggest different things. As a subject or course of study, ‘history’ is usually taken to refer to an activity (one of enquiry), with the ‘past’ as the object of that enquiry. History in this sense is taken to be about the past, but it isn’t the past itself. This sounds an obvious point because the formulation of history as being the study of the past has become so ingrained within our ways of thinking and talking about it as a subject that it requires a special effort to think about it in any other ways. Skilful historians, we are told, ‘summon up the past’. Great history books ‘bring the past to life’. Phrases like these imply two important things. The first is that there is a clear separation between a determinate, knowable past (one which we can measure, which contains its own stories), and the practices of the historian doing their research. The second is that the historian’s job is somehow to close the gap between the history they write and the past that they claim to be writing about. Many historians still aspire to produce historical accounts that match up with the realities of the past that they describe. They want to ‘get it right’, to provide histories that are a kind of transcription of ‘the past as it was’.

Historians have always disagreed with each other about how close various accounts of the past have come to ‘getting it right’ – usually centring on issues of interpretation, categorisation and how sources have been used. If these disagreements have at times become personal and overheated, they were at least grounded on the shared assumption that what was being discussed was a real event in the past. In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, this shared assumption has itself been contested. Historians no longer necessarily agree that their scholarly practices can best be described as ‘the study of the past’. The identity of history as a subject has been called into question. Some historians now argue that history is just one genre that we can use to write about what Jenkins has termed ‘the before now’, a genre with specific conventions or rules. Such historians argue that it is these rules or protocols that make history different from other narrations about the past, rather than the fact that it corresponds to, or represents accurately, a singular, independently existing past. In practice, the impact of this debate can sometimes appear marginal. Historians who have different perspectives on the issue share similar working habits and often produce similar types of writing. They use many of the same research methods, follow the same rules for handling data and use the same protocols of history writing. In most cases at least, they are able to value each other’s work. But in other respects the differences involved in this debate are more profound. What is at stake?

For the sake of simplicity, at this stage we will introduce the debate in overly stark terms. Let us suggest for now that there are historians who believe that their work stands in relation to a picture of how the past probably looked. They maintain that at its final point their research constitutes an enquiry into the past itself, using primary sources and other historians’ work as their means to get there. In contrast, others will stop short of making such a claim. These historians see their work as standing in relation to nothing more than the way that they have used their research materials. In their view, history is not the study of the past via texts, but an enquiry into how historians can read and use a body of particular texts according to the subject’s own ground rules. History in this sense is purely textual, more like a form of literary or cultural criticism than an investigation into a unitary phenomenon (the past). Before discussing how this debate relates to your work as a history student, we will look a little further at some of the issues it raises about what ‘history’ and ‘the past’ can be taken to mean.

A common assumption behind the idea of history as an enquiry into the past is that historians can measure that past and produce truthful (if only partial) accounts of it. Geoffrey Elton regarded history as an objective search

to discover truth about the past.¹ Carl Hempel, in 'The Function of General Laws in History' (1942) sought to relate individual explanations for historical events to the type of universal laws found in the physical sciences.² A more recent example of the belief in a real and knowable past is Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob's *Telling the Truth about History* (1994). Although this book advocates writing about the past from a variety of cultural perspectives, it is grounded on the assumption that there is a singular past about which historians can write truthfully. A similar assumption appears in Richard J. Evans's *In Defence of History* (1997), in which the past is likened at various points to a sculptor's block of stone, a mountain observed by painters and a jigsaw puzzle. Each of these analogies conveys the sense that the past is singular and whole – the point about a jigsaw puzzle, for example, is that there is only one way of putting it together that makes any sense. This notion of a singular past is crucial to historians' beliefs that they can at least aim to make their accounts resemble the past 'as it was'. (As we will explain later – see Chapter 6 – we prefer to think in terms of plural pasts. But for convenience we will normally refer to 'the past' in this book.)

Historians who reject the idea that history is best described as the study of the past begin with a straightforward proposition. They state that there is no way of comparing the past itself with an account of that past. The past is always absent, so it is never available as a referent. Of course, they accept that all kinds of things took place 'before now', but we cannot go back to the time of the Norman Conquest, the French Revolution or anything else as observers. For writers such as Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit, the point about the past is that it is never accessible 'as such'. Our knowledge of the past is derived from different kinds of texts (or sources). Historians work in the present, and from there they can look only at traces left behind from the past (like documents, objects, buildings, films and so on), talk to people about their memories of past events or look at other people's versions of what they imagine the past might have been like (usually in the form of books, films or documentaries). In short, instead of thinking that history studies the past (which is always out of reach), it is more useful to think of history as being about the study of these *other* things (the traces, the memories, other people's versions of the past). History looks at surrogates of the past, not the past itself. In this line of thinking, statements about the 'accuracy' or 'truthfulness' of a historical account are held to relate to the ways in which the historian has used their research materials – the documents, the objects, other histories, the surrogates of the past. They do not relate to the past itself. This is why Keith Jenkins has argued that when it comes to dealing with historical

knowledge, “‘the past’ is a useless notion”.³ History as an activity, in other words, involves the writing of the past – albeit with a methodological reliance on a rigorous use of sources – but it is not an exercise in reconstructing the past ‘as it really happened’.

What are the implications of all this for your work as a history student? Our view is that it is best to avoid regarding this debate as one that requires you to ‘take sides’. We see no reason why differences of opinion about how to describe what historians do are obliged to give way to some kind of final settlement – nor can we imagine the grounds on which such a resolution might take place. But we do believe that reading and thinking about the issues at stake in this debate are worthwhile activities. This is because part of the challenge of studying degree-level history is to arrive at an understanding of the different ways in which the subject is currently conceptualised. It pays anyone who writes history to reflect on the assumptions that stand behind how they do it. All history writing is based on a theoretical approach – an understanding of what historians do – and if you want to read historical accounts critically, rather than simply mine them for information, it helps if you can identify which approach is being used. This is not a question of detecting a historian’s ‘bias’ in order to set it aside. Nor is it a question of separating historians into ‘wrong’ and ‘right’ camps. It is about developing the practices required to be a more rigorous and perceptive reader of historical texts and developing the vocabulary to be able to take part in the debate and continue the conversation.

What is our understanding of the terms ‘history’ and ‘the past’? Our thinking on these matters has its origins in the pragmatist philosophy of Richard Rorty. We prefer to abandon the model of there being a singular and true past that exists independently of our perception of it and which we can access through a careful study of primary sources. In our view, history (as an academic subject) can best be regarded as a particular way of speaking and writing about what happened before, but it does not imply the existence of a singular, determinate, independent past. We believe that history as a practice should be open, heterogeneous, aware of its own contingencies and self-reflexive about the conventions that govern its construction. In our view, the best history books are not the ones that purport to give a ‘definitive’ account of something, but the ones that generate more thinking, more debate and more research about both the subject itself and the way in which the historian has chosen to write about it.

When historians write their accounts they follow the rules that govern the writing of history – the ones that tell us how to ‘do history’. These are the procedures, conventions and customs for working with the sources (the

surrogates and traces of the past) and presenting a particular type of written text. The rules function as a kind of scholarly historians' etiquette. We might say, as a shorthand, that history has its own 'genre rules' – just as there are genre rules for different categories of fiction, philosophy, law textbooks and so on. These rules or protocols are created and made habitual by a 'community of users' (including teachers, academics, editorial boards and professional historical societies). The accepted ways of 'doing history' are rooted in the here-and-now of our cultures. They are what we have for now, they differ from the norms of a century ago, and most likely they will be different again at some point in the future. These rules are collectively known as the historical method. While some historians argue that the application of these protocols to the analysis of sources permits a degree of correspondence to an independently existing past, we would argue that studying the sources according to the rules produces a particular past that is conventionally called 'history', and that this past is not independent of the historian and her interpretation of the sources or explanatory frameworks used for understanding the world. Moreover, there are potentially equally valid but different narratives of the 'before now'. Whichever understanding of the function of the historical method (the rules governing the writing of history) one prefers, the point remains that history students are faced with the task of learning to work in accordance with the current rules for doing the subject. Doing a history degree, in other words, requires you, as a student, to learn how 'to play the game' of academic history – you learn how to think, talk and write like historians do now. Following the rules is a precondition of anyone having their work regarded as academic history. While some historians claim that these rules help us to get closer to the past 'as it really was', we favour an approach that regards historical knowledge as always provisional, produced for specific purposes and constructed at specific times and places. We maintain that it is possible to work using the discourse of history in ways that have some social relevance in the present day. Studying for a history degree can be a worthwhile activity, for any number of reasons that we hope to make clear in what follows. But we are also interested in the ways in which the subject's claims to utility have been called into question.

Why study history?

Historians (we include ourselves) often choose to answer this question instrumentally. We take it as an invitation to market our subject to whichever audience is in front of us. We compile audits of skills that can be acquired

by studying history. We list the kinds of employment that history graduates typically move into. We tell prospective students how exciting and rewarding they will find our history courses. These are the safe, relatively uncontentious answers to the ‘why study history?’ question that we provide for students and academic managers. They have a certain value. History is a subject that helps students to think – the same can be said, of course, of many other subjects. Reading for a history degree requires students to expand their vocabularies, their categories of thought and their facility for linking texts and ideas together. History students learn to analyse complex sets of data, synthesise competing historical interpretations, read different kinds of primary and secondary texts critically, develop their reasoning skills and improve their capacity to undertake research. These are transferable and therefore marketable skills. This is why history graduates often move into careers in areas such as management, law, education, media, journalism and public administration.

But the ‘why study history?’ question also needs to be answered on a different level, one that relates to a philosophical view of history, or a theoretical understanding of what historical enquiry might be able to achieve. The question implies an existential challenge – what is the point of our doing what we do? Tony Judt recently wrote a powerful advocacy of studying history – specifically twentieth-century history – as a means of providing a context against which contemporary political challenges might appear more intelligible. He wrote:

of all our contemporary illusions, the most dangerous is the one that underpins and accounts for all the others. And that is the idea that we live in a time without precedent: that what is happening to us is new and irreversible and that the past has nothing to teach us ... except when it comes to ransacking it for serviceable precedents.⁴

According to Judt, history helps us to understand the ‘perennial complexity’ of our current dilemmas: social, political, moral, ethical, ideological and so on. Only in cultures that seek to forget the recent past, he says – with the exception of those parts of the past that are selected for memorialisation – can ahistorical abstracts like the ‘war on terror’ or the threat of ‘Islamofascism’ be taken seriously as justifications for policy decisions.⁵ In a similar vein, Eric Hobsbawm argued in his memoirs that ‘most historians, including all good ones, know that in investigating the past, even the remote past, they are also thinking and expressing opinions in terms of and about the present and its concerns. Understanding history is as important for citizens as for

experts'.⁶ We might add here that Hobsbawm's injunction can be turned on its head – thus, it is our understanding of the present that makes the study of the past intelligible.

In some respects it might seem surprising that eminent historians such as Judt and Hobsbawm feel the need to make the case for studying history. After all, the subject is a ubiquitous feature of the wider contemporary cultures of media, entertainment and national politics. We are constantly directed to think in historical terms. Placing things into what we call a historical context has never been more popular, or assumed to be so necessary and natural. Raphael Samuel wrote that we now attach to the past the kind of excited fascination earlier epochs reserved for the new. We encounter what we take to be 'the past' everywhere, in a world in which everything is explained as being the end-point of a historical process. We revive old design styles, watch films like *The Reader*, finance the preservation of old buildings, read parts of Anne Frank's diary, listen to critics arguing about which decade had the 'best' pop music, watch television programmes where volunteers experience a highly contrived version of what life might have been like in an Iron Age settlement, a Victorian farm, a Tudor kitchen and any number of other simulations. We identify with earlier generations and wonder how we might have coped in their shoes. We look to history as a guide for acting now. We hope that it will unlock for us a way of making sense of ourselves in the world. Above all, we largely take it for granted that we are morally obliged to keep the past in mind. In today's culture it is always the (important) anniversary of one thing or another. Each day the Wikipedia main page lists a set of anniversaries in its 'On this day' section. Historians of course seek to perpetuate this history culture, always pointing to something from the past in order to make their point that nothing that we have now is completely new. 'Talk to any historian', complains Martin Davies, 'he or she always comes up with an antecedent to show that this *latest thing* is actually the same as the *same old thing*'.⁷

At some point in the development of our social imagination we internalised the idea that we can and should 'learn the lessons of history'. Certainly this is what historians have been telling people they should do since at least as far back as the time when Confucius was writing, some 2,500 years ago (see Chapter 2). Unless we learn from the past, the cliché says, we are condemned to repeat its most damaging excesses and wrong turnings. Historical knowledge, in this line of reasoning, is held to act as a kind of safeguard. In contemporary European cultures this way of thinking is most commonly applied in relation to the Third Reich and the Holocaust. We must study the Nazi era, the reasoning goes, or we risk becoming the next victims of mass murder, or

perhaps the ones who do the killing. But before we accept this injunction, we should question the assumption that people who acquire historical knowledge are necessarily more likely to make good ethical choices. If, for example, we met a person whose bookshelves were full of Hitler biographies, perhaps we would feel reassured that here was someone who took seriously their duty to be on guard against the rise of neo-fascism. But equally, we might want to ask whether their motivations for having so many books about Hitler were darker and potentially more troubling. Reading history is not always and everywhere a morally improving activity. As Lawrence Langer has argued, for example, there is nothing to prevent political or military leaders who have their own genocidal ambitions from studying the Holocaust as a model of how to organise mass murder. In any case, we should recognise that sound ethical arguments against genocide could be made equally effectively with or without reference to historical precedents.

In fact, there is a long tradition of thought that regards the study of history as being at best a waste of time and at worst potentially harmful. An interesting entry point into this line of thinking is Hayden White's essay 'The Burden of History' (1966).⁸ White argued here that history failed to match either the predictive value of science or the imaginative power of art. White traced some of the various ways in which historians (or historical consciousness) have featured in a negative light in works such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874), Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890), André Gide's *Immoralist* (1902) and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938). Each of these writers shared common ground with the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose criticisms of history as it was often practised in the nineteenth century were set out in 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' (1874). As White comments, 'Nietzsche hated history even more than he hated religion. History promoted a debilitating voyeurism in men, made them feel that they were latecomers to a world in which everything worth doing had already been done'.⁹ In fact, Nietzsche rejected two particular ways of writing history that sought to memorialise or preserve the past – those he called 'monumental' and 'antiquarian' history. In place of this he advocated writing 'critical' history, at least until it succeeded as a way of overcoming the burdens of the past. The past had to be forgotten, he wrote, if it was not to become the gravedigger of the present.¹⁰ In other words, the danger of some forms of thinking about history was that they served to justify how things were in the present by taking them to be the latest point in an unstoppable historical sequence. They shored up present arrangements (social, political, economic) by describing

these arrangements as what the past always had in store for the future. Studying history, according to this critique, conditions us to think in old ways (always within the old co-ordinates) and prevents us from thinking in radically new ones. This is what Sande Cohen had in mind when he wrote that ‘we are overhistoricised and undercritical’ in relation to contemporary conditions (he wants us to pull apart the assumptions that are used to justify current arrangements, rather than think about how we might put them into a historical sequence and thus leave them undisturbed).¹¹ In ‘The Burden of History’ White echoed Nietzsche’s dismissal of the virtues of studying the past for its own sake, describing such activity as ‘wilful resistance to the attempt to close with the present world in all its strangeness and mystery’. Instead, he argued, history should be justified as ‘a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solutions of problems peculiar to our own time’.¹² In effect, Hayden White was posing the ‘why study history?’ question in a different way – one that related to the functions of history (see below).

In our view, although Judt/Hobsbawm on one side and Cohen/Davies on the other appear to disagree sharply, there are ways in which we can begin to reconcile their views. Judt and Hobsbawm advise us to study history in ways that show that those things we have come to regard as natural, pre-ordained, ahistorical and thus unchallengeable are in fact contingent, context dependent and not permanent (in other words, ‘historical’). Indeed, historians can and do argue that their subject’s premise is that change is the only constant in human affairs. In that sense, history can be used as a tool for critical thinking. Equally, we can usefully read Cohen and Davies as a warning against taking at face value those forms of historical work that seek to normalise and naturalise current conditions (neo-liberal forms of capitalism, vast inequalities in resources and opportunities, the supremacy of the West and so on) by describing them as the only possible way in which things could have turned out. History might well have been what White called the ‘conservative discipline *par excellence*’,¹³ but perhaps that tells us more about the kind of people who have traditionally written history – inside and outside the academy. There are no ‘innate’ properties to history as a subject, there are only decisions made by historians, as individuals and collectives, to write about the past in particular ways. In other words, there is no need for us to have a universal, invariant and general answer to the ‘why study history?’ question. Rather, we need more localised answers to more specific questions – why are we studying *this* history, in *these* particular ways, for *what* purposes and with *what* possible implications?

What are the functions of history?

John Tosh, in *Historians on History* (2009), suggests that historians have been collectively motivated by four main aspirations. Each of these aspirations implies a vision of history's principal function. The first was to 'discover what happened in the past and what it was like to live in the past'.¹⁴ History is likened here to a detective enquiry, with the study of the past regarded as an end in itself, free from any claims to present-day political or social utility. History in this sense would primarily serve an aesthetic function, providing pleasure for like-minded individuals. This would include, for example, the use of history as nostalgia – historic walks, visiting old buildings and museums, collecting memorabilia and so on. It would include the collection of information about a historical subject for purely personal reasons – known as antiquarianism. Moreover, we should recognise here the processes of personal identification and transference that occur when we read and think about history. In other words, at some level history provides a form of escapism by enabling us to imagine that we are someone (or something) else – in much the same way that we project ourselves onto characters in novels or films.

The second aspiration was to write history that revealed the shape of human destiny. This built on assumptions about linear time and held that human history had an underlying plot. Before the eighteenth century this plot was commonly regarded to be a divine plan for the world. But since the Enlightenment it has come to be explained as a story of human progress, both material and moral. The idea of history following its own path toward a particular end – separate from the way that historians choose to impose their own patterns and sequences on past events – is known as teleological. Accounts which claim to describe the unfolding of these paths – towards, say, the growth of liberal democracy, the rise of empires, the rise of western civilisation, the triumph of free-market capitalism – are called meta-narratives (meaning an all-encompassing account of how things came to be). The best examples of such meta-narratives are found in the nineteenth century. G.W.F. Hegel, in *The Philosophy of History* (posthumously published in 1837), described history as something that operated according to discoverable laws. He saw history as the rational unfolding of the World-Mind or World-Spirit (via a long process of struggle and conflict), leading towards its destiny – the realisation of human freedom. Karl Marx, in *Capital* (vol. 1, 1867), drew on Hegel's model but turned it on its head. In place of Hegel's belief that human history was the story of moving towards an ideal, Marx substituted the idea that human development was driven forward by material concerns, and more

specifically by the clash of interests between rival groups involved in a given social model of wealth creation. Marx therefore re-described history's destiny as the overthrow of capitalism and the rise of a new, communist society. A more contemporary version of teleological history is Francis Fukuyama's thesis about the triumph of liberal democracy in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

Another aspiration of historians has been to serve current political or ideological interests – most obviously in providing an agreed picture of a shared past for projects of nation building or the configuration of a national identity (see Chapter 7). All histories are ideological in the sense that they provide a view of the world and a perspective on what we should know about that world. This is why the kind of history that is taught within national education systems, or the kind of historical research that attracts national research funding, has political implications. Former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher recalled how she fought the 'hardest battle' over history when her government designed a national curriculum for schools in the late 1980s. She wanted more weight given to British political history, and more emphasis on 'facts' rather than 'enquiry'. She wrote in her memoirs: 'No amount of imaginative sympathy for historical characters or situations can be a substitute for the initially tedious but ultimately rewarding business of memorizing what actually happened.'¹⁵ By this she meant the key facts of iconic events of domestic and international state politics. Thatcher believed she was in a battle against left-wing ideologues whose views on history as a subject were formed in the counter-cultures of the 1960s and 1970s. These were the kind of historians who wrote 'history from below' – social and cultural history that gave a voice to people and groups from the past who were ignored in studies of high politics. This approach was initially dominated by concepts of class, but it came to produce what we now recognise as feminist history, black history, post-colonial history and histories of sexual and other minorities (see Chapter 8). The ways in which these categories intersect and overlap can be seen in works such as David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (2007).

Finally, historians have aspired to draw insights and lessons from the historical record itself – to 'learn the lessons of the past'. As we have seen, this is sometimes presented in instrumental (and problematic) terms. Historians might invoke the idea of 'avoiding past mistakes' – for example, by describing the circumstances in which despotic regimes have come to power in the past. Similarly, they might draw analogies with the past as a way of understanding the present – what strategies did previous governments use to deal

with economic depression? What kinds of challenges are involved in fighting colonial wars? How have minority groups in the past organised themselves effectively around a grievance? At a more general level, the idea of ‘learning lessons from the past’ assumes that historical knowledge aggregates. In other words, that it is cumulative – that all knowledge about the past represents a gain for humankind because it represents a form of intellectual progress.

History also has more concrete and pragmatic functions. The subject has its own industrial infrastructure, much of it funded by public finance. It provides jobs for teachers at school and college/university level. In 2008, for example, there were 26,000 postsecondary history teachers in the USA – not including graduate teaching assistants.¹⁶ In the UK, the comparable figure was almost 3,000.¹⁷ Within this sector of employment, careers have to be advanced and reputations made, usually by writing and publishing ‘original’ research. Funding for this research has to be captured via competition between historians. Books need to be written because publishers require new material for their catalogues. Students want to be taught ‘up-to-date’ courses based around new research materials and recent scholarship. And there are opportunities in the media for historians who are able to communicate clearly about a subject of current concern.

What kinds of questions do historians ask?

The starting point for any piece of historical writing is a research question. One of the genre rules that permit a piece of writing to qualify as history is that it answers a ‘proper’ research question. Such questions define the boundaries of a discussion in terms of time and space. They position it as belonging to a particular category of history (social, ethnographic, cultural, political, diplomatic, intellectual and so on). And they bring a set of research materials into play (historians’ writings and contemporary sources). Instead of thinking that the kind of history we read is shaped by the characteristics of a singular past (how it was back then), it is more useful to think of it as being determined by the interaction between historians, their research materials and their research question. Instead of thinking that historians offer us different perspectives on the past, it might be better to think that they offer us different perspectives on how to answer questions using their research materials – or indeed, different perspectives on what kinds of questions are worth asking in the first place. This is why we need to pay attention to the types of question historians ask. History teachers think carefully about the questions they set for students – or they insist on giving final approval of questions that students

set themselves. There are two main reasons for this. First, they know that generalised or fuzzy questions tend to produce generalised or fuzzy answers. Second, they know that historical questions are never neutral or innocent – they all carry assumptions about what historians are able to know and what they can claim to explain and resolve. As Hannah Arendt wrote in ‘The Concept of History, Ancient and Modern’, the kinds of answers that we find in any form of human enquiry are always dependent on the questions asked – and the questions that we ask are always *our* questions.¹⁸

It might help here to divide historical questions into two general categories. The most common category assumes that the object of enquiry is some aspect of ‘the past itself’ that requires explanation or interpretation. This produces questions that ask about events, what happened and why, or ask about long-term changes in society, politics or economic practices. Such questions invoke the concepts of chronology, causation, continuity, similarity and difference. And they relate to a hypothesis that a historian has in mind. So, for example, asking a question about the importance of public debt as a cause of the French Revolution suggests a hypothesis that will be tested. If, in practice, a question turns out to be largely unanswerable (and the hypothesis breaks down), the historian usually changes their question for one that works better. Significantly, however, what remain intact here are the assumptions that the French Revolution is a singular object that we can study, and that historians have the tools and methods for making judgements about why it happened. Similarly, a question that asks whether a particular period was marked by continuity or change assumes that such terms are valid analytical categories and that historians know how to weigh them up against each other.

A different category of questions makes history writing itself (discourse) the object of enquiry. Probably the most common form of these in higher education is the type that asks about historians’ differing interpretations of something – for example, ‘Why do historians disagree about the timing and causes of “the death of Christian Britain”, and whose interpretation do you find most persuasive?’ Alternatively, we might ask about the relationships between written histories and other ways of producing narratives about the past. ‘Is Michael Winterbottom’s *Welcome to Sarajevo* a historical film?’ This category also includes questions that ask historians to think about their own practices. The issues at stake here are the kinds of claims that historians have made about the past, how they have validated those claims and what we, as readers, make of those claims. An example of this in practice is the work of Saul Friedländer and others on representing the Holocaust. Friedländer posed the question of how – indeed whether – it could be possible adequately to

represent the Holocaust according to the genre conventions of history.¹⁹ This line of questioning raises a number of questions about history writing. Using what narrative forms and with what vocabulary could historians write about the events of the Holocaust without trivialising what happened? In attempting to represent the Holocaust, do traditional forms of history writing (particular genres of books, articles and essays) reduce it to a set of statistics, documented claims and explanatory schemes? Is there a danger that this kind of shaping work by historians – however well intentioned – makes the chaotic events of the Holocaust intelligible and, as a consequence, rational and thus at some level justifiable? Moreover, what kinds of issues are raised by historians' preferences for using certain primary sources rather than others in their accounts of the Holocaust – for example, Nazi documents rather than survivor testimonies? In fact, questions like these can be applied to historical writing on any event – it is simply that in the context of the Holocaust they have a particular import and resonance.

What is historiography?

Historiography can be defined most simply as the study of the writing of history. This study can be conducted at the general level – that is, a study of the different ground-rules and practices of writing history since the age of Herodotus (c.480–c.420 BCE). But as a history student you will most often encounter the term historiography at the local level of historians' writings about a particular subject. So, for example, the historiography of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) denotes the collection of published work on the subject produced by historians such as Rafael Abella, José Luis García Delgado, Mary Nash, Gabriel Jackson, Paul Preston, Helen Graham and Sheelagh Ellwood. Studying historiography should not be confused with using certain historians' books as transparent mediums to access 'the past'. Nor should it be seen as an invitation to 'name drop' historians or to strip out some quotes from their work. Instead, it should involve thinking about the particular ways in which the relevant specialist historians have conceptualised, researched and written about the subject at hand. How does their work differ from one another's? At what points does it converge? How do we explain their arrival at contending interpretations, and how do we cope with their lack of agreement? (See Chapter 5 for a discussion of this.) Moreover, these history texts should be related to the specific times and cultures in which they were produced – in other words, we should apply the same critical procedures for reading historians' work that we apply to the raw data of historical sources

(documents, testimony and artefacts). Historiography has one last meaning: it is sometimes used to describe texts which address philosophical issues that apply to the writing of history – that is, books which discuss the epistemological status of history, how we can verify historical knowledge and how we can know what words, phrases and texts mean. Some works combine all three of these uses of the term, such as this one.

Further reading

John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). This is an imaginative and accessible book that is simultaneously a ‘history of history’, a brief survey of historical methodology and an introduction to questions around historical ‘truth’ and the continuing relevance of history as a subject. Arnold focuses his discussion around a handful of specific examples of historians and subjects – Guilhem de Rodes, Lorenzo Valla, Leopold von Ranke, George Burdett and Sojourner Truth.

Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005). A lucid and economical survey of modern historiography, with a strong emphasis on national varieties of history writing. Iggers organises this book around three themes: the emergence of history as a professional discipline, the influence of the social sciences and the challenge of postmodernism.

Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006). A substantially extended second edition of Munslow’s earlier work which contains many new entries reflecting various ‘post-ist’ developments and an increased interest in ethics and aesthetics on the part of historians. While it is written from a position of ‘epistemological scepticism’, to use Munslow’s term – that is, it is critical of traditional reconstructionist and empiricist history writing – it provides a valuable extended glossary of key terms, concepts and ideas inherent in both postmodern discussions of the nature of history and reconstructionist and constructionist positions.

Changing approaches to history

Human society has probably always had a historical consciousness of some form, that is, people have been narrating their pasts and telling stories about the ‘before now’ for thousands of years. There can be found in all civilisations and communities a genre of narrative, be it oral or written, that we might today describe as something like history. These earlier authors of histories have contributed much, not only to our knowledge of the times about which they wrote, but also to our comprehension of what history has been understood to be by their societies. Many of the historiographical issues that they raised are still being discussed and debated today. Is the purpose of history to faithfully record the past, or to educate, to entertain or to provide moral guidance for the benefit of individuals and society? What causes change over time in societies: the progress and development of civilisation, God, material conditions, economics, geographical or climatic factors, or class conflict? Is there a pattern to history? Is it linear or cyclical? What should the role of the historian be? Should she simply chronicle events that happened, or attempt to analyse and explain why they happened? Should the personal beliefs and perspectives of the historian be allowed to influence their narrative or should the historian ‘tell things *as they were done*’?¹ What is the appropriate subject matter of histories: wars, diplomacy, the activities of the political elite, explanations as to why empires rise and fall, the development of society, or the lives of the common people? Who were the intended audiences of histories? Lastly, what type of writing is history: is it like poetry, or more like a science? Inherent in this last distinction are wider issues concerning the

epistemological status of history – in other words what type of knowledge is history? Is it factual knowledge, like science, or is it more fictive and imaginative, like poetry or literature? In this chapter we will explore how these questions have been addressed in different societies and cultures over the past two thousand years, through an analysis of various histories and historians. We will consider what the various approaches have in common and how they differed. Obviously, there is not the space for a detailed discussion of all the main historians and trends in historical writing from around the world (see the recommended reading for books that deal with this subject in more depth), so we will look at just some of the more important people and ideas that you may come across in your reading or studies: those historians whose ideas had a profound influence on different audiences and on later historians. Moreover, because we wish to challenge the preconception that historical consciousness was generally a modern European phenomenon, we will pay particular attention to the historical traditions and scholars of the Chinese, Islamic and Afro-Asian worlds.

History in the ancient world

The development of Hellenic culture in the East Mediterranean around 500 BCE is generally understood to mark a cultural shift from the mythical to a more rational or philosophical consciousness. This meant that communities began to seek explanation of events in terms of economic, sociological, political or demographic factors and not solely in terms of the actions of the gods. Simultaneously, we see the emergence of what could be termed the first historians, people who attempted to find rational explanations for the course of human events, particularly wars, diplomatic activities and the foundation of cities.²

In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, written in the fifth century BCE, Thucydides aimed to provide an accurate and detailed political and military account of the war. However, he was not simply content with chronicling the major events of the war, he also wanted to analyse and explain the forces that underpinned the conflict. It is this desire to provide an explanation of events together with his critical attitude towards sources that has earned him the title of ‘the father of history’ among contemporary western historians. Thucydides was also one of the earliest scholars to make the distinction between poetry (or literature) and history – a distinction that is still debated by historians today. He accuses chroniclers of composing their narratives with the aim more of ‘pleasing the ear than of telling the truth’ and notes that Homer’s account of

the Trojan War may include inaccuracies and exaggerations because he was a poet and thus his priority was not to provide a lasting, accurate depiction of the war, but was to entertain.³ In contrast, he argues, in writing his work he has strived to adhere to high standards of research and accuracy and thus ‘from the evidence that has been given [...] the state of affairs in antiquity was pretty nearly such as I have described it’.⁴ Thucydides claims that he has achieved such accuracy because he includes facts ‘only after investigating with the greatest possible accuracy each detail’.⁵ He also considers alternative explanations of events, but like many historians today believes that there can only be one true account of what really happened. He uses a similar range of sources to that of modern historians, including oral evidence, archaeological or material remains, inscriptions and earlier histories or accounts of events, including, despite his reservations, accounts by Herodotus and Homer. However, one type of source that he uses which modern historians would probably no longer consider to be valid is evidence supplied by the oracles.

History writing in China also has a long heritage. While there were historians before Confucius (551–479 BCE), he is one of the earliest and most famous of Chinese historians. Confucius is generally credited with having introduced moral edification as a historiographic principle in Chinese history writing: that is, he used history as a pedagogical tool to convey moral messages and to pass judgements on people and actions. By reducing literary excesses and repetitions, deleting records he deemed to be unimportant, and re-arranging the text, he re-worked and augmented the earlier annalistic history of the reigns of twelve dukes between 722 and 484 BCE, entitled *Spring and Autumn Annals*, in order to convey moral judgements. Sima Qian, a later Chinese historian, says this about the *Annals*: ‘it distinguishes what is suspicious and doubtful, clarifies right and wrong, and settles points which are uncertain. It calls good good and bad bad, honours the worthy, and condemns the unworthy.’⁶

In the Chinese historiographic tradition history not only provided a moral narrative that distinguished between vice and virtue, it could also be used as a guide to contemporary statecraft. Confucius argued that, because present problems are all re-enactments of past problems, the past could provide a suitable model from which to learn the principles of good statecraft. In this way Confucius understands history to have a cyclical pattern to it. However, the importance of history as a pedagogical tool did not diminish the commitment of Chinese historians to be faithful to the sources and to search for the truth: Confucius argued that although he could discuss the rituals of the Yia

and Shang dynasties, he could not discuss those of the Qi and Song because there were insufficient documents.

Sima Qian (also sometimes transliterated as Ssu-ma Ch'ien), who was Grand Historian/Astrologer in the first century BCE, in many ways shares Confucius' belief in moral edification as a historiographical principle. However, in his history, the *Records of the Grand Historian*, he does not simply emulate Confucius, he also creates a new historical tradition with novel styles and forms of writing that had a very profound influence on Chinese historiography. His history differs from that of Thucydides because it has a much greater geographical, chronological and thematic scope. While the subject of Thucydides' history was the conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans, Sima Qian organised his vast encyclopaedic work into five broad categories: basic annals, chronological tables, hereditary houses, biographies and treatises on human institutions such as astronomy, economics, hydraulic engineering, religion, calendars and music. While the first three sections provide a rather traditional history of the dynastic houses, reigns of individual emperors and hereditary office-holding families, the section on biographies describes the lives of a variety of individuals including poets, philosophers, tycoons, bandits, officials, diviners, foreigners and minor royalty. Sima Qian used this biographical form to highlight the actions of people in the past because he believed it was the job of the historian to pass judgement on the lives of individuals in order to highlight moral lessons. This use of biography as a tool for teaching morality was a historiographical innovation that subsequently characterised Chinese history writing for nearly two millennia and can also be seen in Western European history writing, particularly from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. For example, Samuel Smiles in his late nineteenth century work *Self-Help; with illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* gives biographies of a series of engineers, businessmen, craftsmen and inventors in order to present 'lessons of industry, perseverance, and self-culture' to his audience.⁷

Another precedent that Sima Qian introduced, which remained a feature of Chinese writing until the twentieth century, was the practice of providing a commentary at different points throughout the text. He introduced his commentaries with the phrase 'The Grand Historian remarked' and used these sections to comment on historical events, critique historical figures and highlight the meaning of different stories.⁸ This acknowledgement of the role of the historian in judging the lives of individuals and commenting on various aspects of the past is very different to the view among many twentieth-century historians that historians should remain objective and distant from the

events they record and should simply explain past events and not comment on them. However, Sima Qian combined his didactic approach to the writing of history with a careful regard for establishing what he saw as the truth. He believed that an equally important task of the historian was to correct the historical record in cases where people were erroneously judged as worthy of moral emulation or demonised as traitors: as he says, ‘because Su Ch’ien died a traitor’s death, the world has united in scoffing at him [...] For this reason I have set forth this account of his deeds, arranging them in proper chronological order, so that he may not forever suffer from an evil reputation’.⁹

His attitude towards sources is similar to that of Thucydides and modern historians. He uses more than seventy-five written documents, memorials and inscriptions, and for events that occurred during his lifetime he uses his own personal observations and oral information from other key figures. When faced with new information not included in earlier classical books, he compares it with that found in other documents in order to verify it, and where he judges that there is not sufficient information to provide a reliable and accurate account of events he accordingly does not provide one. Moreover, by attributing the success or failure of events not to the will of heaven, but to more earthly causal factors, he is making explicit the power of human agency in shaping human history, which is a feature of more modern historical writing as well.

In ancient China history was not only used for pedagogical purposes, but it also had a political role. It was read by rulers and administrators as a guide to statecraft and to provide practical insights into current political problems. It was also used, more polemically, to legitimise the rule of new dynasties, which would commission the writing of a history in order to confirm that their succession was legitimate and that there had been a rightful continuation of power and authority. This official endorsement that history writing received in ancient China was bureaucratised further under the Tang, with the establishment of the History Bureau. However history did not inevitably become mere political propaganda, as such histories were still written within a framework that emphasised the importance of historical truth, fidelity to the sources and the importance of producing an account of what ‘really happened’. Moreover, various safeguards were introduced to ensure that historians could remain faithful to the sources and free from undue official pressure. However, this is not to say that at times historians did not write partisan or sycophantic histories.

There was also a flourishing tradition of history writing in China throughout the ancient, pre-modern and modern periods by private individuals. Such

works were not simply encyclopaedic, or histories of dynasties, but included treatises, synoptic works and miscellanies. Such works still generally adhered to the conventions and methodologies of Chinese historical writing, however. For example, Liu Shiji (661–721 CE) argued for the critical evaluation of sources, the impartial reconstruction of historical narratives through truthful recording and the avoidance of distortion, concealment and embellishment. He still adhered to the idea that the principal function of history was to apportion blame and praise, but argued that the historian could act as moral adjudicator only with a truthful and accurate account of the past.¹⁰

Written around the same time as Liu Shiji's history, Bede's *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* provides an account mainly of events in the seventh and early eighth centuries and is crucial for our knowledge of early English history. Similar to Sima Qian, Bede primarily understands history to have a moral and didactic component. Historical events, or the lives of historical individuals, should act as examples or guides to moral action: 'if history records good things of good men, the thoughtful hearer is encouraged to imitate what is good; or if it records evil of wicked men, the devout, religious listener or reader is encouraged to avoid all that is sinful'.¹¹

A key function of history for Bede, who was a member of a monastic order, was to spread Christianity and to strengthen the faith of existing Christians. He is therefore essentially writing within a Christian framework and his explanations of events are in religious terms. For example, he explains periods of prosperity in Britain as arising from Britons respecting God's laws, and conversely, negative events and disasters are the result of their misdeeds. This religious framework also means that his history includes many accounts of miraculous happenings.

Bede uses a variety of written and oral sources and also names these sources in his text. One of his most important sources was Abbot Albinus, who himself had collected numerous written and oral accounts of traditions in the Kent region and who passed them to Northelm, who gave them to Bede. Northelm also supplied Bede with evidence about Britain from letters and documents kept in the archives of the Roman church in Rome. Bede clearly distinguishes between direct and indirect accounts of events, and notes when the details of an event have been obtained from hearsay or rumour.

History in the pre-modern world

Many pre-modern histories such as Bede's are written within a religious framework, be it Christian, Islamic or the heavenly order that Confucius and

other Chinese scholars referred to. History writing in an early Islamic context was relatively varied, ranging from *hadith*, which was a genre that recorded the deeds and words of the Prophet, to chronicle histories, biographies and universal histories. A good example of an Islamic universal history is that written by Ibn al-Athir in the twelfth/thirteenth centuries CE. Ibn al-Athir's twelve-volume world history *al-Kamil fi'l-ta'rikh* [*The Perfect or Complete Work of History*] has been described as the high point of Muslim annalistic historiography.¹² This comprehensive work begins with an account of creation and a narration of Persian, Roman, Jewish and Arab histories from the pre-Islamic era, before providing a history of the early Islamic caliphate and subsequent Islamic dynasties.¹³ It is arranged chronologically in an annalistic fashion, and as such is a paradigmatic example of pre-modern Islamic history writing. However, Ibn al-Athir was also quite innovative in terms of style and approach. For example, despite the annalistic format, whereby all events occurring in a particular year are narrated together, Ibn al-Athir at times relates a single event or series of related events that stretch over a period of a few years in a single section, thus creating a narrative based on subject matter rather than chronology. This occurs far more frequently when he is writing contemporary history for events occurring between 614–20 in the Islamic calendar (c.1217–23 CE), including an account of the Fifth Crusade, Mesopotamian affairs after the fall of the Zengids (Zankids) and the Mongol attack.¹⁴ Moreover, when sources give contradictory accounts of events that Ibn al-Athir cannot effectively harmonise into one narrative, he includes different versions of the same event, promising to settle the dispute if further evidence comes to light.¹⁵

Ibn al-Athir summarised and synthesised a variety of different histories and sources in his narration of pre-Islamic and early Islamic history, most notably the universal history of the ninth/tenth century historian al-Tabari. For events nearer his own time, he supplemented his sources with oral information derived from family members and contacts employed in the Zengid dynasty and the administration of Saladin, as well as official documents such as muster rolls and the official correspondence of government ministers.¹⁶ Ibn al-Athir's history is truly universal in content, at least from an Islamic perspective. It covers events and provides information on politics and societies throughout the Islamic world, including details about the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, encounters with European crusaders in Syria and Palestine, factional power struggles among the Saljuk sultans, the political machinations of the Ghurid dynasty in South Asia, as well as the activities of Turkish nomads in the far east of Central Asia and the Amoravid and Almohad dynasties in

Anadaluia. Ibn al-Athir does not only concentrate on political, dynastic or military history. He also provides valuable information on the economic conditions of his own time, including the prices of various goods, the disruption of trade routes by the Mongols and trade disputes occurring between other states in the Persian Gulf.¹⁷

The introduction to his work, like that of many pre-modern histories, contains both a defence of history as a worthy subject of study and an explanation of what he understands history to be. For Ibn al-Athir, an interest in the past is a natural human activity found in all societies. In particular, he argues, history has a didactic component in that it provides moral lessons and guidance for audiences. It can also act as a kind of ultimate tribunal bestowing a good reputation on the worthy and a bad one on the wicked. Like Bede's history, his account of the past is set within a religious framework, with the will of God lying behind all events, thereby reducing the importance of the role of people. He thus frequently comments on the transitory nature of human life and the vicissitudes of fortune. However, on occasion he writes as if he does hold individuals responsible for their own actions. Similarly, despite the exemplary rather than explanatory nature of his work, he does sometimes attempt to explain the cause of events and speculates on possible alternative outcomes or hypothetical histories. Historiographically, therefore, there are considerable similarities between the approach of Ibn al-Athir and those of classical and medieval Christian European scholars and of Chinese historians.¹⁸

Writing in the twelfth century, slightly earlier than Ibn al-Athir, Anna Comnena, the daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Alexius, also wrote a multivolume history that dealt in part with the crusades. Her work, *The Alexiad*, was not a universal history, but had more in common with Ibn al-Athir's panegyric history celebrating the deeds of the Zengid dynasty entitled *The Resplendent History of the Atabeg Dynasty*, in that it was a eulogistic history of her family, the Comneni, and more specifically a military and political history of the Byzantine Empire during the reign of her father, Alexius. Her history is lively, informative and passionate. In the preface to the *The Alexiad* she sets out her understanding of the function of history: 'The stream of Time, irresistible, ever-moving, carries off and bears away all things that come to birth and plunges them into utter darkness [...] The science of History is a great bulwark against this stream of Time [...] it holds in a tight grasp whatever it can seize on the surface, and will not allow it to slip away into the depths of oblivion.'¹⁹ More specifically, she makes explicit the political nature of history writing with her comment that, 'having realized the effects wrought by Time,

[I] desire now by means of my writings to give an account of my father's deeds, which do not deserve to be consigned to Forgetfulness'.²⁰ Anna is aware of the potential criticisms that writing about her father might occasion and states that she will be completely unbiased and not allow filial piety and her love for her family to interfere with her objective description of events and people.²¹ Indeed she takes great care to distinguish her work as history and not panegyric. This leads to one of the most interesting features of her work, the presence of extensive authorial interventions or self-interjections into the text. Although there was a tradition of such interventions in Byzantine historiography both Anna Comnena and the historian Michael Psellos use the technique more extensively than do other Byzantine historians.²² Such interventions foreground the self-consciousness of the writer and draw attention to her role as author of the text. Some of her interventions seem relatively innocuous, as when discussing a Norman trick Anna notes: 'When I think of all this it makes me smile and laughter rises to my lips, as I wield my pen by the lamp.'²³ Other interventions, however, more explicitly reflect her concern that her credentials as a historian will be affected by her personal closeness to her subject and that she will be accused of bias and partiality. They are therefore methodological and are intended to demarcate her work as history rather than panegyric. For example, when defending her mother against criticisms for having accompanied her father, Alexius, on campaign, she notes that 'I could have said a great deal more about this empress were it not that being a daughter might produce the suspicion of falsehood and the (accusation) that we are favouring the mother'.²⁴ Similarly, when defending her father's use of strategy rather than military conflict, she comments, 'For I have many times said in my defense that it is not favour towards my father which produces these words but the nature of circumstances. For does anything on the side of truth itself hinder one from being both a father lover and at the same time a lover of truth?'²⁵

In addition to providing details of court life, military engagements and the deeds of Anna's family, *The Alexiad*, also provides an account of the First Crusade from the perspective of the Byzantine elite. Unsurprisingly, Anna depicts those crusaders who remained loyal to Alexius as pious and chivalrous, but portrays those who eventually attacked her father as faithless, covetous men. Her textual portraits of various historical protagonists provide one of the most interesting features of her history. Through these often very detailed descriptions she informs the reader of the moral and physical traits of members of the Byzantine aristocracy, their friends and their enemies. However, there is a tendency for her portraits to project the aristocracy as

embodying ideal types rather than be realistic depictions, although she does personalise each description to a degree.²⁶

Anna Comnena is often described as the first female historian, but this reflects a rather Eurocentric view, as the famous Chinese scholar and historian Ban Zhao (also spelt Pan Chao) predates her by about a thousand years.²⁷ Ban Zhao was the highly educated and accomplished daughter of Ban Biao, a famous historian who worked on a sequel to Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* entitled the *Han Shu* – a history of the Han dynasty. Following his death, and that of her brother who had taken over the task of finishing the history, Ban Zhao was commissioned by the Emperor Ho to complete the work, suggesting she was already a very well-respected scholar. We know that she at least completed the 'Eight Tables' and the 'Treatise on Astronomy' that her brother had started, but it is entirely possible that she also revised and re-edited the entire *Han Shu*.²⁸ As a result of her labour she became the de facto historian to the Imperial Court of China, although she did not officially hold this title.²⁹ Her work was used as a model for later histories of subsequent dynasties. She was also an adviser to, and confidant of, the Empress, who effectively ruled China, and the author of numerous other literary texts, including poetry and a moralistic manual entitled *Lessons for Women*.³⁰

Not all pre-modern Islamic histories were annalistic, biographical or linear. The work of Ibn Khaldun is an excellent example of cyclical history. Ibn Khaldun was a fourteenth-century North African scholar and bureaucrat. He was well educated and occupied a number of high government, legal and academic posts for a variety of different rulers, including that of prime minister for the Hafsid ruler, and chief judge and professor of law in Egypt.

Ibn Khaldun's most famous work is *The Muqaddimah* (*The Prolegomena*). Although now considered to be a work in its own right, it was originally meant to be the introduction and first chapter of Ibn Khaldun's longer and universal history of the Arabs, non-Arabs and Berbers, the *Kitab al-'ibar* [*The Book of Lessons*]. *The Muqaddimah* consists of an introduction which discusses historiography and the types of errors that historians commonly make, and six sub-chapters that deal with: human civilisation and the influence that the physical environment has on society; bedouin civilisation; royal authority; urban civilisation; crafts and ways of making a living; and science.

For Ibn Khaldun, history is more than 'information about political events, dynasties and, occurrences of the remote past'; it is 'an attempt to get at the truth, [a] subtle explanation of the causes and origins of existing things and deep knowledge of the how and why of events'.³¹ In order to provide such an explanation and 'to establish the truth and soundness of information about

factual happenings, a requirement to consider is the conformity [...] with general conditions. Therefore it is necessary to investigate whether it is possible that the reported facts could have happened'.³² He continues that 'if he [the historian] trusts historical information in its plain transmitted form and has no clear knowledge of the principles resulting from custom, the fundamental facts of politics, the nature of civilization, or the conditions governing human social organization, and if, furthermore, he does not evaluate remote or ancient material through comparison with near or contemporary material, he often cannot avoid [...] deviating from the path of truth'.³³ A historian must therefore 'know the principles of politics, the nature of things, and the differences among nations, places and periods with regard to ways of life, character qualities, customs, sects, schools, and everything else [...] He must compare similarities or differences between present and past conditions. He must know the causes of the similarities in certain cases and of the differences in others'.³⁴ Ibn Khaldun illustrates his argument with a variety of case studies. For example, he challenges claims that there is a city built wholly of copper in the Sijimashah desert by arguing that none of the travellers and guides who regularly traverse the desert has ever seen it, and also that metal does not usually exist in quantities sufficient to build an entire city from it.³⁵

For Ibn Khaldun, therefore, historical ideas should reflect reality; that is, they should conform to, or cohere with, the rules that govern social organisation. Consequently, it is fundamental for historians to have knowledge of these rules and of how society in all its aspects works, including a theory of social co-operation, urbanisation, social organisation and political power. His exhortation to historians to be aware of the underlying rules governing society, politics, authority and social organisation is possibly the most innovative aspect of *The Muqaddimah* and can be considered one of the earliest attempts to discern and explain the structural patterns that govern changes in human political and social organisations. For Ibn Khaldun, history is far more than a reconstruction of the past: it 'is information about human social organization' and should explain why and how societies came into being and how and why they change over time.³⁶ Essentially, Ibn Khaldun can be seen as a pioneer of what later became known in the West in the nineteenth century as sociology. Moreover, his exploration of the influence of the environment on human nature and society in the first sub-chapter of *The Muqaddimah* pre-empts Braudel's emphasis on the role of the environment in his twentieth-century epic history of the Mediterranean.³⁷

Also of significance is the manner in which Ibn Khaldun combines his unique understanding of the term *asabiyye* (social solidarity or group

feeling) with the Aristotelian circle-of-justice model of a functioning state and the life-cycle metaphor in order to explain the various stages that states go through. For Ibn Khaldun, *asabiyye* is a key element of human society and can also be considered as the basic motor of societal change: it explains both the difference between various social organisations and also why some are bigger, more successful or more durable than others. A social group with strong group cohesiveness (*asabiyye*) will achieve predominance over other groups and its leader may therefore be able to establish a dynasty. However, to establish a dynasty requires the support of a large number of people and thus requires the development of cities and towns, which in turn permits the development of the arts, crafts and sciences. As the cities develop, the men whose social solidarity sustains the ruling elite become more alienated and their power is weakened, which ultimately leads to their being superseded by an outside military force whose group solidarity is much stronger. States therefore follow a life-cycle pattern: they emerge, develop, mature and then decline. Ibn Khaldun thus conceives of history as having a cyclical pattern, with civilisations rising, then collapsing and others subsequently taking their place. Cyclical ideas of history can also be found in Buddhist and Hindu histories, in some classical western histories (especially Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) and also in some modern economic histories. Andre Gunder Frank, for example, developed the Soviet economist Kondratiev's idea of there being waves of fast and slow economic growth, and suggested the existence of long and short economic cycles which have affected economic development in the world system.³⁸

Mustafa Naima was a late seventeenth/early eighteenth-century Ottoman historian whose history of the Ottoman Empire from 1591 to 1660 became one of the most famous and defining histories of the period. Naima had a bureaucratic career in the Ottoman government, serving as chief army archivist, chief to the head accountancy bureau and secretary to various elite Ottomans. He was also, between 1697–1704, *vak'anüvis* (event-writer). The term *vak'anüvis* can have two meanings: a recording secretary who kept the minutes of government; or an official state historian. Naima was both. His duty was to keep a written record of the events of the Ottoman state in a daybook, but he was also commissioned to write a history of the Ottoman Empire.

Naima's history is, on the surface, typical of Muslim annalistic chronicles. It is organised by year, so events that last for a number of years are broken up into different sections. Military events and affairs of state dominate, but he also includes biographies of deceased members of the Ottoman elite. This

emphasis on the history of the Ottoman state and government reflects his understanding of the function of history. Just as for the Chinese historians discussed above, for Naima the purpose of history is didactic: it should educate the reader. The section of his preface entitled 'On History' makes this point quite forcefully, as he notes that history increases the keenness of scholars' intellects; makes the attentiveness of wise men broader; serves as a standard of judgement; gives to the elite secrets which would otherwise have been concealed; gives men insight into the causes of decay and decline in civilisations, and thus allows men to foresee what will be the result of actions and the consequences of particular circumstances.³⁹ History should therefore provide a record of past and present events in order to provide examples of good government practice as a guide to current administrators. Throughout his history, Naima gives advice on leadership, on factions and influencing sultans and on reforms. In this regard, Naima continues a long tradition of Islamic scholars who received court or state patronage and who wrote histories that provided useful political and moral lessons.

As to how Naima wrote his history, he was trying to provide a synthesis of all available histories for this period in order to construct the most reliable account. He relied mainly upon Katib Çelebi's *Fezleke* (*Memorandum*) and incorporated large sections from this and other histories into his own work. However, Naima was not uncritically copying these texts and it cannot be understood as plagiarism. By choosing what to incorporate and also by making small changes to the text, Naima and other Ottoman historians who composed histories in a similar manner were, effectively, commenting and passing judgement on the views of earlier historians: they were, in effect, engaging in what could be termed academic dialogue.

Moreover, Naima took great pains to challenge and verify his sources. Where different accounts of particular events existed he usually reproduced all the versions and then either offered his view as to which he believed was the more probable version or left it to the reader to decide by saying 'God alone knows'. Sometimes he notes that he has tried to reconcile events by speaking to members of the elite who may have had more direct knowledge of the event in question. On one occasion he follows two different versions of an event with a poem, which is very informative as to his understanding of the function of history and how, or whether, one should try and reconcile conflicting accounts:

Certainly some call the lover cypress and some *elif*
The aim of all of them is one, but the telling differs.⁴⁰

Both the cypress tree and the Arabic letter *elif* are upright and straight and are thus commonly used as metaphors to describe the physical and moral attributes of a beloved. The poem suggests that for Naima at times there may be two distinct narratives of a historical event, but that they, like the cypress and the letter *elif*, can serve the same function: they can both allow the reader to draw the same moral lesson. This suggests that Naima did not believe that the function of history was always to try to accurately represent the past or tell *the* truth about what *really* happened, but that sometimes the moral or didactic aspect took precedence. This is not to say that Naima adopted an uncritical attitude towards sources. He was aware of the partisan nature of some of his sources, and he tried to take a more neutral stance when incorporating sections from them. In particular, he notes that he omitted some of the polemic from the pro-clerical account of the bureaucrat Manarzade, who was one of his main sources.

In many ways, western historians of the same period were approaching the study of history in a similar manner. Philosopher and historian David Hume and Edward Gibbon both wrote histories that were largely based upon accounts by others, rather than on primary sources.⁴¹ However, they were committed to trying to establish a true account of the past, and through critical scrutiny of these accounts attempted to remove any evidence of legends, myths or politically partisan bias from their works. Moreover, both historians strove to write exemplary narratives that provided apposite moral lessons and concentrated on issues of political life, governance and questions of rulership.

In his Preface, Naima, like Ibn Khaldun, provides some guidelines for historians. These include a duty to be reliable and not make spurious or foolish claims (to tell the truth and substantiate it); to disregard the rumours and gossip of the common people and to concentrate on documented statements of reliable men who know how to record what actually happened; to not simply tell a story but also to incorporate useful information into the narrative and allow the reader to draw the moral for himself; to speak frankly and fairly (to not be partisan or biased); to avoid obscure expressions; to quote in full any interesting correspondence, anecdotes and prose that can be obtained; and to discuss astrology only when appropriate. With the exception of this last point, these guidelines are reminiscent of those used by modern historians.

As we saw above, it was not only Islamic historians who were writing in a broadly bureaucratic context and who saw one of the primary functions of historical texts as providing important lessons for governing the state: a similar approach to history was evident in China. In the early modern period,

under the Ming dynasty the protocols or rules of writing history were becoming more standardised and began to resemble very much the historical method of today's academic historians. A comprehensive compilation and vetting of sources, standardised rules for recounting events, adherence to the truth, impartial evaluation and narrative concision were all commonplace in many official and private histories.

History in the modern world

Historiographical traditions in the modern world have both continued and developed some of the characteristics seen in earlier historical practices, and also introduced new features. Although not all histories possess all of these traits, the key aspects of modern history writing include: a commitment to objectivity; a desire to provide causal explanations, not simply chronologies of past events; an interest in epistemology (theories of historical knowledge); a belief that history is a scientific discipline; and an understanding of history as a coherent, progressive and thus linear process which ultimately leads to social advancement and greater freedom. The two most significant characteristics are possibly the last two. The notion that history is scientific and progressive is very much a response to the discourse of modernity. Modernity is generally taken to be characterised by a commitment to empiricism as the best means of verifying knowledge about the world; beliefs in human intentionality, secularism and progress; the idea that scientific and technological development is the best solution to problems; and the desire to make a new, better society.

Positivism is an excellent example of a modernist response to history writing. The development of positivism as an epistemology or theory of knowledge is often credited to Auguste Comte, who argued that the history of human society demonstrated a progressive three-stage path leading from primitive society, where the world was understood primarily in religious terms, through the metaphysical stage, when alternative views of the world were sought, ultimately to the positive stage in the nineteenth century, when an empirical methodology was employed to make sense of the world. Comte argued that historians could, through a rational and scientific analysis of empirical data (sources), identify the structural laws which govern or guide human development and social change. The discovery of such laws would then allow one to speculate on the future development of human society. Positivist historians therefore adhere to a progressive theory of history. Moreover, they see it as a science. They argue that, just as in the natural sciences, there are natural laws

governing society. The apparent existence of these laws enables historians to formulate hypotheses about the development of societies which can then be empirically tested, and amended if necessary. As we shall see, positivism had a significant influence on many of the historiographical developments that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century and during the twentieth century.

Linear progressive history

The notion of history as linear and progressive has been interpreted very differently by historians. In addition to the positivist movement described above, it can have an economic aspect, as in Marx's explanation of history, a nationalistic aspect, as in Whig history, and a racist aspect, as in the case of colonial and some Eurocentric histories.

Although its most famous proponent was the early nineteenth-century historian Macaulay, Whig history writing emerged in Britain in the eighteenth century and takes its name from the Whig political party. Many have accused Whig history of being party political propaganda rather than history, and it is certainly true that politics and history were very much intertwined for Whig historians. For example, when the Whigs were returned to political power in 1830, Macaulay played a key role in the administration. However, as we have seen above, many historians have had close links with the government or state bureaucracy over the past 2,000 years, and this continued throughout the twentieth century. The British wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his historical writings. Whig historians interpreted the early modern period as a narrative of progress, culminating in the development of distinctive British political institutions and society. They saw history as explaining and justifying not only the key events of British history, but also the existing social system, institutions and government. For the Whigs, British history was a narrative of how Britain became democratic, free and successful.

Many other histories also emphasised the continual development, and superiority, of European civilisation. Hegel, Ranke and Marx argued that Asian society was primitive and unchanging – without a history or historical consciousness – and it could be brought into the modern world and the progressive course of history only through Western European intervention. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, such histories therefore provided a perfect explanation of, and justification for, European colonial exploits in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This idea of Afro-Asia being under-developed, particularly when compared to the West, was further developed in the twentieth century by Eurocentric historians who argued either on the basis of race (Weber), environment (Diamond and Jones), Christianity (Mann) or western rational culture (Jones and Landes) that the West, over the past 600 years, developed faster than the rest of the world economically, intellectually and culturally and that this led to the inevitable pre-eminence or dominance of the western countries and their culture.⁴² Such a view has since been challenged in a variety of ways by non-Eurocentric scholars, including Blaut, Goody, Frank and Hobson, among others.⁴³

History as a science

The natural sciences, with their emphasis on the scientific method, the key role of empirical observation and the idea that laws govern the natural world, had a profound influence on historians in the nineteenth century. It caused them to speculate about whether human society, past and present, could similarly be accurately described by empirical observation and was subject to discoverable laws. There are three main methodological approaches that conceive of history as a science: the Rankean school of traditional history, which emphasises the use of a rigorous methodology and empirical observation; and the positivist paradigm and Marxism, both of which argue for the existence of discoverable universal laws. Each of these approaches had a profound influence on the development of history in the twentieth century.⁴⁴ We touched on positivism above and will consider Rankean and Marxist history below.

The development of 'traditional' academic, scientific history

In nineteenth-century Germany two different traditions of writing about the past came together: antiquarianism, which emphasised the empirical recovery of the past through the collection and investigation of material remains; and that of the philosophical historians, who speculated about historical development in general terms. Historians increasingly started to think about the meaning of history, while simultaneously searching for reliable documents or artefacts that could be used as evidence for their arguments. One of the most famous German historians to be involved in this transformation of history writing was Leopold Ranke. Ranke was a nineteenth-century German professor of history who is generally, rightly or wrongly, credited with developing the modern historical method and being one of the modern fathers of

history as a discipline. To proponents of traditional or reconstructionist history he is an exemplary historian who justifiably emphasised the importance of the use of primary sources, particularly those held in government archives. He also argued that all available evidence should be studied; encouraged source criticism as a methodological norm; stressed the purpose of history as being simply to 'show what actually happened' (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*); and discouraged any manifestation of the personal views or opinions of the historian in history writing.

Although Ranke has been credited with developing or articulating the critical methodology crucial to academic history, and in particular with placing an emphasis on a hermeneutical approach to primary sources (that is, the critical interpretation of texts), it is important not to overemphasise the innovation of such practices. In Germany in the eighteenth century the practices of textual criticism used in theology were gradually adopted by historians, who began to stress the importance of identifying and using genuine primary sources as a basis of history writing rather than simply relying upon the accounts of earlier historians. Source criticism thus became the key component of academic history at German universities and historians began to claim that it was this source criticism that enabled them to produce verifiable historical knowledge. It is perhaps preferable to see Ranke as the spokesman for, rather than innovator of, this particular methodology and attitude towards documentary primary sources. Moreover, it is important to remember that the professionalisation of history as embodied by Ranke and his colleagues was contingent on the wider socio-political context of the time. The nineteenth century was a time of nationalism and the establishment of nation-states, and governments were quick to realise the role that histories, particularly those that focused on the political, diplomatic and military struggles between what were now seen as different nations, could play in providing a cohesive identity for newly established and older nation-states. Therefore states began to establish increasingly professionalised archives. Around this time, to further facilitate the production of suitable histories the state also began printing collections of government documents, all of which helped to make the Rankean emphasis on political history and documents of state more normative and dominant.⁴⁵

The emphasis that Ranke placed on source criticism and the increasing professionalisation of historical studies was not exclusively a European development. Ranke's view of history is quite similar to that of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chinese school of evidential learning, whose adherents initially began to use philology, etymology, epigraphy and phonology in order

to try to determine the original meaning of the Confucian classics, and subsequently applied similar techniques to their analysis of historical sources. They subjected earlier histories to considerable scrutiny, and compared their accounts of events with all available sources to determine accuracy. They were also similarly concerned with establishing the truth of what had happened, and their motto was an old Han-era adage: 'to seek truth in actual facts'.⁴⁶ Many of these historians were also teachers working in academies, rather than bureaucrats, so they too constituted a collaborative scholarly community of learning similar to that found in German universities.

Ranke's view of the history profession was challenged, however, by some of his contemporaries. Droysen, for example, believed that Ranke had over-emphasised the importance of source criticism and side-lined that of interpretation. For Droysen, sources alone could not yield historical knowledge: they could be turned into historical information or knowledge only when interpreted by a historian. As he said: 'Those who consider it to be the highest task of the historian that he does not add anything of his own thinking, but simply lets the facts speak for themselves, do not see that the facts themselves do not speak except through the words of someone who has seized and understood them.'⁴⁷ This debate about the role that interpretation should play in the writing of history subsequently became a key feature of twentieth-century historiographical arguments. Similarly, although some of Ranke's contemporaries argued that history should reflect the rational progress of humanity, Ranke disagreed either that history had a shape or that it was linear and progressive. He also disagreed with the assertion that human society (past and present) was governed by laws which could be discovered through a careful study of the evidence. For Ranke, the key job of the historian was to describe rather than explain human actions. However, he did believe that historians, through their study of the past, could make manifest God's presence in the world and that, by understanding the interconnection of facts and events, the divine course of human history would be made manifest.⁴⁸

The Rankean tradition had a profound effect upon historical studies in the twentieth century, partly as a result of the conflation of Ranke's practical research methodology with a set of philosophical theories, namely Anglo-American empiricism, realist (or representationalist) theories of knowledge and correspondence theories of truth and meaning.⁴⁹ As a result of this synthesis a number of historians misunderstood Ranke's now iconic phrase *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, interpreting it to mean to 'show what actually happened' rather than 'how things essentially happened'. This resulted in truth being understood, in the context of historical writing, in exclusively factual

or empirical terms: something that contrasts with Naima's understanding of truth as having a moral dimension.

Many modern historians claim to have their historical roots in the Rankean approach to history writing and it can be considered one of the dominant genres in the twentieth century. As mentioned above, one of the key features of modern historical writing is an interest in the epistemology of history – that, is how we acquire and verify historical knowledge. Munslow and Jenkins have argued that, for the sake of convenience, modern historians can be (very) broadly classified into three different categories or genres on the basis of their epistemologies of historical knowledge: reconstructionists, constructionists and deconstructionists.⁵⁰ While historians do not always easily fit into one of these categories, these are a useful tool for beginning to think about the different interpretative frameworks, epistemologies and views of what constitutes proper history that are held by historians. Historians writing in the Rankean and empiricist tradition can be described as reconstructionist. They emphasise the importance of critical source analysis (ideally of state documents) as *the* basis of historical knowledge. However, they also interpret Ranke's injunction to only 'show what actually happened' as meaning that the historian should refrain from allowing their perspectives, opinions and biases to influence the history that they write.

This emphasis on the historian reconstructing the past in a neutral manner has encouraged reconstructionists to eschew vociferously the validity of employing explanatory theories or laws in their analysis of the evidence/sources. This suspicion of both theory and the use of laws or structures to explain human society has led to a tendency for reconstructionists to focus on retelling events rather than attempting to explain social processes or the structures that govern society. They therefore tend to ask 'what happened' questions. Because of the critical role that primary sources play in upholding their epistemologies, reconstructionist historians tend to favour those sources which they perceive to be less biased or subjective – in particular state documents, or to use Marwick's term 'documents of record', such as edicts, the minutes of state meetings or discussions in parliament, court records and local parish records.⁵¹ This bias towards particular sources results in a propensity towards writing political or diplomatic history. In Chapter 3 we will look in more depth at a philosopher of history, C. Behan McCullagh's, defence of a reconstructionist or realist approach to acquiring and justifying historical knowledge, and in Chapter 6 we will explore the problems with this approach.

Influenced by Ranke, reconstructionists argue that the past should be studied for its own sake and therefore professional academic historians should

be motivated by only the first of Tosh's functions of history discussed in Chapter 1: the desire to discover what happened in the past. In particular, history should not be used didactically: it should not teach moral lessons, nor provide advice on good governance or statecraft, as was the case in much Chinese history writing. It should be used neither to reveal human destiny nor to foresee where human society is heading. Perhaps most importantly, it should not serve political or ideological ends: that is, it should not be used to legitimise particular claims to power, nor to establish a communal identity. As we will see in Chapter 7, this is not as easy as it sounds because, while historians may not consciously intend their histories to serve such functions, they generally do so.

Arthur Marwick and Geoffrey Elton are perhaps the most vociferous exponents of reconstructionist or Rankean traditionalist historiography. However, as a consequence of the adoption of the Rankean methodology as *the* model for professional, academic history around the world and the instinctive, commonsense appeal of empiricism, realist epistemologies and the correspondence theory of truth, their views are shared by many other historians. For Elton, a historian primarily of Tudor political history, history is very much a practical discipline and he is especially averse to the contamination, as he sees it, of history by ideas and methods from other disciplines and the introduction of theory and theoretical models. He therefore has little time for those who adhere to a particular model of history, be it linear, cyclical or teleological, nor for those who argue for the existence of laws or structures that govern the development of human society. Therefore Marxist-influenced history, as well as that produced by the Annales school, is an anathema to him. However, far worse than this are the postmodern theorists who, according to Elton, spend far too much time theorising and not enough time actually doing practical history, and who threaten the whole discipline with their claims that we cannot really know the past. The consequence of this argument, according to Elton, is a descent into relativism and a situation where any account, including historical myths, would be understood as an equally valid, legitimate and true account of the past. According to Elton, professional historians can access the truth simply through a critical study of all available, relevant primary sources; by asking questions of the evidence that are free from bias; by keeping an open mind; and by presenting their ideas in a clear and intelligible form. There are therefore some similarities between Elton's guide to being a good historian and that of the Ottoman historian Naima, suggesting that the precepts of Rankean professionalism are not as modern nor as European as some have suggested.

History from below – social science-influenced constructionist history

Although the Rankean model of historical studies was adopted internationally in the late nineteenth century as *the* model for professional academic history, it was very quickly critiqued not only in western countries but also in Latin America and Japan. These critiques focused on two main points. Firstly, that Rankean history, with its strict focus on diplomatic and political history, ignored the political and social consequences of the emergence of a mass, industrialised public. Secondly, that its exclusive focus on the critical analysis of sources was too narrow and it therefore tended to neglect the social context of historical development and did not try to explain, particularly with reference to laws or theories, societal change.

In response to this first criticism a large number of histories began to be written that focused less on great men and more on ordinary individuals. This type of history is commonly known as ‘history from below’ or ‘people’s history’ and has been used to cover a number of different approaches to writing history and explanations of historical change. What all the different approaches have in common, though, is a concentration on the lives of ordinary people, people previously often excluded from history: women, peasants, the industrial or urban working classes, ethnic minorities and the poor. As these people rarely left written records of their lives and beliefs, such an approach often necessitates either the reinterpretation or re-reading of traditional sources such as court records or other state documents, or the use of alternative sources such as ballads, cartoons or folktales. Just as this new approach to narrating the past changed the types of sources that historians used, it also altered the type of history written, with historians increasingly writing social and economic rather than political and diplomatic history. Three of the most well-known approaches to ‘history from below’ are those influenced by Marxism, what is often described as the Annales school and postcolonial or subaltern history.

All three approaches (as well as many feminist and gender histories and environmental histories) can be understood as embodying a constructionist approach to history writing. Constructionism is another conceptual category that covers a great diversity of historians who exhibit a broad range of different attitudes towards the theory, practice and writing of history. However, they all generally share a belief in the value, or necessity, of using theoretical concepts to interpret historical evidence and explain human society. Constructionists believe that the task of the historian is not simply to chronicle the main or important events of the past, but to discern or provide a coherent narrative to link these events together into a larger story or meta-narrative.

Moreover, they also want to be able to explain social, political and economic change over time. As we saw above, the idea that there were discoverable structural laws that governed human behaviour and the development of human society was first suggested by Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century, although it was developed in more depth by Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century. This idea became very popular among the new socio-economic historians of the twentieth century, who variously stressed the benefits of using economic, demographic, environmental, sociological, anthropological or statistical models for explaining human society. Constructionists therefore conceive of human societies as organisations whose development is determined by discoverable, law-governed processes. They argue that all histories implicitly or explicitly use explanatory theories or presuppositions about how human society or human behaviour works to interpret evidence of the past. They claim that, in contrast to reconstructionists, they are explicit about the theories they employ and, moreover, these models, because they are often expressed in propositional terms, are amenable to testing and verification. In this manner constructionists argue that the use of theories does not render their historical narratives subjective, because they are always amenable to further testing. Marxist-influenced approaches, the Annales school and early postcolonial or subaltern histories are all examples of constructionist approaches to writing history. Other examples include historians who ascribe explanatory value in a historical context to the environment, ecology or climate in some form. For example, Jared Diamond's thesis explicating the rise of the West argues that it was a consequence of the unique geography of Europe. Similarly, Jack A. Goldstone explains uprisings, revolutions and rebellions in seventeenth-century China, England and the Ottoman Empire as a result of ecological crises.⁵²

Although constructionists do focus on individual events, their interest in theories that elucidate human behaviour and societal change means that they tend to try to locate events within a broader explanatory framework that will make clear the structures of society and explain change. Their histories therefore tend to be more problem centred and they ask 'why' questions; for example, why politics, the economy and culture have changed over time. Moreover, these two concerns also affect the types of sources they use. Rather than favouring state documents of record, they use sources that can provide data that is amenable to statistical analysis (such as parish records, census material, criminal records and wills), sources that can be read against the grain to provide information on ordinary people, such as court records, as well as more unusual sources, including the physical landscape and cartoons.

Marxism

The writings of the nineteenth-century philosopher, political theorist, revolutionary thinker and historian Karl Marx have had a profound influence on twentieth-century society and history writing. Marx's investigation into history was prompted by a desire to uncover the laws that governed human development and explained societal change. As we saw in Chapter 1, Marx's theory of historical change drew on Hegel's model of the dialectic – in which the resolution of recurrent conflicts produces change and an improvement in societal arrangements which ultimately leads to a linear pattern of improvement. However, unlike Ibn Khaldun, who suggested that 'group feeling' explained societal change, Marx employed the idea of class conflict. As he said at the beginning of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.'⁵³

Marx's theory of historical change can be described as follows. Humans are social animals who naturally form societies in order to meet their material requirements. The productive forces (which include labour, and the means of production such as technologies, raw materials, skills and equipment) determine or constrain the possible economic structures that a society can develop. These in turn significantly influence the form of the superstructure (the political and legal institutions) and the various ideologies and discourses (religious, philosophical, moral and artistic beliefs) prevalent in that society. Different kinds of society therefore develop as a result of the particular combination of productive forces in existence at any specific time. To understand the institutions, laws, politics, culture and morality of a society it is necessary to understand the nature of its productive forces and its mode of production. The mode of production can be described as the stage of economic development of a society manifested in a particular combination of the productive forces and the relations of production (that is, the power relations governing society's assets as expressed in law, the relations between people and their work and between the various social classes). As Marx argued: 'The mode of production of material life conditions the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence

determines their consciousness.⁷⁵⁴ Marx identified a number of main modes of production: primitive communal; Asiatic; ancient; feudalism; capitalism; and communism. This understanding of society and historical change is termed historical materialism.

For Marx, the motor of historical change is the contradiction between the modes of production and the relations of production that erupts in the form of class conflict. Society will be stable whilst there is equilibrium between the social relations, the political system and ideological superstructure, on the one hand, and the modes of production, on the other. However, over time the productive forces begin to be held back from further development because they outstrip the social relations appropriate to them: in other words, the economic structure can no longer facilitate the development of the forces of production. This creates a tension which manifests itself as conflict between different classes that is between distinct groups defined by their different relations to the means of production and their place in the productive system. If this conflict is resolved by a revolution, then the previous economic structure will be replaced by one more suited to the development of the existing forces of production; property and social relations will also be transformed; and a new mode of production will be in force. Therefore, for Marx, political struggles do not cause change in society, but are instead themselves the effects of changes which are caused by economic forces. Marx argued that human societies gradually change and develop and move their way through the various modes of production and, although currently the capitalist mode is dominant, ultimately at some point in the future there will be a revolution and communism will become the dominant mode. For Marx, therefore, history does have a pattern but, although society moves through epochal changes, it is not cyclical; instead, history is essentially linear and progressive.

The key aspects of Marx's theory that historians later adopted were his emphasis not only on the role that economic factors had in determining or influencing the form of a society's institutions and ideologies, but also the role they played in historical change. Equally influential was his idea of class conflict as a motor of historical change, particularly because it gave agency back to groups of people who had traditionally been seen in historical accounts as passive participants. For example, French Marxist-orientated historians applied their understanding of Marx initially to the French Revolution, which they interpreted as a bourgeois revolution that ended the feudal mode of production and ushered in the capitalist mode.

The writings of Marx also had a profound influence on some British historians, particularly those of the British Marxist School, which included,

among others, E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton and Eric Hobsbawm. Thompson was a Marxist intellectual who transformed the writing of labour history. His most famous work, and the greatest work of this school of historians, is the social history *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), in which he challenged not only the Fabian orthodoxy which saw the majority of working people as passive victims, but also the approaches of economic historians who saw working people simply as an undifferentiated labour force, and the ‘pilgrim’s progress’ model which teleologically figures key working men as pioneers of later social developments such as the welfare state or a socialist commonwealth.⁵⁵ Instead, Thompson argued for the agency of the working people: ‘I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver [...] from the enormous condescension of posterity.’⁵⁶ His approach was Marxist in that he argued that the changing means of production engendered by the industrial revolution affected the formation of class. However, Thompson, like many historians, did not slavishly adhere to Marx’s theories in their entirety, but argued that they could be re-interpreted to take account of different circumstances. Thus, although he argued for an analysis of historical change and development based upon class struggle, he did not simply employ the concept of class either as an abstract term or as something arising deterministically from a change in the means of production (i.e. technological change). Instead, he saw class in cultural terms, as something that happens in human relations when some men, as a result of common experiences, articulate their interests in opposition to those of other men whose interests differ. For Thompson, therefore, just like Marx, there is a degree of antagonism between classes. However, class is not conceived of as a thing, but is understood instead as a relationship.⁵⁷

Hobsbawm similarly believed that the best model for explaining change over the past one thousand years was Marxist materialism. Like Marx, he argued that the main factor that led to societal change was conflict between groups who had different relationships with the means of production. Hobsbawm believed that, much of the time, conflict was inevitable. For example, he argued that factory workers in the early nineteenth century worked in such appalling conditions that rebellion was unavoidable. These conditions led to a series of ultimately unsuccessful revolutions across Europe and the consequent rise of the liberal bourgeoisie and the triumph of capitalism. Hobsbawm, rather than concur with the standard interpretation of Luddite ‘machine breaking’ by workers as an animalistic or instinctive reaction to the pressures of misery, argued instead that it could be interpreted as the workers reacting proactively to the threat to their livelihood brought

about by the total transformation of productive relations that the introduction of such machinery brought about.⁵⁸ Although Hobsbawm was originally a labour historian, his later work covers peasant and agrarian studies (the rural labouring classes), world history, peasant revolutionary movements and historiography.

Epistemologically, Hobsbawm did not agree with Rankean traditionalists that history was a neutral means of transparently recording what had happened before. He recognised that history writing had the potential to do great harm because it could be used to legitimise all kinds of intolerant or violent actions. He therefore thought that it was the duty of historians to prevent this misuse of the past by both defending the stringent use of evidence in writing histories and manifestly affirming the fact-fiction distinction by clearly distinguishing between the two. Yet, despite these protestations, Tony Judt has argued that Hobsbawm's communist sympathies meant that he often romanticised the Soviet Union, glossing over its injustices, and thus did not effectively engage with the moral and political heritage of Soviet Communism.⁵⁹

Marxism also had a significant influence on post-independence Indian history writing and there was a gradual shift away from the Rankean topics of political, military and diplomatic history in favour of social and economic subjects. However, the Rankean commitment to a critical analysis of primary sources and objectivity remained. One of the most influential Marxist Indian historians was D.D. Kosambi, who in his work *Introduction to the Study of Indian History* focused on social formations, class conflict and material life.⁶⁰ In a similar manner to Thompson, Kosambi and other Indian historians re-interpreted Marx's historical theory, borrowing the elements which had value and ignoring those which did not seem appropriate to their situation. By re-interpreting the Mughal period of Indian history as a form of Indian feudalism, Kosambi demonstrated that Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production was not relevant to the situation in early modern South Asia and also challenged the notion that South Asian communities had essentially lacked a historical consciousness before the arrival of the British. His groundbreaking work was the stimulus for further histories of the Mughal agrarian system.⁶¹

Marxist historiography also flourished in post-Second World War Japan. For many Japanese historians, Marx's historical model of the transition of societies from ancient slavery through feudalism and on to capitalism and communism provided a valuable framework for analysing the transition in medieval Japanese society from slavery to feudalism, and also explained and gave significance to peasant rebellions and mass movements.⁶² However, the

main pre-occupation of Japanese Marxist historians was to explain, and also condemn, their country's actions during and before the war.

The Annales school

The Annales school takes its name from the historical journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* established by French historians Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929. However, it is important to note that there is no single Annales approach to the study of history, nor a specific Annales methodology. The cohesive element of Annales historiography is perhaps best described as a shared socio-economic approach focused on the history of ordinary people, and an understanding of history as a social science which could therefore benefit from the adoption and application of anthropological, geographical, economic and sociological theoretical models.

Both Febvre and Bloch were socio-economic historians influenced by the positivism of Comte, who wrote 'history from below' and introduced significant methodological innovations into the discipline. Febvre wrote a history of the Franche Comté region of France which demonstrated the interaction of geographic, political, social, religious and economic factors, but also focused on everyday culture.⁶³ Bloch, in his work *The Royal Touch*, explored the belief popular in French (and English) society in the early modern period that the king could cure scurvy by touching the afflicted person.⁶⁴ One of the greatest contributions of this work was that it explored the mentalities of different communities: an approach that subsequently became very popular among Annales historians. Bloch employed a similar procedure in his subsequent work *Feudal Society*, which examines European feudal history from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries. This history does not concentrate on the political or economic aspects of feudalism, instead it explores how medieval people viewed the world around them, what they thought of life and death: it inquired into their mentalities.

Possibly the most famous proponent of the Annales school is Fernand Braudel, best known for his epic work on the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, published in 1949. Braudel was influenced by the materialism of Marx's theory, but placed much more emphasis on geographical and environmental factors than just economic ones. Developing the inclusive approach of Febvre and Bloch, Braudel wanted to write a total history of the Mediterranean but, recognising that it would have to be multi-layered he, again like Febvre and Bloch, moved away from a chronological depiction of events. Instead, he

developed three different conceptions of time: the *longue durée* or geographical time, which explores the impact of the environment on human civilisation over millennia where change is very slow; *la moyenne durée*, which focuses on social and cultural history and explores the history of social structures, the rise and fall of dynasties, the development of economic and political systems, and scientific and intellectual changes over the medium term; and *histoire événementielle*, the time of events, the history of individuals and short-term developments common to most historical works. Moreover, Braudel's interest in the history of events or individuals extends only so far as it reveals the existence of the economic, social and intellectual structures that characterise human society. His emphasis on the decisive role that the environment plays in determining or influencing the development of human societies, together with his insistence that much of history (particularly that of the *longue durée*) is cyclical, is very reminiscent of Ibn Khaldun's approach to history.

The influence of different disciplines on the Annales school, combined with a desire to transform history into a scientific discipline and the development of new technologies, led to an emphasis among Annales scholars on quantitative history, in particular historical demography and the use of statistical data to investigate price movements, including shifts in food prices and wages. Some historians explored the effect that price movements had on socio-political events such as revolutions or rebellions, and others combined statistical analysis with a study of the mentalities of communities: for example, analysing wills in order to demonstrate the secularisation or dechristianisation of attitudes towards death.⁶⁵

By the 1970s yet another trend could be seen within the very broad Annales approach, that of micro-history. It began with Le Roy Ladurie's painstaking and comprehensive study of a small French village, *Montaillou: village occitan*. Although, following the Annales tradition, the first few chapters provide detailed information on the geographical, economic and social context of the village, the main part of the book uses inquisitorial records to explore the mentalities of the villagers, their views on life and death and their attitudes towards such topics as superstitions and sex. A similar use of inquisitorial records was employed by Carlo Ginzberg in his micro-study of the life and outlook of an ordinary Italian miller, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*.⁶⁶ As can be seen from these two examples, there was an increasing departure from the study of large-scale structures and long-term developments in favour of a turn towards micro-history and the cultural study of society: that is, an interest in how people constructed their world and how popular ideas influenced a community's ceremonies, rituals

and work practices. This does not mean that such histories abandoned the use of laws and generalisations in explaining events, but more that they began to apply them at the micro-level.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism can be a rather problematic word, with many, often contested meanings, but we will use it here as a shorthand way of describing a particular genre of writing history. Postmodernism is a hybridisation of a variety of different intellectual movements from different disciplines which differ in significant aspects, but which have in common the belief that the philosophies, assumptions and theories underpinning post-Enlightenment modernity, in particular empiricist epistemologies, realist ontologies and correspondence theories of truth and language, are no longer useful or relevant for us in continuing to make sense of our world. Such theoretical challenges argue that we cannot use the past as a foundation for historical knowledge because we cannot directly access it in order to check whether there exists a correspondence between this past and our historical narratives.⁶⁷ All we have are our interpretations of the sources, and because we cannot escape the interpretative frameworks and explanatory concepts that we use to order and make sense of the world, nor distance ourselves from our values, prejudices and assumptions, then our interpretation of these sources will necessarily be subjective and personal. It therefore follows that there is no one, correct, true account of the past that we can reconstruct. There are instead multiple possible accounts of the past, written from a variety of perspectives. Consequently, some historians, such as White, have argued that we can distinguish between historical accounts only on the basis of aesthetic or moral preferences.

As a consequence of these theoretical differences, particularly the idea that there are plural histories which reflect the views and perspectives of their authors rather than a single true history which reconstructs the past, postmodernist historians tend to focus on people's representations or perceptions of past events. They will perhaps foreground the subjectivities of various authors of primary and secondary sources; be explicit about the role that their own voice (or perspective) plays in the making of their histories; and choose to explore how and why historical accounts have been used, particularly in the context of political legitimisation or identity construction. This is not to say that postmodernist historians do not largely adhere to the protocols of writing history and the historical method, nor that they take an uncritical or

cavalier approach to sources. They may use non-traditional sources, apply innovative reading strategies often borrowed from other disciplines to these sources, experiment with different ways of writing or presenting their narratives, and argue that their own accounts are to some degree fictive, but they do not write fiction, nor do they simply make it all up. The aim of postmodernist historians is to narrate a story based upon their understanding of other primary and secondary narratives and sources according to the protocols or rules of academic history, but which also coheres with and reflects not only their own political, social and aesthetic ideologies, but also their wider beliefs and assumptions about the world. A discussion of examples of postmodern histories can be found in Chapter 10, which explores in more detail the future of history as a literary genre and academic subject.

Further reading

Geoffrey Elton *Return to Essentials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

A clear exposition of the reconstructionist position.

Marnie Hughes-Warrington *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Offers an excellent summary of fifty historians writing during the previous 2,500 years from around the world.

Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, with contributions from Supriya Mukherjee *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2008).

A detailed examination of Islamic, Chinese and South Asian historical trends and developments from the eighteenth century onwards, with most emphasis on the twentieth century.

Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow *The Nature of History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004). Contains a variety of extracts from reconstructionist, constructionist and deconstructionist (postmodern) historians which either directly address methodological issues or provide a good example of what history written in each of these paradigms looks like. The last section deals with post-postmodern history in a section entitled 'Endisms'.

Keith Jenkins *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997). Includes a variety of extracts focused on the epistemology and methodology of history writing from reconstructionist, postmodern and constructionist historians, although he does not specifically use these terms.

Ibn Khaldun *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* trans. and introduced by Franz Rosenthal with a new introduction by Bruce B. Lawrence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Alun Munslow *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997). An anti-representationalist postmodern argument against realist conceptions of historical knowledge.

On-cho Ng and Q. Edward Wang *Mirroring the Past: The Writing and Use of History in Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005). Explores Chinese historiography over 3,000 years.

Chase F. Robinson *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). An overview of Arabic-language Islamic history writing from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries.

John Tosh *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London: Pearson-Longman, 2000). A constructionist argument as to why there is a place for social theory in history.

PART II



WHAT DO HISTORIANS DO?

Creating historical knowledge

How can historians claim to know what happened in the past?

Historians are often described as having expert knowledge of their particular fields – Tang Dynasty China, the reign of Edward II, Mexico after the 1910–11 Revolution. Historians believe that they can establish facts about the past, explain why historical events happened, weigh up the consequences of those events and show how a diverse range of cultural practices and people's actions in the past relate to each other. This is illustrated in the opening pages of Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, where he writes that his aim in the book is to 'explain why things turned out the way that they did' in the world between the beginning of the Great War and the end of the Soviet era.¹ Such claims to knowledge or expertise are conventionally thought to rest on two propositions. One is that the past has a singular shape and substance of its own, prior to any human attempts to conceptualise or describe it, and that the past is therefore knowable; the other is that historians have developed reliable methods for studying and writing accurately about the past. These propositions remain central to historians' collective understanding of what they do. For example, in *Telling the Truth about History* (1994) Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob state that they believe in the reality of the past, in humans' ability to make contact with this reality and in historians' ability to establish at least provisional truths about the past.² We can find similar points made in texts such as Richard Evans's *In Defence of History* (1997), Arthur Marwick's *The*

New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language (2001) and John Tosh and Seán Lang's *The Pursuit of History* (2006), to name just a few.

The belief that historians can study and therefore know the past brings us back to what we earlier described as empiricism – the idea that the past can be observed or accessed via the traces (or sources) it left behind. From an empiricist point of view, the accuracy of a piece of written history can be checked by comparing it to the past that it purportedly represents. This is done in practice by looking at how historians have used the traces or remains from this past: that is to say, how they have used the sources. It is the apparently adhesive relationship between the written account (history), the evidence (sources) and the object of enquiry (the past) that allows historians to claim that their work refers to something solid and permanent – the past as it happened, the past-thing-in-itself.³ This is why we have those familiar metaphors about historians doing ‘detective work’, acting like a lawyer presenting ‘the facts of the case’, working like a scientist (with the archive as their laboratory) or perhaps doing a kind of jigsaw puzzle. Moreover, historians invoke this three-part relationship to distinguish their work from other ways of representing the past, such as in historical novels, history films or the activities of the heritage industry. Most people probably accept the claim that historians have a firmly grounded knowledge of the past – how else are we to explain the popularity of history as a subject over the years in schools and universities, the numbers of history books published annually or the regular appearances of historians in the media as *the* authorities on the past? What else are historians for, the question might be asked, if not to tell us how things used to be?

Certainly, at the level of whether we should trust historians to make accurate factual statements about the past there is rarely much of an issue. If a historian makes a factual claim – for example, stating that Algerian independence from French colonial control was proclaimed on 3 July 1962 – they are probably right. Invariably they will support such claims with a piece of corroborating evidence that will put the issue beyond doubt. This ability to establish warranted facts about the past is an important part of the historian's role. If someone (for whatever reason) wished to invent a fact about some aspect of the past, a historian with knowledge of the field in question would be able to challenge their claim, in terms of its coherence, with the available evidence. The problem, of course, is that historians' work aspires to be much more than a series of singular factual statements that can be verified or disputed. Historians of the Algerian War such as Jean-Pierre Rioux, Benjamin Stora and Alistair Horne give us *narratives* of that conflict, and in the matter of assessing narratives the limitations of empiricism become apparent. Although

empiricism might be used as a method to verify each factual claim that a historian makes within their narrative, there is no way of assessing at the level of the narrative whether the historian has produced a true or false account of the past. This is because within their accounts historians tell us which facts among many were important, they assign a particular interpretative weight to their chosen facts, they omit some other facts entirely and they employ various figurative and rhetorical devices in order to turn their selection of facts into a narrative form. The decisions that the historian makes when doing all this might be applauded or criticised, but their selection and weighting of facts, and the ways in which these are turned into a narrative, cannot be falsified on empirical grounds. Moreover, historians usually marshal their chosen facts as elements within complex sequences, and they present these sequences in ways that make the combination of such elements appear ‘natural’ rather than contrived. So how should we regard historians’ claims that they know what happened in Algeria’s war against France (1954–62), or in any other historical event or process? What allows them to have such confidence in their abilities to make knowledge-claims about the past?

Few, if any, historians claim to know *the* truth about any aspect of the past. While discovering truths about a past that is ‘out there’ remains historians’ collective motivating goal, most concede that the ideal of describing the past ‘as it was’ always remains beyond reach. Instead, it is common now for historians to refer to their knowledge of what happened in the past – and thus the statements that they make about it – as justified, warranted, verifiable and perhaps ‘the best that we have for now’. C. Behan McCullagh, in *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (1984), *The Truth of History* (1998) and *The Logic of History* (2004), provides a detailed discussion of the philosophical foundations that enable historians to make such claims. We refer to McCullagh here because he is the leading ‘realist’ or reconstructionist philosopher of history. His work has been described by Keith Windschuttle as ‘the best defence of history yet made by any philosopher’ – a defence, Windschuttle means here, against the postmodern critique of historiography.⁴ In (very brief) summary we have reduced McCullagh’s discussion to five main points.

He states that:

- First, the world exists and has existed independently of our perceptions about it – thus there is a clean divide between the knower (in our case, the historian) and the known (history). This relates to the empiricists’ claim that the past has a form of its own that is observable and verifiable, and does not exist simply in the mind of a historian.

- Second, our perceptions of things – under certain conditions – provide an accurate impression of reality. This implies that a historical account can be regarded as more than simply one person's present-day perspective on what the original sources might suggest. It is the foundation for the claim that, as long as the statements in a historical account correspond with the evidence (as itemised in the footnotes and bibliography), then that account should be regarded as accurate history.
- Third, we can make fair and reliable inferences from what we observe (that is, draw conclusions from it). In the historian's case, this suggests that they can (and should) use inductive inference to draw general conclusions from their reading of particular data. So, for example, we know that since 1968 all Republican presidential candidates in the USA have criticised to some degree the social and cultural experiments of the 1960s. Republicans won 7 out of 10 presidential elections between 1968 and 2004. Only once during that time did a Democrat (Bill Clinton in 1996) win a majority of the fifty states, and only Jimmy Carter won a majority of the popular vote (with 50.1 per cent in the post-Watergate election). Thus, infers Bernard von Bothmer, 'The Right's backlash against "the sixties" was a huge success'.⁵
- Fourth, we can conceive of the historical world as an extension of the present and thus bring it within our understanding. This assumption lies behind the belief that historians can at least attempt to think about the past as it happened, and not simply via the activity of running different types of text together to construct an account of how that past might now be imagined. It is to assume that historians are able to use documents as 'evidence of social realities which it is reasonable to believe really existed'.⁶
- Fifth, we can usually explain why particular people in the past acted as they did. Sometimes these explanations will describe a person acting rationally in accordance with their desires, beliefs and values. (At other times someone's behaviour will be described as irrational, and thus beyond explanation as such.) In still more cases, a person's actions might be explained with reference to social or cultural roles and norms.

These are the assumptions that enable historians to believe that the quest to discover what happened in the past is a feasible goal. Indeed, according to McCullagh, unless history is concerned with the discovery of truth about the past it might as well be abandoned.⁷

Although we focus in this chapter on generic issues, we recognise of course that different types of history writing (religious, social, cultural,

political, economic, military, intellectual) have produced knowledge about the past in different ways. Each of these variants of historical writing has employed (to some degree at least) its own research methodologies, source materials and interpretative strategies for identifying and reading data, and framing the resulting text. So, for example, from the 1960s onwards historians began to use quantitative research methods to write histories based on the use of analytical statistics. Instead of interpreting individual documents, historians fed vast amounts of data into mainframe computers – and eventually high-specification PCs – and aimed to produce workable models that explained historical change. The analysis of this data made possible new fields of enquiry. ‘New political history’ focused on statistical trends in activities such as voting behaviour and political party membership. ‘New social history’ used records such as police files, employment registers and educational statistics to make general observations about concepts such as collective behaviour or social mobility. ‘Historical demography’ converted parish registers into sets of local, regional and national statistics about births, marriages and deaths. ‘New economic history’ used large data sets on wages, prices, consumption and investment to posit new models of industrial development.⁸

In contrast to the quantitative historians’ use of statistical analysis to produce new knowledge, the multi-authored *Medieval Religion: New Approaches* (2005) is a good example of how redefinition of existing concepts, re-reading of old sources (combined with the use of previously neglected ones) and a broadening out of perspective could all be employed to create new accounts of the past. Contributors to this volume worked with a new and wider view of what religion meant (in the broad cultural sense) for medieval Christians and their non-Christian neighbours. This included asking different (and important) questions about previously under-studied medieval religious groups, such as those that specialised in ransoming captives or those that ministered to the urban poor. It involved looking at the consequences of canon law and administrative structures on the interaction between Christian church insiders and outsiders such as Jews and pagans. The book argues that papal and clerical efforts to impose adherence to their preferred vision of Christianity had a negative impact on Jews and Muslims in particular. Contributors used previously neglected Hebrew and Arabic sources, and brought an interdisciplinary perspective (art, history, religious studies) to a long-established field of enquiry. The authors also focused closely on the (previously neglected) role of women in medieval religious life – using sources such as legal transactions, saints’ lives, sermons, art and architecture, and theological treatises. In summary, whereas the history of the late medieval Church used to focus

on papal and male initiatives, these new interpretations discuss how women played an active role in medieval religion.⁹

As we have already seen in Chapters 1 and 2, postmodern theorists like Hayden White, Sande Cohen, Frank Ankersmit, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, David Harlan and Alun Munslow provide a very different theoretical perspective on the nature of history from realist philosophers like C. Behan McCullagh. For these writers, histories are more imagined than found and are shaped by the figurative work of the historian rather than by the force of the past itself (by ‘imagined’ they mean that history writing/reading is mentally organised or conceptualised in particular ways, they do not mean that history writing is a form of fantasy). However, for the purpose of this chapter, we will leave unchallenged the idea of a knowable past and move on to a discussion of the methods that historians commonly use in their efforts to ‘know’ it.

What is the historical method?

The historical method refers to the agreed ground rules for researching and writing academic or professional history. It is a term for the core protocols that all historians use for handling sources and justifying their accounts. It should not be confused with the various methodologies that historians use to address different types of research question. The core rules that constitute the historical method as it is today relate back to the empiricism of the Enlightenment and the nineteenth-century development of history as an academic subject as it was taught in European universities. These rules reflect the ways in which history as a practice was initially modelled on the natural sciences – and therefore seen to be capable of producing ‘hard’, rational and verifiable knowledge. Historians now disagree (sometimes sharply) about the kind of knowledge that the historical method is capable of producing. But all agree about the need to observe its protocols, and for one simple reason. All academic historians by definition employ the historical method in their work – because anyone who writes about the past without using these methods is regarded as having produced work that is something other than academic ‘history’. This is not necessarily a question of value (historians are not guaranteed to produce better accounts of the past than anyone else), but it is a matter of categorisation. In other words, it is adherence to the protocols of the historical method that defines what it is to ‘do’ history. For this reason, part of your challenge as a history student is to be able to recognise and follow the protocols of the historical method in your own work.

What are these protocols? Historians have to base their accounts on source materials. In order to make a statement about the past they need to be able to produce a corroborating reference to justify it. This means that historians need to be able to locate and organise the relevant sources (the traces left behind from the past and the works of historians) on which they will base their account. They need to be able to verify sources, to date them, locate

The historical method

The 'rules' for writing history are socially determined and contingent. This means that they are not eternally fixed but could be subject to change. In fact, many of the postmodern histories discussed in Chapter 10 do not physically frame their texts as histories and are not written using the 'impersonal' voice. This suggests that adherence to these rules does not need to be comprehensive, but rather that it is sufficient for one to adhere to a majority of them. In practice there is a degree of flexibility. The rules or practices for writing history contained under the term 'the historical method' can be described as the following:

- the use of standard models for the ascription of cause, effect and contingency
- the use of generally accepted or recognised interpretative models
- critical appraisal of primary and archival sources, which includes an assessment of the reliability and authenticity of the documents
- the physical framing of the work as history through the employment of a critical apparatus including acknowledgements, explanatory introduction, footnotes, bibliographical references, appendices, and indexes
- invocations of authority such as the identification of the narratorial voice with the known author and the attribution of information to cited sources
- intra- and inter-textual coherence – that is, internal coherence within the work and coherence or agreement between the work and other sources
- inclusiveness, that is, the work should explain coherently all the evidence available
- the acquisition of substantiating and countervailing evidence
- the establishment of facts from this evidence
- a decontextualised tone and the use of expository prose – the incorporation of the facts into a narrative in an objective, disinterested manner
- an explicit explanatory purpose or function
- the diachronic situation of the narrative within the discourse of history through citations of other accepted histories
- if controversial interpretative models are to be used, or established facts are to be challenged, a coherent explanation/defence of this should be provided.

their place of origin and identify their intended functions. They need to show that they have read them with close attention, and demonstrate how they have been used to answer the research question under discussion. Historians need to make accurate notes from their sources, taking care to distinguish between quotes and parts that are paraphrased, noting page numbers where available, checking dates, checking whose views are being presented at particular points in the text – is it the actual author, or is she/he relaying someone else's views in that passage? Also, they need to be careful not to mislead by strategically lifting small parts of a text from the whole in order to deliberately change the meaning of that text. Historians need to be able to distinguish between how they use sources to support a simple factual claim, and how they use them to infer things about the past. Historians also need to be able to show how their hypotheses relate to the available source materials.

Why do we need to historicise historians and their work?

As we have seen, the ways in which historians author their histories is subject to a variety of methodological controls. These limit the kinds of statements that they can reasonably make in a historical account – anyone who wants to claim, for example, that former King Richard II continued to live in Scotland in 1400–19 (as was rumoured) will have to find a satisfactory way of dismissing the various sources that date his death in 1400, otherwise they will be deemed to have mistaken their facts. But while the historical method produces a set of boundaries in which historians compose their accounts, it does not constitute a means by which they can reconstruct a once-existing past as if it were already arranged in narrative form. Historians are not ciphers who transcribe the pre-formed stories of the past. Instead, as Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur and Michel de Certeau have explored perhaps more cogently than any others, history writing is a form of narrative representation in which the historian (albeit working within a set of cultural traditions) makes the key decisions about the form and content of their text.¹⁰ Therefore, when we argue in favour of historicising a historian and their work, we simply mean that it is worth paying attention to the historian (as an author) and the circumstances in which they composed their text.

If you go into a bookshop and look at the front covers of the works of fiction, in most cases the name of the writer is more prominent than the book's title. If you look at the history books, the opposite is usually true. The same kind of ordering often occurs in conversations about books. If you ask

someone who is reading a novel *what* they're reading, they will usually tell you the author's name – 'it's a Zadie Smith, Philip Roth, Michel Houlebeq, George Eliot'. But if you ask the same question of someone reading a history book they often describe the subject, 'it's about the Roman Republic, the history of printing'. There are reasons for this. Historians conventionally do what they can to erase their own voice from their work. Most history books are written using the third- rather than the first-person form. History students are usually taught to avoid using 'I' or 'my' in their writing. So, for example, students will be told to write simple declarative statements such as, 'nationalism was a more powerful revolutionary ideal than socialism in nineteenth-century Europe', rather than 'I think that nationalism was a more powerful revolutionary ideal than socialism in nineteenth-century Europe'. This way of writing could be justified as simply adhering to a set of genre conventions – the traditional form for writing historical accounts. But behind this convention for using the third-person form stands something more fundamental. When we read the statement 'I think that nationalism was a more powerful revolutionary ideal than socialism in nineteenth-century Europe', we understand whose voice it is we are listening to. This particular writer is informing us that they have thought about the issue at hand and now they are telling us what they have concluded. As readers who are familiar with the protocols for writing history, we will expect them to explain their reasoning and to name the sources that guided their thinking. We can then engage with this individual's viewpoint and think about whether or not we are persuaded by them. But when we read the statement 'nationalism was a more powerful revolutionary ideal than socialism in nineteenth-century Europe' the rhetorical effect is different. True, we will still expect to see the reasoning and sources behind the statement. But phrasing it in the third person conveys the sense that there is something in the contents of the past itself that lies behind the statement, rather than a choice by a writer to isolate and describe something in a particular way. Writing in the third person carries the impression that the historian has transcended the subject at hand, that they have found some extra-cultural justification for the points that they make, or that they are acting as a kind of medium through which the reader can see and hear the past itself. In doing so, historians minimise the extent to which they can be seen to have imposed themselves on their material and actively composed their own text.

Our argument here is that historians should interrogate the work of other historians in much the same way that they read primary sources. The point of doing so would not be to look for signs of a particular writer's 'bias' or ideological preferences. Neither would it be part of a search to distinguish

those writers whose books take us closer to the ‘truth’ of the past. Instead, the point of such work would be to help us become more finely tuned, critical and self-questioning readers of historical accounts. Alongside an approach where historians’ work is simply mined for facts about the past (which has value in itself), we would advocate a way of reading that shares common ground with literary criticism. As well as being able to read accurately what any historian has said about a particular subject, we should also be able to analyse the ways in which that writer has put together their account. We need to avoid our tendency to ignore the author of historical texts as we concentrate on what we are being told about the past. In our minds, we need to picture the author’s billing as above their book’s title. Regardless of rhetorical convention, we should read historical accounts as if they written in the first person. As Oliver Daddow has argued in the journal *Rethinking History*, we would profit from a kind of critical reading that ‘would focus on the impact that historians have on their texts and the drivers behind their interpretation and reinterpretation of past events’.¹¹ We could usefully define historiography as including some questioning of why historians wrote as they did at certain times, and some examination of why a body of history writing has taken the shape that it has.¹²

Part of such an approach to history would mean historicising historians and their texts. What would this mean in practice? It would mean regarding a historical account as being the product of a writer who was working in a specifically local culture – a time, a place, an institutional context, a set of political and economic circumstances, a (historiographical) tradition and a selection from one of the sanctioned modes for writing history. This is not to invoke a kind of determinism – we do not believe that texts can simply be read off from an assumed context that is fixed and only capable of being described in one way. It is simply to recognise that historical accounts are socially constructed phenomena – and as we have seen, issues such as emplotment, narrative, ideology and choice of metaphor can be usefully brought into play when we think about these accounts. In doing so, we believe that making associative connections between a history book and aspects of the social and cultural contexts in which it was produced can aid our critical reading. So we work by asking questions. Who wrote this historical account? What do we know about the kind of history that they write (their epistemological preferences)? What other books or articles have they produced? When was this book published – is it a first or subsequent edition, and if it is the latter, what kind of changes have been made? What can we suggest about the relationship between the account itself and the time, place and circumstances in which it was produced? How has the writer organised their material? What kind of source

materials has she used to support her claims? How have those sources been used? How does what the historian says in this work relate to other pieces of writing in the same field? Who was this book produced for? What kind of agendas (personal, professional, political) might it be seen to serve? What are your views about the kind of claims that the writer makes in the piece?

Further reading

Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob *Telling the Truth about History* (London: W.W. Norton and Company 1994). A key neo-realist and neo-empiricist text.

Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (eds), *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (London: Arnold, 2003). This collection introduces some key philosophical questions about how history is written. Some essays deal with the intellectual and institutional settings in which professional history writing developed; others deal with historical approaches that purport to be applicable to all periods and fields of history; others examine the impact of various theories within specific fields of history (political, economic, social, gender and so forth). The collection is strongly oriented towards British and European history. There is no unifying theme as such, but several essays suggest their authors' impatience with the postmodern critique of historiography.

C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); *The Truth of History* (London: Routledge, 1998); and *The Logic of History: Putting Postmodernism into Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2004). McCullagh is a reconstructionist philosopher of history. His books provide a detailed account of the case for writing empirical, 'objective' history that can be understood by readers who have not studied philosophy before.

Alun Munslow, *The New History* (Harlow: Pearson, Longman, 2003).

Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice (ed.) Alun Munslow and James Goodman is a leading history journal which publishes articles on theoretical issues related to the writing of history, particularly articles which take a sceptical approach to traditional empiricist epistemology.

Using sources

What are primary and secondary sources?

For the sake of simplicity we will begin with the conventional answer to this question. Historians name the various sources they have used to carry out their research by providing a bibliography at the end of their writing. These bibliographies are usually divided into two categories of research materials. Primary sources are listed first, followed by secondary sources. As this ordering suggests, primary sources are regarded as the most important for historical research. These sources might take the form of documents and old texts held in archives and libraries, archaeological remains and old buildings, old newspapers, film footage, recordings of interviews from the period being studied. Secondary sources consist of the writings of other historians about a particular historical topic or event, and they are held to have a different kind of value to original sources. Secondary sources written by historians commonly appear in forms such as monographs, journal articles, popular histories and textbooks.

The privileged status that the raw data in primary sources enjoys among historians has been true since the mid-nineteenth century and the Rankean injunction that to know the past one must first know the archive. This is not to say, of course, that Ranke and his contemporaries invented archive-based history writing. But it was Ranke who inspired modern historians to adopt the critical reading of original documents as the basis for their professional training and scholarly practice. Under Ranke at the University of Berlin, history

students attended seminars where they learned to read and analyse medieval documents. Following Ranke's pioneering work in the German archives, historians have long favoured the use of sources that were generated (temporally and geographically) as close as possible to the event that they describe, rather than, for example, a memoir written by an eyewitness years afterwards. Also, for several decades after Ranke's death in 1886 historians were primarily interested in the kind of official documents held in state archives that were the evidence base for writing histories of high politics and diplomacy.

Since the early twentieth century, however, the range of primary sources regarded as legitimate for historical research has expanded greatly. One reason for this is methodological. From the founding of the *Annales* approach to writing history in 1929 onwards, social and cultural historians in particular have gradually become more willing to incorporate almost any available source within their research materials – from the testimony of living witnesses, to landscapes to Disney cartoons. This turn towards new kinds of sources is largely a consequence of historians becoming more open minded about which topics of study they would regard as 'historical' subjects. For example, whereas Ranke had focused on the histories of state politics, historians in the *Annales* school wanted to be able to explain how human cultures in particular regions (not necessarily within one country) changed over time, and why. They wanted to delineate the economic, psychological, social, intellectual and physical structures of these lived cultures, and to do this they realised that they would need to go beyond the traditional topics of politics and the lives of great men. In pursuit of this holistic or 'total' history, *Annales* historians drew freely on the methods and resources of other academic disciplines – geography, sociology, anthropology and economics. And they were similarly pluralistic in their use of non-official sources: ranging from the analysis of tree rings and parish records to the study of manuals on interior decoration or evidence of people's eating habits.¹ Another reason for the proliferation of new sources is technological. From the early printing presses to modern databases and Internet forums, the ways in which human cultures have generated, preserved, processed and organised data have grown at pace. A problem facing contemporary historians now is the massive volume of data that is potentially available for their research. To borrow an example used by Keith Jenkins, imagine trying to write a history called 'Yesterday in New York'.² Consider the potential range and mass of primary sources – qualitative and quantitative – that might be used in such an account: the many millions of events and experiences that people in New York might recall for a researcher, the output of the entire electronic media available in the city that day, the

paperwork generated by every civic or community organisation, the combined texts of the print media, the movement of stock prices, the registers of births and deaths, recorded crime statistics, data relating to public health – the list could go on, but hopefully the point has been made.

A final example we will use to illustrate the broad range of primary sources that historians now consult is taken from Akram Fouad Khater's *Sources in the History of the Modern Middle East* (2004). This book lists 74 different sources that include:

- an Ottoman government decree defining the official notion of the 'modern' citizen, 1870
- the Treaty of Peace and Commerce (Treaty of Turkmanchai) between Iran and Russia, 1828
- *Anis al-Jalis*, an Egyptian magazine on a vision of women and their role in society, 1899
- Shaykh Ben Badis's fatwa against French naturalisation of Algerians in *Al-Basha'ir*, journal of the Association of the *Ulama* of Algeria, 1937
- US President Truman's statement supporting Jewish immigration into Palestine, 1946
- Asadollah Alam's diary entries on some elements of the Shah of Iran's rule in 1976 and 1977
- US consular documents on US diplomats' assessment of the Iranian revolution, 1978
- Internet discussion of marriage and education for Saudi women, 1996
- article in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* in which Arab and Israeli soccer players discuss ethnic relations in Israel, 2000
- selection from a roundtable discussion of globalisation and its impact on Arab culture, 2000.

In contrast to the kind of sources listed above, secondary sources are the writings of other historians. Because they are interpretative – and thus likely to be challenged or superseded by later accounts – secondary sources sometimes have only a limited shelf life. By this we mean that whereas medieval historians will almost certainly continue to read the Domesday Book (a vital resource for scholars of late eleventh-century England) a hundred years from now, it is unlikely that many of today's history books will still be widely read (if at all). With the exception of a few classic texts, most historical accounts eventually pass from being the latest version of some subject to becoming out of date, and thus deleted from the publisher's catalogue and removed from

all but the largest libraries' shelves to make space for new material. When we refer to historians' writings in a collective sense we use the term 'historiography'. In addition to his or her reading of primary sources, a historian working on a particular subject is expected to show a thorough knowledge of the work of other historians in that field. They will be expected to show how their work stands in relation to these other accounts, in terms of their methodology, interpretations and use of sources. This is what tutors mean when they tell students that their own writings should display 'historiographical awareness'.

At the risk of confusing matters, we should note here that the apparently clear division between primary and secondary sources just described does not always apply. What we conventionally regard as secondary sources can in fact be used as primary sources, depending on the nature of the project in which they are put to work. An intellectual history that describes how historians have written about their subjects over time will use historians' accounts as its primary sources. For example, Georg Iggers' *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (2005) uses the collection of other historians' writings as the primary sources for an intellectual history of modern history writing. This means that a book such as Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975) would usually be regarded as a secondary source for someone studying the Inquisition in southern France in the fourteenth century, but as a primary source for someone writing a history of how Annales historians wrote about their subjects. In other cases, historical accounts are a kind of hybrid of primary and secondary source – neither quite one nor the other. Arthur Marwick places into this ambiguous category autobiographies and contemporary histories, such as Churchill's history of the Second World War (which is part memoir, part traditional narrative history). Accounts like these combine the author's eyewitness testimonies (usually regarded as a primary source) and an interpretation of the events being described that draws on a reading of other sources (usually regarded as the property of a secondary account).³ We believe that this rather confusing state of affairs suggests two things. The first is the potentially problematic and artificial nature of the primary/secondary source division. The second is that it illustrates how historians have tended to make a fetish of manuscript sources and old documents, while simultaneously assuming that 'proper' secondary sources did not really exist before history as an academic profession came into being in Western Europe in the nineteenth century.

Nonetheless, we recognise, of course, that the benchmark of historical research remains tied to the critical use of primary sources. This is not simply a matter of academic prestige: it relates to a set of cultural practices that have

material consequences. How far a piece of history writing is based on a systematic study of primary sources is an important consideration for Ph.D. examiners, editorial boards of journals, academic book publishers and research funding councils. For these reasons the 'gold standard' of history writing is still taken to be the research monograph – a detailed study of a subject, based extensively on primary sources, heavily footnoted, finished with a lengthy bibliography and often published by a university press. Below this in the hierarchy come articles in prestigious journals and chapters in edited books. Further down the list are found textbooks or synoptic analyses. These books aim to summarise what historians collectively know about a subject, rather than to offer 'new' knowledge based on primary sources. Maintaining that there is a clear distinction between primary and secondary sources (in terms both of their identity and their value) is crucial for reconstructionist historians. This is because it helps to support their epistemological explanation of history – that the past is objectively knowable via their selection, verification and critical reading of primary sources. They argue that primary sources are special because they are the original traces or relics of the past. They believe that such sources are unprocessed, authentic and unmediated – in short, free from interpretation. Reconstructionist historians also tend to further classify primary sources into those that are documents of record and other, discursive sources. The former are understood as essentially state documents, largely produced and consumed by the bureaucracy: edicts, laws, treaties, minutes of meetings, memoranda, key state papers, dispatches, telegraphs (more recently e-mails) and treasury accounts. Discursive primary sources include other people's accounts of what happened, such as reports of meetings, handbooks, guides, diaries, pamphlets, newspaper articles, sermons and literary and artistic sources. They are considered to be inferior to documents of record because they are held to contain various degrees of interpretation, subjectivity and bias. What they tell us is taken to be inseparably linked with the opinions and considerations of the author. Similarly, official sources are seen by some to take precedence over private sources on the grounds that the latter are assumed to be more subjective than the former. The idea here, for example, is that a personal letter will be contaminated by 'opinion', whereas an official government document can be trusted to deliver the 'facts'. Using the same reasoning, secondary sources are considered to be inferior to primary sources (in terms of their evidential value) because of the presence of the author's interpretation.

Not all historians, however, agree with the traditional way of defining and separating out primary and secondary sources that we have described above.

Postmodernist historians tend not to see the primary/secondary distinction as crucially important. Instead they focus on a particular source's relevance to their research project. Those sources that are most important to the project – the ones that provide the evidence that forms the basis of their arguments and upon which the quality of their work will be judged – they regard as primary sources. Equally, those sources that provide background information, which inform their theoretical approach and which they use to provide a context, they regard as secondary. The classification for postmodernist historians is less to do with providing epistemological justification for their understanding of the status of historical knowledge and more about providing a bibliographical aid to the reader and making explicit what evidence they have used to justify their arguments. A good example of this is Greg Denning's *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* (1992). Instead of making the conventional distinction between primary and secondary sources in his bibliography, Denning lists all the sources he has used in alphabetical order and provides a detailed notes section at the end of the work where he acknowledges the specific sources that he has used to make particular arguments. Moreover, the arguments that Denning makes throughout the book to explore why the mutiny on the *Bounty* took place rely on evidence from a variety of traditional and not-so-traditional sources. These include captain's letters, log books, journals, orders from the admiralty, legal decrees, published books, anthropological descriptions of Tahiti, pantomime programmes and feature films about the mutiny.

Postmodernist historians also argue, as we will see below, that all sources involve interpretation: they are written from someone's perspective, and thus no source should be regarded as objective. One way to illustrate this is by using the example of documents produced in legal proceedings. A reconstructionist like Deborah A. Symonds would argue that such documents of record are largely free from interpretation – they are a true and accurate account of what was said in court. Postmodernists would take a different view, arguing that such records are as positioned (and thus 'subjective') as more obviously personalised or partisan sources. They would say that the contents of records of evidence given in a court of law were framed by the legal framework in place at that time, and the specific expectations of those who were involved in the legal process in question. Those giving evidence would be conscious that they were retelling events not to friends or family but to judges and juries who had power over liberty, life and (sometimes) death. Thus they may have adapted their language or stressed different aspects of the event that they were being asked to recall, depending on how they read the demands of their

immediate situation. Moreover the court's rules of evidence and the prescriptions of the court concerning what can and cannot be said, as well as the questions of the prosecutor or inquisitor, all constrain and shape the evidence a witness could give about their experience – in effect, the protocols of the court system can be seen to constitute an already-in-place interpretation of events. It follows from this that what might appear at first to be a transparent recording of events – the transcription of evidence given in court – is in fact an interpretative act.

How do historians use sources?

Historians regard primary sources as the evidence base for their accounts of the past. For those who favour a straightforward empirical and reconstructionist approach to writing history, primary sources are the closest that we have to an encounter with the past itself. According to the genre rules of history writing, the best way to justify a statement relating to the past is by citing an original source as corroborating material – sometimes by quoting that source itself within the account, at other times by referencing the source in the form of a footnote or endnote. This genre rule applies with greater force in the case of original research – such as a historical monograph or journal article – than in synoptic accounts based on other scholars' writings. The convention of citing a primary source in support of a statement also depends on the type of claim that is being made. Statements that refer to common knowledge need no support, but ones that might be contested or are not widely known will need corroboration. So, for example, making a point about population growth in nineteenth-century Northern Mexico will require some supporting source material, but stating that Mexico City hosted the Olympic Games in 1968 will not. This way of using sources has been the convention of history writing for some 150 years. The injunction to read, use and cite original sources is still widely observed by historians, even by those who might be described as writing postmodern or deconstructionist histories. The correct use and interpretation of primary sources is a fundamental protocol in the historical method and is a key expectation of the genre of academic history writing. Readers, researchers, historians, journal editors, book publishers and students expect to read academic histories that are grounded on the use of primary sources and that make clear, consistent and intelligible references to them (and in the case of history textbooks – or synoptic analyses – that they integrate material from other historians' primary source-based work). Writing about the past in ways that do not adhere to this convention is usually classified as something

other than academic history – such as historical fiction or some other genre of writing about the past. It is also worth acknowledging here that the ways in which we use primary sources as historians have ethical implications. In our selective use of sources we choose to give a voice to some people in the past but to ignore the voices of others; we judge that some people have left us ‘reliable’ evidence while others are not to be trusted; we narrate our accounts of the past through the particular perspectives of our chosen sources – which, as Dominick LaCapra suggests, contributes to the way in which the historian becomes implicated in, identifies with and undergoes forms of ‘affective involvement’ with their own ‘objects’ of study.⁴

At an early stage in a research project a historian will need to know what main body of primary sources they intend to use and what kinds of research questions those sources might help them to answer. As the research progresses there is a kind of dialogue between what the historian would like to write about and what the primary sources enable them to justifiably state. Once they have identified and gained access to their primary sources, historians need to know how to make critical use of them. It is important that we do not simply regard primary sources as containers of authenticated facts, but that we consider what they can tell us about identities, mentalities (ways of interpreting the world), and the various (often contested) relationships that exist between individuals, on the one hand, and collectives, cultures and societies, on the other. For example, letters written by new immigrants to the USA or soldiers in the First World War do not simply provide the historian with data as to what life was like in nineteenth-century America or in the trenches. They can also inform us about how individuals tried to establish and communicate the meanings they attached to their lives, how they used letters to shape their own and their communities’ identity, and particularly how, in the case of immigrants, they were used to shore up a fragile sense of self.⁵ However, we should not assume naïvely that such letters provide a transparent window into the writers’ inner lives – their opinions and perceptions. In order to produce a more informed and nuanced reading of these sources we need to recognise that letter writing has always been constrained by societal norms and expectations. For example, letter-writing manuals and editions of published letters have modulated the ways in which people expressed themselves in this format. Returning to our example above, model letters were provided to soldiers in the First World War to give them a ‘correct’ way of interpreting and communicating their experience. Moreover, the ways in which people express themselves in any given period are always related to prevalent conventions of discourse in society. In some contexts we might also need to be alert to the

fact that letters would have been censored according to security, ideological, religious or moral considerations.⁶

In practice, historians make critical use of primary sources by asking certain types of questions about them. We summarise these questions below.

- Is the source in question authentic – that is, is it really from the time, by the author, and the type of document that it purports to be?
 - Is it a later inscription of an earlier speech or document?
 - If so, how might this affect the way that we read the document?
- Who wrote or produced the source, and what do we know about them that might help our understanding of it?
- What kind of perspective does the author/producer adopt?
- When was it produced?
- What kind of source material is this, and how does this affect our reading of it?
- What functions did the source originally fulfil?
- How might contemporaries have understood it?
- What does it say (and what doesn't it say)?
- Does it say similar or different things to other sources from the period? Does it cohere with other sources/evidence from the period?
- Does it cohere with information in other histories?
- How have other historians in the field used this source?
- Is it a translation?
 - If so, how might this affect the source? How can we be sure that the translation is accurate? But more importantly, we need to recognise that the translation will be an interpretation of the original by the translator.
- Is the source in its original form or is it a reproduction – a transcribed, printed version or a facsimile – and what problems might these pose for a historian? Transcribed texts are, in a fundamental way, also translations. The transcriber generally normalises spelling and grammar and interprets unclear words. In so doing, they place their own interpretation on the text. Edited texts sometimes omit parts of the original. The editor will select those sections that she deems to be important and, as a result, she presents her interpretation of the work to audiences. Moreover, when transcribing handwritten texts to print, some meaning can be lost or changed. For example, handwriting can often reflect the writer's emotional state – particularly useful when reading diaries or personal letters – but this is lost in transcription. Marginalia such as exclamation marks, comments

and qualifications by readers or by the author may be omitted as well. Is the spatial placement of texts maintained from the original? For example, when we read a digitised version of a newspaper article we do not always see where this article was originally positioned – the juxtaposition of one text with another can affect how these texts might have been read originally.

- If it is not in its original form, do we know how the text in question was originally circulated?

We might also add the following considerations from discourse theory:

- We should be alert to the plurality of possible readings for words or phrases.
 - Different terms often meant different things to different audiences – that is, words do not necessarily have the same meaning over time and between different interpretative communities.
- We should check for the use of binary distinctions in the text because this can tell us a lot about how audiences constructed ideas of self and other.
- We need to think about the use of metaphor to create meanings within texts.

In addition to these questions and considerations there are other, community-based conventions for using primary sources in history writing. Historians should never deliberately misrepresent the contents of a source in an effort to prop up a line of argument. This means that when they quote from or paraphrase a source they must do so accurately. Moreover, they should not lift fragments of a document out of context in ways that give a false impression of what that whole document might reasonably be taken to mean. However, observing these rules of scholarly etiquette does not necessarily mean that the study of original sources takes us towards the ‘reality’ of the past. Although historians of all types agree about the necessity of reading texts from the period in question, and also about how to use them, they disagree about their understandings of what type of knowledge these sources might be expected to yield. As we discuss in more detail below, the study of primary sources helps historians to produce more detailed, textured and authoritative pieces of writing. But however intellectually rewarding such writing might be to read, we should not simply assume that the rigorous use of primary sources provides historians with a way to access to the past on its own terms.

Do primary sources provide access to the past?

We share the view that historians (and history students) should continue to make critical use of primary sources. Reading original sources is an important part of the subject's intellectual and cultural traditions. To borrow a line of thought from Richard Rorty, historians can do no more than make best use of the tools and resources that are available to them to do their work. In this sense, we might regard primary sources as the resources we have for this work and modes of critical reading as our tools for doing it. The more 'old' texts we read, the more we expand our vocabularies for writing history and the more skilled we become at performing our particular 'language game'. As we have noted already, according to the genre rules of history, primary sources are the final reference point in the procedures that enable historians to make justified statements about the past. If we want an audience to accept the validity of what we write, we will be expected to show that we have used the available evidence in acceptable ways – and to explain why we have declined or neglected to cite sources that might contradict our accounts. Primary sources are the last 'court of appeal' for historians who disagree with each other about how to account for the same set of events. Can two historians in such a dispute substantiate their accounts by referring to original sources? If so, can each of them show that they have used their sources according to the procedural rules of the profession? Have they drawn reasonable conclusions or inferences from the sources, using them to justify their descriptions of part-whole or whole-part relationships in their accounts? If both have done so, we simply have to accept that their different (competing) histories are both equally 'correct' – and conclude that each writer had their own particular reasons for producing the account that they did.

However, some historians bestow much more evidential weight on primary sources than we have in the paragraph above. In some minds, primary sources give historians a kind of access to the past itself, unmediated by the interpretive work of other historians. According to Arthur Marwick, 'the essential concern of history is with the sustainable truth which painstakingly, and often opaquely, emerges from the sources'.⁷ By 'sources' here, Marwick was specifically referring to primary sources. In a piece called 'Living in the Scottish Record Office' (1999), American historian Deborah A. Symonds makes a similar point to Marwick's as she describes her experience of working with original documents in an Edinburgh archive. For her, reading the manuscripts on eighteenth-century criminal cases was not simply a matter of processing and evaluating data. It was a physical and emotional sensation – a

kind of empathetic contact with the past itself. Symonds recalled how she continually lost all sense of present time and her surroundings in the archive, becoming immersed in the other world that she was reading about in the documents. It was this feeling of being transported back in time via the primary sources that led her to state:

At the risk of arrant romanticisation, I am inclined to argue that historians must hold the original documents of whatever they study, look at the paper, and smell everything. Only by coming face to face with surviving documents, seals, letters, maps, accounts, and receipts can one, I believe, fully weigh the meaning of terms like intention, falsification, and truth.⁸

The idea that stores of archival materials are somehow reflective of the past itself has an obvious appeal for some kinds of historian. It enables them to claim that if the sources are in correspondence with the past, and if their historical account of something is in correspondence with those sources, then logically their historical account must be in correspondence with the past. This is the thinking behind the kind of ‘reconstructionist’ or empirical history that seeks to guarantee its knowledge claims about the past.

However, there are several problems with the model that links past–archives–histories together in such a fixed manner. First, the deposits of documents available in archives are highly fragmented, variable, arbitrary and contingent. They are partly the result of accident (what happened to be recorded, what happened to be preserved, what has survived accidental destruction) and partly the product of politics and culture (the editing activities of archivists and librarians, funding decisions by various agencies to catalogue one set of records instead of another, choosing to make particular records available in digital form, releasing some documents to the public but withholding others).⁹ Second, the ways in which a particular historian might access archival materials depend on any number of external factors. How much research time does she/he have for the archival work involved in her/his current project? Do they require (and can they get) funding to visit distant archives? Do they have the language (or palaeographic) skills to read relevant documents? What levels of energy and concentration does the researcher bring to their work in the archive on any given day (which may affect their note-taking and thus citation of sources in the final account)? As Antoinette Burton argued in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (2005), historians have long maintained a relative silence about the ‘personal,

structural, and political pressures which the archive places on the histories they end up writing – as well as those they do not'.¹⁰ Third, a shift from a correspondence or referential theory of meaning or language use (which conceives of the meaning of a word in terms of its relationship or correspondence to an object or entity in the world) to a use-based theory (which argues that 'the meaning of a word is its use' or that meaning is determined by how a community of language users actually use the term), means that texts can no longer be understood as having fixed, definitive meanings.¹¹ All texts are open to multiple readings, depending on the context in which they are read, by whom, and for what purposes – which is not to say, of course, that texts can mean anything we want them to mean. And if, as a consequence, no text can be given a final authoritative reading (and thus subjected to a 'closure', after which there would be no further ways of interpreting or re-describing it), then we must let go of the idea that primary sources are simply reflective of the time and place in which they were produced. They can always be read in subtly (but important) different ways, according to the needs of the researcher and his/her research question.

Fourth, beyond the level of corroborating a simple factual claim, primary sources do not simply tell historians what they want to know about the past. For example, Hansard *Parliamentary Debates* provides a transcript of Winston Churchill's first speech to the House of Commons as British Prime Minister on 13 May 1940. We can therefore be reasonably sure about what he said – allowing for the fact that speakers can correct the transcripts of what they say, and that 'errs' and 'ums' and other verbal slips are excised. But in order to evaluate the speech, to make a judgement about why he said those words in that particular way, or to make some points about the speech's political importance, we have to use inferential reasoning. This means that we move from particular data (the speech) to general conclusions (about its various functions and levels of meaning). In practice, this means that we use our knowledge of context (recognising that this is itself based on reading other texts) – the speech was made just three days after Churchill became Prime Minister, it followed a recent British military defeat in Norway, Churchill was Prime Minister but not yet the leader of a political party, his predecessor had been deposed partly because he seemed to want to conciliate rather than fight the enemy, and Germany had just launched its offensive on Western Europe. We apply our knowledge of mid-twentieth-century British parliamentary custom – its debating procedures, its traditions of adversarial exchange, the conventions governing language use and modes of address. We use what we know about Churchill as an orator, politician and minister. And we use

our knowledge of other sources (such as John Colville's and Hugh Dalton's diaries) to make the point that, with this speech, Churchill passed his first public test as Prime Minister. We can see why it was widely agreed that Churchill had said the right things, at the right time, by politicians, newspaper commentators, civil servants and the public. Put this way, inferential reasoning looks like a useful way of working. But we should not mistake it for a way of guaranteeing historians' judgements. Inferential reasoning is not a 'reliable' methodology as such. It is largely a matter of intuition and experience, a 'feel' about what the sources might yield, with the important procedural decisions left in the hands of the historian (which of the available contexts will they decide to employ? what other corroborating sources are available and will they cite? what will they do about those other sources that they haven't yet read, but which might cause problems for their argument? – and how will they signal to the reader which sources they have yet to consult?). Finally, there is the problem of the relationship between the sources and the written account. How will the primary sources be deployed, combined and weighted in the historian's text? When and where will the historian quote directly from the source(s)? What governs their choice about the length of any given quote? When will they paraphrase part of a document, or perhaps simply cite a source in a footnote to support a claim? In other words, instead of regarding sources as data that give us access to the past, we should see them as resources that historians deploy figuratively to justify their statements and ensure that their work qualifies as 'history'.

Example of primary source analysis

Fethname (*victory letter*)

Ottoman *fethnames* (victory letters) provide an interesting example of the potential complexities inherent in source analysis. *Fethnames* are early modern Ottoman state documents that record and celebrate Ottoman victories and conquests. Such documents were variously sent to Ottoman state officials and governors; read aloud in Ottoman towns and cities; sent to foreign rulers; incorporated into Ottoman histories; and included in other literary collections. Such a *fethname* was written to celebrate the Ottoman conquest of Eger castle in today's Hungary in 1596. There are a number of versions of this *fethname* in existence today. One was sent to the English Queen Elizabeth I and is in the National Archive. Another was copied by the sixteenth-century Ottoman historian Selaniki into his history of the Ottoman Empire. Selaniki also notes that the *fethname* he copied was originally sent

to the chief judge of Istanbul and was intended to be read aloud on the streets of the city to inform the population of the great victory. A third version was included in a nineteenth-century Ottoman printed edition of a collection of Ottoman cultural writings. And lastly, there exists an English translation of an Arabic version of the *fethname* sent to a Yemeni emir. These four extant versions of the Eger *fethname* are commonly assumed to be essentially the same, as they all describe the capture of the castle in basically the same way. However, the small textual differences, together with the re-inscription of the *fethname* in different textual contexts, provide evidence that the Eger *fethname(s)* had diverse functions and audiences and are not therefore simply the same source copied in different documents.¹²

The implied *fethname* that Selaniki describes in his history as being read aloud on the streets of Istanbul was ostensibly intended to communicate news of the conquest to the Ottoman people. However, it may also have been designed to convince the Ottoman population of the validity of a long and costly war and of the greatness and magnificence of the empire. In doing so, it helped to create public memories which in turn served as a form of social cohesive and provided a sense of identity.

In contrast, the inclusion of the *fethname* in Selaniki's history serves a very different function. Although it provides information about the victory, Selaniki has already provided a full description of the capture of the castle. Therefore the inclusion of the document at the end of his narrative appears to serve a similar function to a modern historian's quotation and citation of primary sources: that is, it serves to validate and authorise his work as a true and accurate history and himself as a respected historian because his history is based upon official documents. Moreover, Selaniki's *fethname* includes an additional section defending the actions and eulogising the grand vizier which was not included in that sent to Queen Elizabeth and in the nineteenth-century printed version. The inclusion of this section in Selaniki's version of the *fethname* is perhaps not surprising, given that he was employed by the grand vizier soon after the latter was appointed to his post.

The *fethname* sent to Queen Elizabeth, although largely similar to the others, does include a number of small lexical differences that indicate that it served another purpose in addition to that of providing information about an Ottoman victory. These differences mainly concern the religious terminology used, which suggests that the Ottomans specifically rewrote the *fethname* to take account of Queen Elizabeth's Christian faith. While not all Qur'anic references are removed, those that remain refer to events also found in the Bible. Specific references to Allah are replaced with the phrase 'the supreme sovereign'. Moreover, the concluding section of the English *fethname* differs from the others by mentioning the role of the English ambassador in that year's Ottoman military campaign and offering hope for the success of the English fleet which had been sent against the common enemy of the English and the Ottomans, the Spanish Habsburgs. The inclusion of these last comments provides evidence that one of the functions of this *fethname*

was to be a tool of diplomacy and to maintain and reaffirm the cordial Anglo-Ottoman relationship.

The English translation of the Arabic-language *fethname* sent to the Yemeni emir has also been rewritten to account for the religious beliefs of its recipient. This version employs a more pronounced Islamic framework and, in particular, exploits the rhetoric of antagonistic religious difference to narrate events, with numerous references to the sultan as an exemplary Muslim waging jihad against the infidel. This *fethname* seems to have been sent with the hope of reinforcing the loyalty of the Ottoman's representative in the Yemen to the Ottoman Empire as well as reminding him of the power and strength of the empire. However, the fact that we have available only the English translation of the Arabic original means that we have to be very careful in drawing conclusions, as we do not know how accurate a translation it is.

The last example is a nineteenth-century printed edition of a much earlier manuscript collection of examples of Ottoman cultural writings. While in the early modern period such collections would have been used by scribes, secretaries and bureaucrats as style and protocol templates, it is very unlikely that this would have been the function of the nineteenth-century printed version. It is far more likely that it, just like the printing of a number of Ottoman 'classic' histories at this time, was intended to establish a particular set of shared social memories of an Ottoman golden age that would help to create a proto-national sense of Ottoman identity. Therefore we cannot read this version of the *fethname* unproblematically as an exact copy of an earlier sixteenth-century *fethname*. Many nineteenth-century printed editions of earlier manuscript versions of Ottoman histories demonstrate differences in vocabulary and also omit some sections of text. For example, this *fethname* is much shorter than the other versions. Unlike the others, it only describes the capture of Eger castle and not the subsequent battle of Mezokeresztes, which the Ottomans only just managed to win. It therefore acts as a powerful iconograph of a golden age of Ottoman victory and success, which contrasts significantly with the military and economic problems that the Ottoman Empire suffered in the nineteenth century.

As we have seen, the various extant versions of the Eger *fethname* served different functions and allowed different potential meanings to be created by different audiences. Source analysis is therefore not simply a matter of extracting 'facts' or documentary evidence about a particular event – in this case the capture of a castle. We also need to ask for whom each particular version was written and why. We need to pay close attention to seemingly insignificant differences as well as the textual framing of the document. And we must therefore be very cautious about uncritically relying on copies of primary sources in collected source books, edited editions, transcriptions and translations and printed versions of originally manuscript texts.

Further reading

- Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird *History beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London: Routledge, 2009). Explores the critical use of cartoons, musical soundscapes, photographs, the Internet, landscape, film and television, oral testimonies and the built environment as sources.
- Antoinette Burton (ed.) *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005). Contains a range of personalised reflections from scholars about their experiences of working in archives. The testimonies collected are a useful reminder that, while archives remain central to historians' work, they are anything but neutral repositories of information.
- Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds) *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London: Routledge, 2009). A good introduction to interpreting and using a variety of primary sources, with chapters on the use of novels, autobiography, speeches, court files, letters, newspapers and diaries, among others. It also includes an introduction which discusses some general approaches to textual analysis and interpreting primary sources.
- Suraiya Faruqi *Approaching Ottoman History: An Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). A very useful introduction to both European and Ottoman archival and narrative sources on Ottoman history which discusses the sources in the context of current research questions, issues and projects.
- Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan (eds) *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008). These essays argue that archival collections of materials are always the product of an interested perspective, and that the materials they contain are always read from an interested perspective. The importance of serendipity, chance discoveries and personal connections with archival documents is a theme that links the various contributions.
- Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). An idiosyncratic but thought-provoking restatement of Marwick's view of history writing as an empirical and objective discipline. Marwick had a habit of using personal abuse against anyone he disagreed with in this text. Chapter 5 provides a lengthy discussion of his ideas about primary sources.

How do historians write history?

Historical interpretations and imagination

Are there ‘right answers’ to historical questions?

History quizzes and multiple-choice tests for history students depend on the assumption that some statements about the past can be regarded as right and others as wrong, and that we have ways of telling the ones from the others. If we were asked where it was that Captain James Cook’s ship *Endeavour* landed on 29 April 1770 and we replied ‘Brazil’, we would have given a wrong answer. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that the ‘right’ answer is Botany Bay in Sydney, Australia. Separating right from wrong statements about the past at this level of knowledge is usually a simple procedure. We can use different types of texts (reference books, historical accounts, primary sources) to help us decide whether a particular proposition about the past is right or wrong, true or false. In the end, this method for establishing correct facts about the past depends on whether we can corroborate those facts by citing observable data – in other words, empiricism. If we want to confirm where the *Endeavour* landed on 29 April 1770 we can read Captain Cook’s journals of his voyage and put the matter seemingly beyond doubt.

We say ‘seemingly beyond doubt’ because sometimes even apparently straightforward, corroborated factual claims can turn out to be problematic. The inlet where Cook landed was given the name ‘Botany Bay’ in the official published edition of his journals. This name was a reference to the wide range of plant specimens that was collected by the ship’s resident botanists, Joseph Banks and Daniel Dolander. But in previous logs – that is, written before

publication of his journals – Cook and others had called the inlet ‘Sting-Ray Harbour’. Furthermore, the indigenous Bidjigal and Geawegal people who lived on the inlet’s northern and southern shores would have used their own place names. So we might say that Botany Bay in Sydney, Australia is one right answer to the question about where Cook landed on 29 April 1770. Or that this is the answer that certain historians are most likely to give. But the answer is not ‘right’ in a kind of pure or absolute sense. Its ‘rightness’ cannot be cleanly separated from issues of power, culture and language – in this case, how did one group of people take naming rights over a territory away from others, and then maintain those rights for over two hundred years? ‘Botany Bay’ is the right answer to the question when viewed from a European perspective. But viewed from another perspective – say, that of the colonised rather than the colonisers – the right answer would be different. The point that we are making here is that finding a corroborating source is only the first step in the procedure that makes an answer to a historical question the ‘right’ one. The second stage is to persuade various audiences (historians, history students, readers of history books, commissioning editors, journalists) of its ‘rightness’. And here it is useful to think of these audiences as being tied to specific times, places and cultures – not as being timeless, universal or in some other ways ahistorical.

All of these difficulties are multiplied when we think about questions that call for some kind of commentary about the past. History students spend much of their time dealing with these matters of interpretation. Instead of writing simple descriptions of some aspect of the past, you will normally be expected to organise history essays around an answer to a specific ‘historical question’. As we previously noted, definitions of what constitutes a ‘historical question’ are, in the end, self-referencing. Historical questions are the kinds of ones that historians have become accustomed to asking, the ones that they like to set for themselves (or for their students). We previously divided these questions into two related types (see Chapter 1). The first asks about things such as events, phenomena, processes, concepts or personalities in the past. Why was the French monarchy overthrown in 1789? What were the main consequences of the 1789 revolution for Anglo-French relations in the nineteenth century? Was Napoleon Bonaparte a great French leader? The second type explicitly asks about the ways in which historians have written about a particular subject. Which recent accounts of the origins of the French Revolution do you find most persuasive, and why? How do you explain historians’ changing approaches to writing about the French Revolution since the 1950s? Both types of question are difficult to handle because they can be answered in

a number of different ways. Their openness is in fact one of the reasons why tutors set these kinds of questions in the first place. Part of what students learn from degree-level study is that knowledge is contested, provisional and constructed for particular purposes. So, asking a question that can be answered only in one possible way is insufficiently difficult for a degree course. But these questions also take us back to an epistemological issue – one that concerns what it is that historians can know about the past.

Historians can make justified, rational, evidence-based, even brilliant attempts to explain why something once happened. But of course this is a long way short of stating that they might one day arrive at the ‘right’ answer to a question like ‘Why was there revolution in France in 1789?’ Different historians will always have their preferred ways of nominating and weighting causal factors within their accounts. Some will prefer class-based explanations of revolution (the rise of the French bourgeoisie, the failure of the aristocracy to make political or economic concessions to this rising class). Others will focus on the importance of ideas (Enlightenment rationalism, modern political ideologies). Historians who like to cite economic factors as agents of change will stress the crisis in the French public finances of the late eighteenth century, caused in part by the state’s regular involvement in wars. Perhaps others will interpret the revolution as being the product of interlocking contingencies – a matter of chance and chaos. Also, there is nothing in the archives, in published accounts or implicit within their methodologies that tells a historian how far back they need to go in search of the long-term causes of the revolution – ten years, fifty years, a century or more?¹ In the end, a historian’s choice about when to begin their explanation of why revolution occurred will always be a matter of personal preference – shaped of course by reading and rational thinking, but personalised nonetheless. This helps us to understand M.C. Lemon’s argument that historians can only ‘explain’ something in the sense that they can ‘explicate’ it. By this, he means that historians can make something clear or intelligible with detailed information, usually by putting it in a sequence with other events or phenomena. But they cannot *account* for events as such.² Even theorists who are largely optimistic about historians’ ability to explain change over time accept that no scholar can provide a wholly satisfactory account of why something happened. This is why they tell us that historians can give us only ‘provisional answers’, ‘tentative conclusions’ or ‘plausible hypotheses’ in relation to the past. Moreover, they say that historians’ explanations have to rely on the secondary justifications of ‘warranted assertability’ or ‘indirect confirmation’, but they cannot be *proved* as such.³

All of this raises an obvious difficulty for history students. If working historians are unable to provide ‘right’ answers to questions about their specialist subjects, what are students meant to do when faced with those same questions? In *Historiography: An introduction*, Roger Spalding and Christopher Parker offer some sensible advice on this issue. Their broad point is that there are right *ways* to answer historical questions rather than right *answers* as such. As they point out, in most cases – with the obvious exception of an extended research project – students will answer historical questions using secondary sources. The answer to the question (the essay), therefore, involves a historiographical discussion: that is, an assessment of the available historical interpretations. They advise students to identify several of the most important interpretations in the field and then to read these accounts critically. It is not enough, they advise, simply to summarise the various interpretations – ‘historian *X* argued this, but historian *Y* argued that’. Students need to make a judgement about the merits of the different accounts they read. This might involve reading academic reviews of the works in question (usually found in journals), and it will certainly involve thinking about the ways in which the account has made use of an evidence base (particularly primary sources) and the reasoning behind its line of argument. It will involve considering how the historian imposed a shape on their account, and what kind of perspective they brought to their work. This kind of critical reading will enable you to go beyond making a straightforward précis of how a particular collection of historians have explained or interpreted something in the past. It will put you in a position to justify why you think that certain answers to the question at hand are more persuasive (but not necessarily more ‘right’) than others.

Is historical knowledge neutral or positioned? (Can historians be objective?)

Richard Rorty wrote that during the Enlightenment the physical scientist was adopted as a model of the intellectual. Science – with Isaac Newton as its ideal practitioner – was prized because it seemingly provided objective access to the workings of Nature.⁴ When history still aspired to be a scientific form of enquiry, historians believed that they had a professional duty to write about the past using a similarly objective method. In order for them to be able to think like this, they had to make an important theoretical assumption. They had to believe that there was a complete separation between themselves and what they were studying. If these things were held to be separate from each other, then the conditions at least existed in which a historian might look at

the past as a kind of impartial observer. In other words, if the past existed as an object that was whole, intact and independent of the historian's organising thoughts, then a historian could at least attempt to describe that past more or less on its own terms. Ideally, historians were expected to make every effort to ensure that their knowledge (their writing) corresponded with the reality of this past. Writing history according to this model was like an exercise in accurate transcription or mimesis. Of course, the model relied on historians acting in good faith. They had to be trusted to describe the past as it appeared to them after they had examined the available evidence (the sources), even if the results turned out to be different from what they had expected, or hoped to find. But this was not regarded as an insurmountable problem. Historians were expected to be able to switch off their internal commentaries about how they liked to see the world during their working hours. It was a matter of professional pride that they seemingly knew how to prevent their own present-day values and preferences from contaminating their research and writing about the past. Moreover, they believed they had a method for excluding unreliable witnesses or sources from intruding into their histories. This apparent detachment was what separated professional historians from amateurs, advocates, propagandists, publicists and other people who, it was assumed, manipulated their accounts of the past for their own ends. Historians were expected to tell the 'truth' about the past. More than anything else, it was historians' claim to objectivity that guaranteed the high cultural standing of their work.

The 'objectivity question' has therefore been central to how historians regarded their subject. It had emotional and moral implications, as well as philosophical ones. Some historians held on to the ideal of objectivity because it promised to guarantee their knowledge-claims, to put some things beyond dispute. It was an attractive working concept for those who cherished certainties. It enabled them to believe that they could establish 'the facts' about the past, and then to regard those facts as being true in and of themselves. To believe in the possibility of objective knowledge, in other words, was to imagine an intellectual world that offered something more solid than the here-and-now contingencies of human culture. It was to believe that there was a difference between knowledge and opinion. Most important of all, it counteracted the sceptics, from Friedrich Nietzsche onwards, who argued that all historians' claims about the past have always been positioned, partial and value laden.

Another way of seeing what is at stake here is to pose the objectivity question in different ways. Do historical accounts correspond with narratives contained in the past itself that can be recovered and retold? Or do historians

ultimately decide how they want to fit their research materials together, what kinds of stories they want to tell, and how they prefer to explain change over time? Can any historical account transcend the culture in which it was conceived and produced, or must it always stand in some kind of relation to it? What kind of 'truth' do historians pursue? As Martin Bunzl wrote, what is at stake here is 'whether there *is* a fact of the matter in matters historical, not just whether we can know it'.⁵ Because of this, the objectivity question in history has generated an extensive literature of its own. The historians, philosophers and theorists who constitute the field not only disagree about the answer to the question, they also disagree about what the question really means. Is it primarily one that asks about the existence of a past that is separate from the ways that we think and write about it? (We call this an ontological question – about 'being'.) Or is it primarily one that asks whether we can research and write about the past in ways that are unaffected by the contingencies of our own time and place? (We call this an epistemological question – about 'knowing'.) Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (1988) is a useful starting point here. Novick offered a general definition of how historians have traditionally understood objectivity in their field:

The assumptions on which it [their understanding] rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and, above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation: the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned. Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are 'found', not 'made'. Though successive generations of historians might, as their perspectives shifted, attribute different significance to events in the past, the meaning of those events was unchanging.⁶

We should make it clear that Novick himself did not share these assumptions. He gave this summary at the start of *That Noble Dream* because he wanted to use the rest of the book to show that the idea of historical objectivity was so confused that it was, in effect, redundant. Novick was neither 'for' nor 'against' objectivity. His argument was, rather, that present-day historians would be better served by abandoning the concept as a guiding aspiration in their work. 'It seems to me that to say of a work of history that it is or isn't

objective is to make an *empty* observation; to say something neither interesting nor useful', he wrote.⁷ David Harlan put it more starkly: 'a full-fledged theory of objectivity is about as useful to a historian as antlers would be to a duck'.⁸ As Novick, Harlan and others have shown, historical objectivity was a concept that was itself bounded by time and culture. It arguably made sense as an ideal in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the historical profession itself was a largely homogenous community: bourgeois, white, 'western' and predominantly male. These scholars could at least agree about what, for them, constituted 'proper' history, what were legitimate sources and how they should write their accounts. It was this homogeneity that enabled Lord Acton to tell contributors to the *Cambridge Modern History* in 1898 that they should work with such impartiality 'that nobody can tell, without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford laid down the pen, and whether Fairbairn or Gasquet, Liebermann or Harrison took it up'.⁹ But the profession's narrow social base – and thereafter its shared understandings of what historians should study – broke apart from the 1960s onwards. Academic historians collectively became more diversified in terms of their gender, ethnic and social class identities. The number of subjects that they wrote about, and the perspectives that historians brought to their writing, proliferated – 'history from below', 'black' history, feminist history, postcolonial history, non-Eurocentric history and more besides. And with this proliferation of research interests, the notion that all historians should share a kind of neutral or 'centrist' space when they worked no longer made sense. Of course there were (and still are) female historians who defined themselves as 'historians who happened to be female', just as they were (and are) black historians who defined themselves as 'historians who happened to be black'. But there were also those who defined themselves as specifically *feminist* or *black* historians with their own agendas to pursue on behalf of the collectives that were so central to their sense of self. In their eyes, Lord Acton's 'impartiality' was no more than an attempt to pass off *his* own particular western, andro-centric values, agenda and world-view as universal.

As well as fragmenting the history profession's social composition, the 1960s also saw the development of the thinking we associate with postmodernism. As we have seen, postmodernism challenged long-held intellectual orthodoxies across all disciplines, not just history. This included the sciences from which historians in the nineteenth century had derived their ideals of objectivity in the first place. In 1962 Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* argued against the long-held assumption that scientists were impartial observers of the natural world. According to Kuhn, the condition

that made a scientific claim true rested on its acceptance by leading practitioners within the relevant scientific community. Scientific knowledge, in other words, was a form of social or institutionalised knowledge, not the accurate reflection of an objective world. Of course, these practitioners (scientists) would have agreed protocols for testing the validity of any scientific claim. Only when they were satisfied on this score would they accept that the arguments that were used to justify a particular claim were true. In that sense, truth was more than simply a question of the weight of prevailing opinion. But ultimately, what underwrote scientific truths were communal protocols – rules of play, shared discourses, agreed vocabularies, common professional initiation – that were local and historical, not natural and timeless.

Kuhn's point is a useful one for historians to bear in mind – certainly in relation to how history is taught and assessed in higher education. Although we personally agree with Peter Novick's argument that 'objectivity' is no longer a useful concept for historians to apply to their work, we accept that in practice the term continues to be widely used. As such, we suggest here that objectivity should best be understood as something that refers to the protocols for writing history or as inter-subjective agreement. This is different from using the term to refer to the ideal of viewing the past from a neutral or 'God's-eye' position – the historian's view as the 'view from nowhere'. In our opinion, history is always written from a particular perspective, and it always serves a particular agenda – personal, professional, political, aesthetic, religious, moral or some other. This is not meant as a criticism. We simply want to recognise that, in choosing to write about one subject over another, a historian has already taken up a position. Moreover, the postmodern 'linguistic turn' has made us aware of how the ways in which we use language constitute or shape our knowledge of the world. Language is not something that we use straightforwardly to reflect knowledge that is already 'out there'. Historians use words – concepts, descriptive categories, figures of speech – to give shape, substance and boundaries to the very thing that they take as their point of enquiry. Discourses, as Michel Foucault said in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, are practices that systematically construct the objects of which they speak.¹⁰ In this way, the idea that there can be a clean separation between the knower and the known breaks down. 'Historical knowledge' is something that is constructed by historians primarily in the act (and indeed performance) of writing, not something that is intrinsic to the past itself, waiting to be recovered. But – and this is where Thomas Kuhn's ideas are useful – that construction of knowledge by historians is always done according to the agreed rules of the profession. So, when tutors instruct history students to

write about the past ‘objectively’, we can see this as another way for them to say that their students should work with the kind of scholarly ‘honesty’ or ‘integrity’ that we described in Chapter 3 as one of the core protocols expected of all historians.

What role does imagination play in writing history?

For historians who wanted to model their work on the ‘objective’ natural sciences as described above, any contention that the imagination played a role in history writing was troubling. After all, in *The Republic* Plato had written that imagination was inferior to – and potentially in conflict with – rationality. Used pejoratively, historians took ‘imagination’ to be synonymous with terms like ‘fantasy’ or ‘fabrication’. But the wish to deny any role for the imagination has not been universally shared among scholarly historians. The literary, fictive and poetic aspects of history writing, and the imaginative work involved in constructing these, have been recognised and valued since antiquity. In fact, viewed against the longer tradition of history writing, the modern attempts to remodel the discipline on the lines of the natural sciences might be seen as a brief (and unsuccessful) attempt to sever historiography from its literary or rhetorical roots.

Herodotus’s *Histories*, the multi-volumed epic narrative of the growth of the Persian Empire and the Greek states of Athens and Sparta (c.430–424 BCE), acknowledged the poetic influences of Homer and Hesiod in its composition.¹¹ Although Herodotus often used evidence in a critical manner that we would now regard as conventional, he also occasionally employed imaginative excesses in his story-telling. In Book Three of the *Histories*, for example, we read about giant ants that were ‘in size smaller than dogs but larger than foxes’, and ‘winged serpents’ which guarded the trees that produced frankincense.¹² In Hayden White’s view, the works of the nineteenth-century ‘masters’ of historiography – Michelet, Ranke, de Tocqueville, Burckhardt – are to be revered more for their literary and artistic qualities, and for the powers of their ‘constructive imagination’, than for the specific explanations they offer for the ‘facts’.¹³ In recent times, historians have used imagined passages within their work as a device for signalling their self-awareness of the ways in which they are implicated in the creation of their historical accounts. Natalie Zemon Davis in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (1975) and *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (1995) created imaginary dialogues between herself and the historical subjects of her research. Simon Schama’s *Dead*

Certainties (1991) provides two complementary novellas in which evidence-based and purely imagined accounts relating to the deaths of General James Wolf in 1759 and the murder of George Parkman in 1849 are combined as a way of exploring the gap that necessarily exists between an event and how that event is described in subsequent narrations. And Jonathan Spence's *The Question of Hu* (1989) similarly blurs the conventional distinctions between history and the historical novel in its tale of how a Chinese man, John Hu, was brought to Paris in 1722 by a Jesuit missionary to help edit and translate the huge volume of Chinese texts he had acquired on his travels. Spence wrote this account as an imaginary log narrated in the present tense. The text itself is not furnished with footnotes, but there are 36 pages of notes at the end of the book that readers can use to see how and where Spence based this imagined log on primary sources.¹⁴ (See Chapter 10 for more examples of how some historians are incorporating imaginative or fictive elements into their histories.)

Davis, Schama and Spence each have their way of modifying some of the conventions of the genre of scholarly history writing. But all share the view that historians do not (and cannot) simply transcribe the past by applying a methodology to the extant primary sources. They each make meticulous use of primary sources, but they also acknowledge that making these sources intelligible and then selectively integrating them into a historical account is an exercise in imagination as well as inferential reasoning. Of course the requirement that a historical account should stand in relation to the sources sets boundaries on the imaginative possibilities open to the historian. But as R.G. Collingwood argued in *The Idea of History* (1946), historians ultimately exercise autonomy in the construction of their accounts. He makes the point by way of analogy: a landscape painter might think that he (*sic*) is copying nature, but in the end it is the artist and not nature that dictates what goes into the picture.¹⁵ Collingwood was in no way stating that historians were free to say whatever they wished and still have that regarded as history. His position was that a form of truthful historical knowledge was possible, but in the sense that a historian could imagine the past as an object of thought rather than as an object of perception.¹⁶ For Collingwood, in fact, historians could only explain the actions of a person (agent) in the past if they were able to 're-enact' in their own minds the thought of what that act had meant to that agent. History was therefore a form of imaginative identification with people in the past.¹⁷ Collingwood freely acknowledged the mediating force of the historian's imagination in this procedure. But what set the historian apart from the historical novelist was that each act of the former's imagination

had to be justified by valid reasons – not simply the internal coherence of the story.

Collingwood also wrote that ‘all history is an attempt to understand the present by reconstructing its determining conditions’.¹⁸ In *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (1997) Niall Ferguson argued that we might imagine the present not as the only possible (pre-determined) outcome of history, but as the result of chaos or contingency. Perhaps, he wrote, the present could be thought about as being the one scenario among a set of plausible alternatives that just happened to play out in practice. We mention this mode of thinking here not because we endorse it, but because Ferguson and his contributors used it to construct imaginary alternative histories – not, they maintain, completely fanciful or speculative histories, but limited to ‘*those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered*’ (original italics).¹⁹ So, for example, the essays include: ‘What if there had been no American Revolution?’ ‘What if Nazi Germany had defeated the Soviet Union?’ and ‘What if John F. Kennedy had lived?’

Why do historians disagree with each other?

Pieter Geyl argued in *Napoleon: For and Against* (1949) that ‘It is impossible that two historians, especially two historians living in different periods, should see any historical personality in the same light.’²⁰ In fact, history writing on all subjects is marked by disputes and controversies. We argue throughout this book that historical accounts are shaped more by the organising and figurative work of historians than by how the past itself once looked. The governing relationships in history writing are those between historians’ perspectives, their research questions, their sources and the genre conventions that set the boundaries for how they present their writing. There is no relationship as such between the historical account and the past in itself. We expect historians to disagree with each other about how they interpret the world around them – in their attitudes to politics, private morality, social values, religion, climate change and so forth. And given that these feature so heavily in the construction of their accounts (remember Collingwood’s point that the painter controls what goes on the canvas) we should expect them to disagree about how they choose to write about their subjects.

We should also acknowledge here that academic historians are professionally obliged to create disagreements with each other. Aspiring historians gain entry into the profession and build their careers by showing that they are

different from others writing in the same field. The most prestigious rewards for practising historians are granted for 'original' work. 'But we already know all this' are dreaded words for historians to read or hear when they receive peer feedback on their research. There are two main ways to be original. One way is to say new things about an old subject, perhaps by citing previously unused primary sources as an evidence base, or else applying a different interpretative template to familiar material to produce an unexpected thesis. Historians sometimes make a name for themselves by overturning previously held assumptions about a historical subject. John Horne and Alan Kramer, for example, successfully challenged the belief that stories about German atrocities during the Great War were fabricated as part of the Allied propaganda campaign. In *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (2001) their research confirmed that German troops killed thousands of Belgian and French civilians between August and October 1914.²¹ A second way is to write about previously ignored subjects – such as marginalised groups, cultures regarded as peripheral or narrowly specialised topics. In either case, the historian will be expected to discuss directly how their account relates to – and differs from – previous work.

It is common to think about disagreements between historians as forming part of a progressive narrative of history writing. That is, we think about historical knowledge as being cumulative – with each generation of historians building on (and refining and correcting) the work of their predecessors.²² In this progressive view, older historical accounts of something are seen as eventually giving way to newer and therefore improved accounts. Historians (and equally publishers) encourage us to imagine that historians' collective writings are leading towards an end-point – a more complete account of the past. In the meantime, readers of history books will be familiar with the marketing quotes that tell them how some or other of these books should be regarded as now 'definitive' or 'unlikely to be bettered'. These claims are most likely to be made on behalf of accounts based on newly available or previously unread primary sources. A simple equation is suggested: new sources equals new knowledge, equals more knowledge, equals a better account of the past. Behind this is the commonly invoked trope of the historian as a discoverer, better allowing the past through the sources to speak to us. But in our view, it is more useful to explain historiographical disagreements without recourse to the assumption that historians are collectively becoming better at what they do. Instead, as the case study below suggests, historians disagree with each other because they bring an individual – but not unique or context-free – perspective to their work.

Case study

The American Revolution, c.1763–c.1783

Gwenda Morgan's *The Debate on the American Revolution* (2007) discusses in detail how historians have disagreed about the causes, consequences and meanings of the revolution, and about which people's experiences of the revolutionary period can be regarded as legitimate subjects to be studied. In some cases these disagreements are matters of debate between individual historians. In other cases they are interpretative disputes between historians who can be grouped into different 'schools'. In her review of the debate about the causes of the revolution, for example, Morgan examines the contending interpretations of 'imperialist' and 'progressive' historians. Imperialists such as Charles Andrews, Herbert Levi Osgood and George Beer wrote about the American colonies in the broader context of the British Empire. They argued that from the late seventeenth century onwards there was an incremental increase in the political powers of colonial assemblies – in North America and elsewhere – at the expense of royal (British) authority. Thus Charles Andrews argued in *The Colonial Background of the American Revolution* (1924) that the rejection of British authority in the American colonies was a consequence of a 'silent revolution' that had transformed relations between the imperial centre and parts of the periphery in the previous hundred years. Rather than repeat familiar denunciations of British tyranny and oppression in the American colonies, imperialist historians argued that the British had devolved a substantial degree of political and economic autonomy to the colonies by the 1760s. In their mind, revolution was the final stage of a century-long journey towards full political independence.²³

In contrast, 'progressive' historians such as Carl Becker, Arthur Schlesinger and Frederick Jackson Turner thought that the best way to understand the causes of the American Revolution was to see them as being in symmetry with the causes of the 1789 French Revolution. In short, they argued that revolution in the colonies was driven by internal conflict between social classes and various sectional interests. Revolution in this sense was a dual contest. As well as being a fight against British control in America, it was simultaneously a struggle for power between rival interest groups inside the colonies. Thus Carl Becker's *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (1909) described how common freeholders and unfranchised mechanics and artisans forced their way into the political arena at this time, much to the annoyance of the landowning and merchant aristocracy who had hoped to dominate politics in the wake of the British being expelled from the colonies.²⁴

How might we explain these different readings of the causes of the revolution? Morgan does so by pointing to the vantage points from which the contending accounts were written. Imperialists, she states, wrote from

the vantage point of Britain's political centre – Westminster and Whitehall. These histories were written through the lens (and sources) of colonisers who were confronted with the practical political challenge of maintaining control of a widely dispersed empire on limited resources. Moreover, they were largely written at a time when the United States of America was building an empire of its own, and when there were improved diplomatic ties between the USA and Britain. In such a context, histories that helped to rehabilitate the reputations of imperialism and British rule in America served contemporary (conservative) political ends. Progressives – as the label implies – wrote histories from a different perspective. These were liberals who were inspired by the values of 1789. Comparing the American and French revolutions was a way of associating liberal ideals with the very foundation of the modern United States of America. Also, progressives wrote about the American Revolution at a time when the nation was confronting the modern challenges of urbanisation, industrialisation and immigration.²⁵ Their reading of their present, in other words, gave them a modern conceptual framework that they could use to produce intelligible accounts of the causes of the revolution. As we have argued throughout this book, historians always write about the past from a present perspective and in service of their current needs.

There have been other attempts to account for the revolution besides those offered by imperialists and progressives. In the nineteenth century, for example, George Bancroft believed that American independence was part of a divinely ordained plan thus reflecting the religious context of much of nineteenth-century American life. In the 1960s Bernard Bailyn used a particular set of primary sources – over 400 revolutionary pamphlets – to justify a different way of thinking about the revolution's origins. Instead of focusing on the social and economic conditions in which revolution fomented, Bailyn analysed the language in which revolutionary thinking was communicated. In particular, he was interested in how the libertarian rhetoric of early eighteenth-century English radicals re-emerged in the pamphlets of American revolutionaries. This reading of sources confirmed his 'old fashioned view' that the revolution was primarily a struggle for political and constitutional ideals rather than a competition for power between social groups.

We should note at this point that male historians who were primarily interested in male colonisers or revolutionaries wrote all of the accounts discussed above. Women were at best marginal or at worst negligible figures in these histories. It was only after the 1960s – following the 'culture wars' over identities, the rise of second-wave feminism, the growth of social history and an increase in numbers of female students and staff within universities – that studies of women and the American Revolution began to appear. The first of these was Joan Hoff Wilson's essay 'The Illusion of Change' (1976), which argued that the revolution had been a step forwards for men but a step backwards for women. Mary Beth Norton's *Liberty's*

Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women 1750–1800 (1980) took a more optimistic view, arguing that revolutionary times saw the development of (some) women's political consciousness in America. Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic* (1980) focused on the activities of the Philadelphia Female Academy and argued that in the revolution women devised a new role for themselves. This new role was 'republican motherhood', based on the service of civic virtue and the orientation of the family unit towards 'appropriate' political values.²⁶

Further reading

- Niall Ferguson (ed.) *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Picador, 1997). Interesting but uneven collection of counterfactual histories, most of which focus on the twentieth century. Niall Ferguson's lengthy introduction is a readable survey of historiography, determinism and chaos theory.
- Byron Hollinshead and Theodore K. Rabb (eds) *I Wish I'd Been There: Twenty Historians Revisit Key Moments in History* (London: Macmillan, 2008). Asks scholars to choose a moment in the past that they believe they can (imaginatively) inhabit.
- G. Morgan, *The Debate on the American Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Part of MUP's 'Issues in Historiography' series. It provides a good example of how to write a detailed historiographical review of the literature in a field. Morgan organises the analysis of texts under headings that include the pioneers, the making of the constitution, slavery, African-American resistance, and the 'new era' in female history.
- Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Part of CUP's 'Ideas in Context' series. This is a very detailed and lengthy study of American historians and historiography and how they relate to the rise and fall of 'objectivity' as a professional aspiration. Novick hoped to provoke historians to greater self-consciousness about their work and to outline alternative ways of thinking about what historians do.

History and the past

History as a special type of knowledge

The claim by reconstructionist and constructionist that histories can provide a true account of the past is based upon the synthesis or fusion of two distinct strands of empiricist thought. Empiricism is both a methodology by which one can acquire and test knowledge through observation, experimentation and examination and an epistemology (philosophy of knowledge) which argues that the empirical method guarantees direct access to reality as it is in itself. While empiricism as a methodology is not particularly problematic and is the core of the historical method, empiricism as a philosophical theory of knowledge is contested, and thought by many to be scepticism-inducing. The traditional understanding of historical knowledge, in addition to relying upon an empiricist epistemology, also depends upon a correspondence theory of truth which argues that a statement or proposition is true if it corresponds to reality. This is also usually accompanied by a belief in realism. Realism as a philosophical theory typically makes two kinds of claims about objects and their properties. Firstly, that they really exist, and secondly and more crucially, that they exist independently. This means that the existence and form of such objects and their properties are not dependent on one's linguistic practices, interpretative frameworks or conceptual schemas: they exist independently of our apprehension of them. The theories of realism, empiricism and the correspondence theory of truth therefore work together to assert that the world exists as it is in itself, free from human perception, and that we can access this world in some way to make and verify knowledge claims about it. Our knowledge of the world (past or present) can thus be verified

and described as true because, when expressed in the form of propositional statements, it corresponds to reality. Reality therefore acts as a *foundation* for our knowledge, and our knowledge accurately *represents* reality as it is in itself – hence the alternative names for realism: foundationalism or representationalism.

In general terms, reconstructionist and constructionist historians, implicitly or explicitly, adhere to the theory of historical knowledge outlined above. The main difference between the two groups is that constructionists argue that there is considerable value in using theoretical models to understand human society – a viewpoint that reconstructionists vehemently dispute. For the sake of convenience we will refer to historians who espouse such philosophies as either realist or traditionalist historians.

The challenge of postmodernism to the idea of objective, true knowledge of the past

‘Postmodernism’, as it applies to our concerns in this book, can be understood as a way of thinking about knowledge and meaning that rejects the possibility that historians have ever known about the past objectively or as things really happened. In a general sense, postmodernist thinking has focused attention on the ways in which our knowledge about the past is generated by the use of language in texts. It holds that there are no ready-made meanings in the past itself: meaning is instead generated by the linguistic descriptions that are marshalled and produced by historians. Hence, postmodernist ways of thinking are also associated with ‘the linguistic turn’. This phrase is generally used to describe a philosophical shift in how language has been understood to function. Rather than see language as a transparent and neutral vehicle that can unproblematically represent or describe reality, proponents of the ‘linguistic turn’ instead acknowledge the key role of language in creating meaning and constituting our world as we perceive it. While the linguistic turn has its origins in turn-of-the-twentieth-century linguistic and philosophical developments, Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit are two of the contemporary figures associated with this concept in the context of history writing. They argue that the language we use when writing historical narratives does not simply reflect meaning, but that its figurative nature is what ultimately leads to the creation of meaning. They propose that to turn the facts that we extract from primary sources into a historical narrative requires a considerable degree of subjective interpretation. We first have to select the facts that we will include. We never include in our narrative all the possible true facts

that we could construct from the sources, so we choose only those facts which have relevance for the story we want to tell. Moreover, the facts that we categorise as significant will partly depend on the research questions we ask and the explanatory models and frameworks we use to interpret the sources. We then have to organise the facts into a historical narrative. Rather than simply chronicle past events in a linear fashion, historical narratives attempt to explain the past, and this involves making interpretative and narrative decisions. For example, to impose a beginning, middle and end on one's narrative involves a degree of interpretation and an imaginative element. Events have a beginning and end only from a human perspective.

White argued that the past itself does not have a story: we impose one on it and we can choose different types of story to emplot our facts. He outlines four main generic story types: comedy, tragedy, romance and satire.¹ The first stresses the temporary triumph of man and the conservation of shared human values against the threat of disruption. The second emphasises that affairs can and do go wrong, values will always collide and there will always exist tension in society. The third tells of the heroic struggle of individuals or groups – of good over evil. And the last emplots events in a story of unending human suffering. Thus the history of Christian–Muslim interactions in the Mediterranean could be emplotted as a comedy: as a story of common values and shared responses to similar environmental conditions. Alternatively, it could be narrated as a tragedy, as an unending clash of civilisations between two very different communities who hold opposing and unreconcilable values. Or, if plotted as a romance, it might tell the story of Christian triumph over the Islamic threat to Europe and the heroic sacrifice of individuals and states who bravely withstood the infidel onslaught. Lastly, if plotted as a satire, the history of this encounter might be situated within a broader narrative which argues that the history of humanity is one of eternal conflict, antagonism and violence, of which this is simply one more example. While White's model is more complex than outlined here and there have been some criticisms of it, it is an interesting example of how the same events can be narrated in radically different ways. Munslow, in *Narrative and History*, provides an accessible introduction to the work of key narrative theorists and discusses the common means by which historians use various literary rules, compositional techniques, narrative practices and structuring processes to turn the information they extract from sources into 'history'. He contends that such narrative decisions reflect the epistemological, ideological, ethical and aesthetic orientation of the author, and thus refutes the notion that historical texts provide a value-free, objective account of historical 'truth'.²

Both White and Ankersmit argue that while statements or individual facts can be verified as true or false by checking whether they cohere with the evidence in the primary sources, at the level of historical narrative such verification is impossible. The selection of facts, emplotment strategy, figurative styles and rhetorical tropes chosen all require the historian to make subjective judgements, and interpretations based upon their interests, opinions and conceptual schemas. Because historians' accounts are so suffused with subjectivity it is therefore impossible to determine whether they are true or false, accurate or inaccurate. In other words, histories cannot correspond to the past as it happened, as the past has no intrinsic story of its own.

White and Ankersmit are not anti-realists. That is, they do not fundamentally challenge realist models of the world. White believes that events happened in the past and Ankersmit claims to be an adherent of empiricist accounts of historical writing at the level of statements about the past, but not for the text as a whole.³ However, they do problematise the extent to which we can acquire or represent objective, true knowledge of the world in a narrative form. Other philosophers and historians have more directly challenged realist models and argued that knowledge of the world (past or present) 'as it is in itself' is impossible, which therefore undermines realist historians' claims to be able to provide true, objective accounts of the past. These challenges generally focus on the reality–appearance distinction, which is integral to realist and empiricist theories. Very few philosophers or historians argue for naïve or direct realism anymore – that is, the theory that we perceive the world actually as it is in itself, free from human classificatory frameworks and interpretative schemas. Instead, it is acknowledged that 'the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds... We *cut nature up* and *organize* it into concepts, and ascribe significance. ...'⁴ Reality is far more complex than we can deal with, so our minds sift, organise and categorise our experiences in order to simplify them and give them some kind of order. Recent work in psychology and perception studies has also recognised that learning to see is a developmental process, that we need to learn to process or interpret the sense data that we receive from objects in the world in order to make it coherent. For example, some previously blind people who regain their sight initially struggle to see and understand the world as normally sighted people do; they have problems understanding depth in drawings, with pictures of a cube simply resembling lines on paper, and landscape paintings just appearing as blobs of colour. Reality is thus always apprehended through human interpretative frameworks, which are constrained both by biology and also by culturally

determined structures and categories of analysis. Our ways of apprehending, engaging with and thinking about the world are therefore not neutral, naturally given and universally shared, but are culturally determined, contingent and subject to change. John Beattie argued that 'people see what they expect to see, and that the categories of their perception are largely if not wholly determined by their social and cultural background. So members of different cultures may see the world they live in very differently. And it is not just a matter of reaching different conclusions about the world from the same evidence; the very evidence which is given to them as members of different cultures may be different'.⁵

Most realists therefore argue from the position which states that we apprehend the world through the medium of ideas and representations. Our minds classify the sense data received from external objects, impose order upon it and interpret it. This model of knowledge acquisition is based upon a separation of appearance and reality, knower and known. That is, it distinguishes between the world as it is in itself, free from human interpretation (reality), and the world as it appears to us, having been subjected to our classificatory schemas or interpretative processes (appearance). The fact that we always apprehend the world through our explanatory frameworks means that we therefore have only indirect knowledge of the world, so how then can we guarantee that our perception of the world actually corresponds to how it really is? If we cannot escape, or stand outside our interpretative schemas, how can we check the accuracy of the correspondence between the real world and our perception of it? It is this problem that is scepticism inducing, as it leads us to wonder whether we can really know anything at all.

With regard to the question as to whether we can have objective, true knowledge of the past, such challenges have caused some historians to argue that we can never access the past as it happened. We always apprehend it from a particular vantage point and through the prism of a network of human interests, assumptions, classificatory systems and interpretative frameworks. Knowledge of the past is always constructed within cultural and institutional practices. We cannot escape the historicity of our time and culture. We can never step outside of ourselves and obtain a 'God's-eye' view of the past, a view from nowhere. When we apprehend reality (past or present) we do not, in effect, hold a mirror up to it, but rather we impose a shape upon it. Our interaction with the past is not analogous to someone watching a film; instead, it may be more useful to think of our role as more like that of a film director. When we narrate or engage with the past we are actively involved in its construction. Just as the director decides how to shoot the film, where to

position the cameras, what will be in the foreground and the background, where to start and stop the action, whether the film will be a comedy, a romance or a thriller, so too when we write historical narratives we make similar decisions about how to tell the story, from which perspective we will narrate it, what evidence we will include and what we will leave out. Just as directors filming the same event would produce different finished products, so too do historians. We are all complicit in the manufacture of our pasts.

Even if we could somehow access the past free from our interests and assumptions we could not adequately represent it in a narrative form that somehow corresponds to the past because the past is just too big to describe. It exists as an infinity of events and the historian has to decide (on the basis of their own interests and cultural needs) which aspects are of significance. Moreover, we can only ever access the past indirectly through textual or material remains. Thus, as Ankersmit has argued, evidence from primary sources does 'not point towards the *past* but to other *interpretations* of the past', which therefore further problematises the notion of there being a correspondence between the past itself and historical narratives.⁶

Neo-realist responses to postmodern challenges

Some historians, such as Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, and Richard Evans, have responded in what might be described as a circumspect but relatively positive manner to what they see as the benefits brought about by postmodernism, while simultaneously being reluctant to abandon the supposed methodological, moral and political security that an empiricist epistemology and realist ontology offer. They, like the more vociferous critics of postmodernism, such as Himmelfarb, Spiegel, Marwick and Elton, are concerned that the epistemological instability generated by postmodern challenges poses a threat not only to academic standards, but to social morality, which could lead to a possible fragmentation of community and ethical norms. They therefore want history to be, in effect, the guarantor of social meaning and order. They have consequently tried to reconcile what they see as the benefits of postmodernism with a revamped type of realism. In *Telling the Truth about History* Appleby et al. acknowledge that the act of representing the past makes the historian complicit in moulding how it is seen, and thus we cannot ignore the subjectivity of the historian and there is therefore no possibility of historical research being absolutely neutral. Furthermore, they add that it is possible for there to be a multiplicity of accurate histories and that there can exist equally valid, but different, interpretations of why an event happened. Similarly, they argue that

the representations of the past are always bound up with present concerns and so will be read differently from one generation to another.⁷ However, despite their embrace of a postmodernism-influenced 'healthy skepticism' towards our construction of knowledge, they want to take a firm stand against what they perceive to be the cynicism and nihilism of contemporary relativism or postmodernism.⁸ They argue that a belief in the reality of the past and its knowability is a fundamental component of what constitutes the genre of history. They describe their position as practical realism, which they present as a more nuanced, less absolute kind of realism, but one which still allows people's perceptions of the world to have some correspondence to it. In other words, the past dimly corresponds to what the historian says about it.⁹ Therefore truths about the past are possible, even if they are not absolute.¹⁰ In effect, history no longer provides a clear, transparent window onto the past, but may be better compared to a cloudy mirror in which are reflected blurred images from the past. However, such a view is still susceptible to the sceptical challenges discussed above and, from our perspective, lacks coherence as an epistemological theory.

Evans holds a similar view, arguing that few historians would defend the 'hard-line concept of historical objectivity espoused by Elton' anymore.¹¹ He acknowledges that literary models, social science theories, as well as our moral and political beliefs all play a role not only in guiding our selection of sources, but also in the way in which we use and interpret the sources. Moreover, he discusses the positive benefits that postmodernism has had on the historical profession, namely that it has opened up new areas and subjects to historical research and encouraged historians to re-examine old topics in new ways; encouraged historians to examine texts more closely and to think about them in a different fashion; forced historians to think about their own methods and procedures in more detail; and reinstated good, imaginative writing. However, despite these laudatory comments, he still adheres to a realist ontology and empiricist epistemology, insisting that 'we can, if we are very careful and thorough, approach a reconstruction of past reality that may be partial and provisional, and certainly will not be objective, but is nevertheless true'.¹²

Evans, like Elton, argues that history is essentially a practical discipline and that historians should be concerned with the content rather than the nature of historical knowledge. He likes what postmodernism can do, but is not prepared to abandon the supposed security of a mind-independent foundation for our knowledge-claims about the past. One of the main reasons for this is a moral desire not to facilitate those who wish to 'suppress, distort or cover up the past', particularly Holocaust deniers. However, this desire does not

effectively rebut the philosophical challenges raised by postmodernism to traditional empiricist theories of historical knowledge. Evans' other arguments against postmodernism are equally contentious. He accuses postmodernists of using excessive jargon and obscure vocabularies and of being narcissistic and elitist. He adds that they want to abandon the notion of historical truth and objectivity not because they are philosophically problematic, but because such concepts do not suit their political or personal purposes.¹³ However, we should not ignore questions about the nature of historical knowledge simply because we are anxious about where those enquiries might lead. If historians wish to retain an empiricist epistemology they need to discuss and refute the philosophical challenges made against it, rather than simply resort to making irrelevant and inapplicable criticisms. Where Evans does offer a more philosophical challenge to postmodernism, he seems to misunderstand the problems raised by it. He argues that postmodernists simultaneously and in a contradictory manner claim that although all theories about reality and the past are equally valid and that truth does not exist, their theory is in fact the true one and should therefore be believed. However, as we will discuss below, postmodernists do not argue for the absolute, objective truth of their theories, and while they may accept that all theories are equally valid in terms of their (non)-correspondence with a mind-independent past reality, they argue that there are other ways of choosing between theories, and a postmodern approach may simply prove to be more useful for what we want to do with the past at this time.

Plural pasts and Rortian pragmatism: an alternative view of historical knowledge

Richard Rorty, a pragmatist philosopher, offers a different way of responding to the postmodern challenges to realist and empiricist theories outlined above.¹⁴ He argues that we should abandon the realist model of the world, which differentiates between the existence of a mind-independent reality free from value judgements and human interests, and our perception of this reality, where the former acts as a foundation for knowledge in the latter. In other words, he does not think that it is useful to continue to make the distinction between what exists in itself (reality) and what exists in relation to human minds (appearance). He argues for a different model, one in which we no longer perceive our relationship with the world in representational terms – that is, we stop thinking that what we perceive is a representation of what is actually there. Instead, he argues, we should think about our relationship

in causal terms. This means that we should accept that the world causes our perceptions and that these perceptions are all we can have knowledge of. Therefore we should stop speculating about what the world is really like in itself.¹⁵ With such a model there will no longer be any need to distinguish between appearance and reality, there will be only reality as perceived by human observers. Rorty and other postmodernist historians are not denying that reality (both past and present) exists, they are just arguing that employing a model of the world that distinguishes between a fixed, singular, true, mind-independent reality and our perception of such a reality is not useful and causes considerable problems which would be eliminated, or cease to have such significance, with the adoption of a different model.

This shift in epistemic models has a number of implications for history writing. Rather than there being a single, determinate 'past reality' hidden somewhere behind our representations of it there will be a potentially endless number of plural past realities which will reflect the various viewpoints of the communities and individuals perceiving them.¹⁶ The employment of different norms and ways of interpreting the world, together with the different needs of communities, will result in the construction, remembrance or narration of a variety of alternative, plural pasts, none of which can be adjudicated as *the* true past outside of institutional or cultural structures. To play with the quote from Novick cited in Chapter 5, truth is therefore plural and perspectival. Secondly, it means that historical knowledge can no longer be justified, or corroborated as true, by reference to its correspondence with a past reality independent of our perception of it. History writing is therefore epistemologically no different from other genres of writing about the 'before now' or other literary genres, if by this we mean that it is true because it corresponds to the world as it is in itself.

If history writing is no longer epistemologically different (meaning that it does not constitute a different type of knowledge) from other types of literature, then can we still talk of history being a separate genre of writing? Can it still be considered different from literature? We think that there is no doubt that history is a culturally (but not epistemologically) distinct genre of writing. We have no trouble identifying histories and historians, although of course at the edges of the discipline there may be some blurring and disagreement. History is different from other forms of literature and also from other mnemonic practices or narratives of the 'before now' and we need to be able to explain what makes academic history different from popular history, heritage, historical fiction, period dramas, films and other accounts of the 'before now' such as those expressed in song, in comic books, museum

displays, websites, art and dance.¹⁷ It is important to bear in mind and as we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 10, in the future these distinctions between academic history and other historical cultures may become much more blurred. So what makes history different, if we can no longer argue that it is its referential relationship with the past that gives it a special status as a distinct type of knowledge? We argue that history is characterised and defined by the protocols, rules or practices that its practitioners adhere to. In effect, what defines history as history is the historian's use of a set of critical, interpretative and analytical practices that are referred to as the historical method. A narrative of the 'before now' can therefore be considered as history if the author has constructed their account using the protocols that we described in Chapter 3. It is thus possible to separate the two strands of empiricist thought discussed at the beginning of this chapter. We can retain the empirical methodology by which one can acquire and test knowledge through observation, but discard the empiricist theory of knowledge which argues that this methodology guarantees direct access to reality. Therefore the actual practice of history essentially remains the same for everyone, despite their epistemological preferences. That this is the case is corroborated by Partner's argument that, despite the language-based and philosophical challenges to realist history writing, historians (particularly postmodern historians) still largely continue to adhere to the integrity of method manifested through disciplinary protocols which govern the finding and handling of evidence and the methods of argumentation.¹⁸ They do this, not because it ensures correspondence with a real past, nor because it enables the historian to narrate the past free from subjective influence, but because this is what writing history consists of. Non-adherence to these protocols opens historians to professional criticism and, potentially, to charges of fraud, and the exclusion of their work from the genre of history.

However, David Harlan has challenged the arguments put forward by Hollinger and Haskell that this 'professionalism' or adherence to the protocols inherent in the historical method can provide a foundation for historical knowledge.¹⁹ We would agree with Harlan that professionalism cannot provide an independent epistemological foundation for historical knowledge, but adherence to such protocols can be seen as defining history as a genre and giving it a particular cultural status. While historical narratives are no more accurate, reliable or true in terms of a correspondence with the past as it really happened than other accounts, they might be deemed to be more socially useful in certain circumstances. Harlan also identifies a further problem, noting that there does not exist a shared set of practices common to all

historians. This is certainly true, but historians do not need to agree *exactly* on which practices and rules must be followed to 'do history'. A cluster-theory approach could be adopted, where the set of practices which constitute history is understood to be very broad, incorporating not only the basic skills of source analysis and interpretation, but also the variety of interpretative models employed by different historians, as well as the different forms that history writing takes. Writers would be considered to be doing history if they adhered to particular core principles as well as a subset of other practices. The example of a history department in a university illustrates this well. Most university history departments are made up of historians who specialise in different time periods and geographical and cultural areas, who write different types of history, use different interpretative strategies and reading practices, and hold different epistemological understandings of history, yet they all generally recognise and acknowledge each other as historians. Just as we recognise a plurality of types of history, including economic, social, military, cultural, intellectual and political, there is no reason why 'methodological pluralism' should not also be encouraged and embraced.²⁰

Of course, these differences can also lead to disputes among historians, and sometimes to unfavourable book or article reviews, but generally the reviewer will agree that although the work may be flawed, it is still history. However, more substantial challenges to an author's status as a historian generally occur against those working at the margins of the profession; those who are challenging accepted boundaries and protocols; those who are innovating methodologically, epistemologically, in the interpretative models they use or in the form their history takes. An example of this is Lawrence Stone's accusation that Michel Foucault should not be considered a historian, on epistemological grounds. Stone's accusation was vigorously challenged by Foucault, who pointed out that his reading and citation of sources adhered to the key core protocols of academic historical scholarship – which therefore defined him as a historian.²¹

How can we distinguish between good and bad history?

Rortian-influenced postmodern history may well look and feel very similar to traditional history, but if the referential link between historians' accounts of the past and the past itself are severed, how will we be able to distinguish between good and bad histories, between true, factual accounts of the past and more fictional, less accurate accounts? Does this mean that the term 'true' will become redundant, that all accounts of the past must be seen as equally

true? Does it mean we can just ‘make up’ the past as we see fit to suit our needs and political or ideological desires? Are Holocaust deniers’ accounts of the concentration camps in the Second World War therefore just as valid as those accounts by historians? Although different accounts of the past can be considered equivalent in regard to their relationship to a mind-independent past reality, they are not identical with respect to other criteria. Rorty argues that, rather than justify our claims to knowledge by reference to such a reality, we could instead use agreement or congruence with socially agreed-upon norms, practices or standards to differentiate between our beliefs or histories. It is possible to justify historical knowledge by asking whether it adheres to the collective norms and practices of the community: that is, does it cohere with the practices set out in the historical method? Paraphrasing Kuhn and applying his thoughts in a historical rather than a scientific context, we might argue that a historical narrative or statement can be considered valid when a majority of the most learned practitioners agree that it explains all available evidence in a coherent manner. Thus, when we describe a historical account or fact as true we are not commenting on its relationship to past reality as it is in itself, but we are instead endorsing it within a particular framework – we are recommending it, and acknowledging that it was produced in accordance with particular guidelines and practices. Specifically, we are stating that it coheres with the relevant primary and secondary sources: truth is therefore located not in correspondence with a past reality but in inter-textual coherence. To put it another way, and borrowing an analogy from Munslow, just as we do not judge art in simply representational terms and thus distinguish between good and bad art in terms of how realistically graphic it is, similarly we can use a variety of contingent guidelines or criteria to categorise histories.²²

Likewise, objectivity could be redefined not as correspondence with the past as it actually happened, but as systematic knowledge acquired through the application of community-agreed-upon rules or practices. A benefit of this model is that it mirrors actual praxis. When we critically review a history book or article we do not check whether it corresponds to the past, we instead examine the degree to which it adheres to disciplinary protocols. For example, Paul A. David et al.’s criticism of Fogel and Engerman’s controversial study of slavery, *Time on the Cross*, focuses on the ‘dubious and largely unexplained models of market behaviour, economic dynamics, socialization, sexual behaviour, fertility determinations and genetics’ that the authors used.²³ This illustrates how important it is for historians to use community-accepted interpretative models or, if they use new models, that they adequately explain and justify their use.

Of course, even if we accept that we cannot compare histories in terms of their faithfulness to the 'past as it happened', we still have ways of discriminating between one history book and another. All kinds of acceptable histories on a variety of topics are written within the conventions of the profession, yet we still make judgements about them, praising some and criticising others. This suggests that to some extent we differentiate between histories on aesthetic, ideological or moral grounds: we prefer particular histories over others because, in Harlan's words, 'we like what we can do with them'.²⁴ For example, Richard Evans' negative review of *The Annales School: An Intellectual History* by André Burguière and of the Annales approach to history writing in general reflects his rather hostile position towards social science-based history.²⁵

Although we have emphasised the significance of the protocols and practices which constitute the historical method, it is important to remember that these are not fixed or timeless. As we discussed in Chapter 3, such protocols are socially determined historical products which have evolved with time and reflect the particular interests and values of the historical community. As such, they are subject to modification and change. For example, although many of the practices of ancient and pre-modern historians are still considered to be part of the historical method, Thucydides' use of evidence from the oracles and Naima's use of astrology are not. In a more up-to-date context, as a consequence of postmodernism highlighting the rhetorical nature of narrative and the ultimately subjective, personal nature of histories, some historians have become less inclined when writing their narratives to use a decontextualised, disinterested tone, which thirty years ago was considered a key aspect of historical writing. They argue that such a tone, by giving the appearance of objectivity and a neutral disinterestedness, masks the voice of the historian in the work. Therefore historians such as Richard Price are increasingly playing with making their voice and the voices of others explicit in their work.²⁶ Similarly, fictional invention in the form of anecdotes, scenes taken from other books, the inclusion of miracles, and verbatim renditions of secret conversations, is commonly assumed to belong to the protocols and practices of ancient and pre-modern historical communities and not to twenty-first-century western academic history writing.²⁷ But increasingly, postmodern historians are incorporating imaginative reconstructions of conversations and other fictive elements within their writing.

It is therefore possible for historians to modify the genre conventions of history, to introduce new ways of narrating the past and to adapt or discard existing conventions. However, despite the contingent nature of these

protocols, a complete break with *all* of them is not possible. It is feasible for a few practices to be modified or discarded at any one time, but not for the entire set of rules to be disregarded. A narrative of the 'before now' that disregarded all of the conventions inherent in the genre of history would no longer be recognised by historians as history. Historians have to produce readings of primary sources and write narratives that make sense to their readers and which largely concur with their readers' expectations of what history is.

For postmodernists it is these contingent, fluid norms of the historical community, together with historians' different interests and ways of interpreting the world, that help to explain changes in historical narrations over time and disagreements between historians. For postmodernists history is very much a presentist activity – that is, the past is rewritten by every generation or community to reflect its interests, identities and needs. As the identity of communities and societies shifts over time, as different values are seen as important, then older histories no longer do their job of reflecting and thus reinforcing the identity of the community as effectively; therefore new histories are written.

The understanding of history writing and the contingency of its disciplinary protocols outlined above allows us to see different accounts of the same

What does the adoption of a pragmatist model of knowledge acquisition mean for history?

We will have to:

- abandon the idea of a singular past that can be used as a foundation for the truth claims of our histories
- acknowledge the existence of plural pasts that reflect not only the interpretative frameworks of those narrating them, but the multiple functions that such pasts serve
- recognise history as a literary genre of writing about pasts that is different from other narratives of the 'before now', not because it corresponds to a foundational past out there, but because it adheres to socially accepted and determined genre conventions or protocols
- accept that we distinguish between good and bad histories not by comparing them to what actually happened, but by asking how well they adhere to these protocols
- acknowledge that these protocols are socially determined and are thus subject to change in accordance with the community's needs and agreement.

event for what they are: accounts written for different purposes and from different perspectives. The realist model of historical knowledge has, in effect, elided the subjectivity, ideologies and diverse functions inherent in all histories. From a postmodern point of view, the myth of studying the past for its own sake to achieve an objective, accurate and true account is no longer a useful or coherent model. Rather than worry about how we can ensure that our histories are free from subjective interference and how exactly they correspond to the past, we should perhaps instead concentrate on asking of all historical accounts who was this written for, whose interests does it represent and what function does it serve? We should enquire about the types of history we as individuals or as a society want or need, and we should scrutinise history for what it really is – an often fascinating genre of literary writing which is ideologically motivated, that helps construct our worlds and identities and can be used to teach, encourage, illuminate or entertain.

Further reading

- F. Ankersmit and H. Kellner (eds) *A New Philosophy of History* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995). A collection of interesting articles by historians sympathetic to postmodernism, including the article by Partner cited in this chapter.
- Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob *Telling the Truth about History* (London: W.W. Norton and Company 1994). A key neo-realist and neo-empiricist text.
- Callum G. Brown *Postmodernism for Historians* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005). Provides a thoughtful, accessible introduction to postmodernism.
- Richard J. Evans *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997). Another key neo-realist book, which notes the advantages of a postmodern approach while still desiring to ultimately retain realist and empiricist epistemologies. Evans provides an excellent contextualisation of twentieth-century historians and historiography, offering possible explanations as to why certain trends in historiography became popular at particular times.
- David Harlan *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). An interesting text that takes an unusual look at the question of the epistemological status of history, with chapters on Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, the feminist history of Showalter and Scott, the professionalism of Hollinger, Haskell and Kloppenberg, and White, Rorty and Henry Louis Gates among others. The chapter on Rorty is particularly useful.
- K. Jenkins (ed.) *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, – originally published 1997, reprinted 1998). A good introduction to the key texts of the epistemological debate in history. It includes extracts from traditional reconstructionist, constructionist and postmodern historians, although Jenkins in this work prefers the

terms upper-case Historians, and lower-case historians for those espousing constructionist and reconstructionist views.

Keith Jenkins *On 'What is History?'* *From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London: Routledge, 1995). Jenkins' interpretations of two more traditional theorists of history (Carr and Elton) and two more postmodern ones (Rorty and White).

Keith Jenkins *Rethinking History*, with a new preface and conversation with the author by Alun Munslow 2nd edition (London: Routledge Classics, 2003). A very short book, first published in 1991, which played a key role in popularising the postmodern challenge to history by challenging the idea that historical narratives in some way correspond to, or unproblematically represent, the past.

Alun Munslow *Narrative and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). An accessible introduction to the work of key narrative theorists and a clear discussion of how various narrative techniques, including emplotment, affect the potential meanings of the text.

Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). A collection of some of the most important papers of this seminal pragmatist philosopher.

Dan Stone *Constructing the Holocaust: A Study in Historiography* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003). An exploration of the development of Holocaust historiography, the first chapter of which explores in more depth some of the philosophical issues surrounding the genre of history and the Holocaust from a postmodern perspective. This is important because the Holocaust has frequently been cited as an event which challenges postmodern epistemologies and understandings of history writing.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/> is an excellent resource for philosophical topics. See especially the entries on 'Realism', 'Pragmatism' and the supplemental entry on 'Relativism and the Constructive Aspects of Perception'.

Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice, edited by Alun Munslow and James Goodman is a leading history journal which publishes articles on theoretical issues related to the writing of history, particularly articles which take a sceptical approach to traditional empiricist epistemology.

PART III



WHOSE HISTORY?

The power of history

It has been argued by realist or reconstructionist historians that history, if done properly, should simply be concerned with finding out what happened. Historians should divorce themselves from any subjective, political or ideological interests that they may have, and research and write history ‘for its own sake’. However, as we saw in Chapters 5 and 6, many historians now believe that it is impossible for a historian to completely remove herself from her own personal interests and concerns and the wider socio-cultural framework, theories, models and classificatory systems she uses to make sense of, or interpret, the world. For such historians, therefore, historical narratives always reflect to some degree the ideological or political perspective of the historian. The question is not, then, whether a particular narrative is ideologically motivated, but rather whether it consciously acknowledges the viewpoint from which it is written and the functions it hopes to have. The argument that we study and write history for its own sake and do not use it for political, social or cultural ends is further undermined by the vast sums of money that are spent worldwide each year on providing history education in schools and universities, organising conferences and subsidising the publication of books. If history has no socio-political function, then why do governments invest all this money in it?

The link between history and politics is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the fact that so many historians around the world have been intimately involved with the governing or administration of states and empires. We saw in Chapter 2 how in China and the Ottoman Empire government bureaucrats

were employed to write histories of the state, for example, Sima Qian and Mustafa Naima. Ibn Khaldun and Macaulay also had political careers, with Ibn Khaldun employed as prime minister for the Hafsid ruler and Macaulay being elected to parliament and playing a role in the Whig administration. In the later nineteenth century, with the development of nationalism and the geo-political division of territory into nation-states, the political role of historians became even more pronounced, not simply with historians writing histories that contributed to the imagination and development of national identities, but also with their direct involvement in political life. In Egypt, Taha Husayn and Muhammad Rif'at Bey were not only among the founding fathers of the Egyptian historical profession, but both served as Minister of Education. In Turkey, Mehmed Fuat Köprülü, one of the Republic's leading historians, was also a member of the Turkish parliament, and the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a renowned historian.¹ In a British context, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his history of the Second World War, and more recently the modern British historian Tristram Hunt was elected as Labour member of parliament for Stoke-on-Trent in the May 2010 general election. Similarly, the historian Andrew Roberts works for two centre-right think-tanks (the Centre for Policy Studies and the Centre for Social Cohesion) and is an adviser to the Conservative-Liberal Coalition government on revising the school history curriculum. In America, Bernard Lewis is a right-wing historian of early modern Islam who advised the Bush administration in America concerning its goals of regime change in Iraq.²

In this chapter we will argue that history as taught in schools and universities and as manifested in academic histories plays a crucial socio-political role. It has been, and is, used to imagine or reinforce communal identities, particularly national identities; to promote particular political or social systems; to legitimise claims to nation-state status; to facilitate or justify the expansion of empire; as a means of social control; and as a guide to morality. We will therefore take a brief look at the power that history can wield in an imperial and nationalist context, in secondary-level and higher education, and in the archives.

Colonial history

Colonial and imperial states have often used history as a means of justifying their rule over their colonies and asserting a colonial identity. It is no coincidence that orientalism (the imagination of the East – or Afro-Asian societies

and cultures – through academic discourse as qualitatively different from and inferior to the West) developed as an academic subject in European universities at the same time as European colonial expansion occurred. The case of British colonial writings clearly illustrates the political aspect inherent in such histories. Early British colonial histories of India were written by administrative historians employed by the East India Company and were intended to gather information on local customs and practices that could help facilitate company rule and the collection of revenue.³ As the company grew in power and confidence, it began to justify its rule in India by arguing that it was part of a wider effort to civilise the country and people. History was used to support the idea that British rule in India was beneficial to the population, in that it brought civilisation, good government and a competent administration to a ‘backward, stagnant, lethargic’ country.⁴ To do this it had to contrast British rule favourably with the pre-colonial Indian past, which was consequently depicted as inferior, despotic and in need of British guidance. The eighteenth-century Indologist Sir William Jones argued that ancient India had as great a civilisation as ancient Greece, but that it had declined during the time of Muslim rule in the early modern period, thus necessitating the protection and help of the British. In contrast, James Mill, who never visited India and who wrote his *History of British India* (1817) using solely the East India Company archives in London, argued that Indians were, and always had been, low down on the evolutionary path, and that it was British rule that had freed them from their primitive state and in doing so had brought them in to history.⁵ British rule would therefore ‘emancipate India from its own culture’. For Mill, however, it was not Muslim governance that was to blame, but the rule of earlier Hindu states.⁶

Colonial economic historians similarly asserted, in contrast to Indian nationalist economic histories, that the economy in pre-colonial India was small, underdeveloped and lacked the substantial infrastructure needed for growth, such as good road networks. Of course they argued that the British changed all of this and improved not only the infrastructure but also the economy, thereby ‘helping’ the Indians to enter the modern world.⁷ Colonial history was not only taught and read in Britain, but was taught in the missionary and vernacular schools which trained Indian clerks and civil servants in India. By emphasising the exemplary achievements of the British and other Europeans, and simultaneously downplaying the achievements of Indian societies, it aimed to create a compliant population that was convinced of the benefits that British rule could bring to India.⁸ In this way, British histories of India were a key aspect of cultural domination and control and had a lasting effect

on the self-esteem of Indians and their identity. This perception of India, and of Asian societies in general, as stagnant, unchanging and isolated from the progressive development found in western societies was prevalent among nineteenth-century western thinkers, including Hegel, Marx and Ranke, and also continued into the twentieth century, when, in the light of increasing nationalist action, histories such as Vincent Smith's *Oxford History of India* (1919) and the six-volume *Cambridge History of India* (1922–32) became even more strident in their assumptions of Indian backwardness as they attempted to continue to justify colonial rule.⁹ The view of the 'East' as stagnant and despotic is still to be found in Eurocentric histories, as we will see in Chapter 8.

Just as British historians of India stressed the backwardness of India in order to legitimise their colonial rule, Japanese scholars of Korean history similarly emphasised the inferiority and stagnation of Korean civilisation in order to legitimise the Japanese annexation of Korea in the early twentieth century. They argued that China had dominated Korea for much of its past and that it was only with Japanese rule in the fourth and seventh centuries that Korea was 'liberated' from this oppression. Shiratori Kurakichi went one stage further and developed a historical thesis that argued for the shared racial origins of the Japanese and Korean people, which was intended to further legitimise Japanese rule over Korea. This thesis of shared racial origins was later extended to include the Manchus, presaging Japan's interest in annexing Manchuria.¹⁰

Nationalist history

For history is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies [...] The Past is an essential element, perhaps the essential element, in these ideologies. If there is no suitable past, it can always be invented.

Eric Hobsbawm¹¹

The geo-political division of territory into nation-states has had a profound influence both directly and indirectly on history writing. And history writing has played a significant role in the establishment of nation-states. Despite the increased professionalisation of history and the commitment of historians to scientific objectivity and the quest for truth, historians have used their supposedly neutral research techniques and practices both to justify the existence of particular nations and to help create national identities. History in all

communities is used or abused, depending on your perspective, for nationalist purposes. Such a use can be seen in the establishment of national archives, museums and monuments, in the development of school curricula and the writing of popular and academic histories. While some authors and historians have explicitly written histories which contribute to a national cause, all historians, to some extent, find themselves influenced, in terms of scope and subject matter, by the nation as a means of dividing up geo-political space and by the organisation of primary sources into national state archives. The concomitant rise of modern nation-states and the professionalisation of history facilitated the development of the nation as a key framework for comprehending and understanding the past. For example, historians generally describe their field of expertise in nation-state terms: they are experts in British, Italian, German or American history, and modules offered at school and university level are typically organised around the nation: Society and Politics in Tudor England, Twentieth-Century Britain, Economy and Society in Weimar Germany, Revolutionary America, Democracy in Russia. Moreover, the notion of the modern nation-state is teleologically projected back in time in order to make manifest the forces which have (inevitably) led to its evolution. As Morris-Suzuki has noted, modern historians of all persuasions write history that essentially presents a vision of the forces that have made national society. Thus we find monographs on modern Greek history which include chapters on the Byzantine Empire, histories of Thailand since the tenth century and of the Soviet Union since Palaeolithic times.¹²

At times of intense nation building, when new nations are working both to define their identity and to legitimise their existence to their own people and other nations, historians and their histories are often co-opted to help in the endeavour. Determining the longevity, integrity and uniqueness of one's national community is seen as critical for establishing a right to nation-state status. This can be expressed by demonstrating that the community in question shared a common language, religion, ethnicity or culture and has existed as a distinct collectivity for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Historical narratives therefore play a critical role in establishing the 'credentials' of a nation. Indeed Renan argued that a common heroic past was more important as a constituent ingredient for a nation than a common race, language or religion.¹³ But nationalist histories do more than simply legitimise claims to nation status; they can also have a therapeutic and ideological function in that they help to develop a shared national identity and, in doing so, encourage people to take pride in their nation and to develop a collective sense of self-esteem and dignity.

In order to establish the continuous existence, and development, of the nation, periods of colonial rule or occupation have to be interpreted as of limited significance and as having no influence on the cultural and ethnic integrity of the nation. Nations frequently gloss over such periods and instead look back to a time of florescence, a golden age. Thus, Greek nationalist histories look back to the achievements of ancient Greece and the Byzantine Empire as evidence of the uniqueness and longevity of their 'nation' and gloss over the period of Ottoman rule, during which, they assert, the Greek nation lay dormant, but not forgotten.

Likewise, Indian nationalist writing developed alongside the radicalisation of Indian politics during the last years of British colonial rule. In order to confront the negative accounts of Indian society and culture and to compete with the discourse of western superiority and dominance, nationalist historians searched their past for inspiring examples of Indian civilisation or examples of modern elements present in pre-colonial Indian society. Ancient Indian civilisations, particularly that of the Gupta Empire (320–540 CE), were often depicted as golden ages for Indian society and culture and presented as proof that Indians were capable of establishing unified, prosperous and successful states. Alternatively, some Hindu nationalists argued that contemporary Indian society was underdeveloped and impoverished, but that this was not the result of a flawed Indian culture per se, but was rather a consequence of centuries of Islamic corruption, despotism and misrule.¹⁴ To this extent they agreed with the narrative of British colonial Indologists such as Sir William Jones, but used their histories for a very different purpose. This approach was favoured by Hindu nationalists such as V.D. Savarkar, who was a historian and hero to the Indian Hindu right. Savarkar attempted to construct a Hindu ethnic identity for India through his sectarian, anti-colonial, Hindu nationalist history, which conceptualised a glorious Hindu past and future for India and was subsequently seen as providing a master-narrative for the new nation-state.¹⁵ Savarkar not only used history to challenge the western stereotype of Indian passivity and to construct a Hindu nationalism, he also used the memory of the past to encourage resistance to British rule. On the fiftieth anniversary of the 1857 conflict that British historians called the Indian Mutiny, he presented an account of events entitled *The Indian War of Independence*.¹⁶

After Indian independence, the new governing leadership preferred to stress the multicultural rather than Hindu character of India. Therefore there was a need for histories that would not only correct the colonial narratives, and record the freedom struggle against the British, but would also unite the

various different peoples of India. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, wrote the *Discovery of India* and proposed a definition of India and Indian-ness that was complex, fluid and multi-layered – a fusion culture comprised of many communities which retained their distinctiveness, but which also engaged with each other.¹⁷ This was a vision of the past that could be used to embrace the new multi-lingual, poly-ethnic, pluralistic, religiously diverse India. Historians researching and teaching within the state sector were therefore required to emphasise the ‘communal harmony’ of India’s past.¹⁸ This is evidenced in the selection of the author chosen to write the semi-official *History of the Freedom Movement in India*. Originally R.C. Majumdar had been chosen to write it, but his draft deviated from the official government attitude of ‘unity in diversity’, and furthermore he argued that the idea of Hindu–Muslim fraternity was not only not in line with the available evidence, but was a politically motivated fabrication, and that Hindu–Muslim conflict had in effect characterised relations between the two major religious communities in India over the past seven centuries. In contrast, Tara Chand, who actually wrote the book, foregrounded evidence which pointed to communal harmony.¹⁹ Majumdar went on to edit *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, which, like the earlier work of Savarkar, argued that India was, and should continue to be, culturally and ethnically primarily Hindu, and that, despite the many invasions from outsiders, Hindu culture had been preserved.²⁰

As we will see in Chapter 9, the past can also be articulated in non-textual ways through monuments, museums and other heritage sites. The political use of such places plays a critical role in imagining, projecting and maintaining the identity of the nation and the values deemed to be important. Joshua Arthurs explores how the Roman past has been used ideologically in a nationalist and imperialist context in the three incarnations of the Museo della Civiltà Romana (Museum of Roman Civilization). The first archaeological exhibition was organised in 1911 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Italian unification and was intended to demonstrate Italian technology, civilisation and accomplishments. It consisted of scale models, casts, photographs and reconstructions of Roman objects and monuments displayed in a series of pavilions that geographically represented the Roman Empire. The exhibition reconstructed a picture of imperial Roman society that not only demonstrated how the Romans brought civilisation to Europe, but reified the connection between the Roman Empire and modern Italy, finally reunited after centuries of conflict and foreign rule, but now ready to resume its civilising mission.²¹ It presented the Roman Empire as a logical precursor

to Italian liberal bourgeois internationalism, while at the same time justifying and legitimising Italian colonial exploits in North Africa.²² In the 1930s, under the Fascist government, the archaeological exhibition was resurrected and reorganised for an exhibition that would celebrate the bi-millenary of the Emperor Augustus' birth. In this reincarnation the exhibition was reorganised into three sections. The first traced the development of Roman civilisation up until Mussolini's Italy, stressing the need for strong authoritarian leaders and constantly reinforcing the links between Augustus and Mussolini. The other two sections concentrated on public works and everyday life. The exhibition presented the Roman world as a disciplined martial state and as a 'blueprint for Fascist modernity'.²³ It also worked to legitimise Mussolini's rule by directly comparing him to the Emperor Augustus. Moreover, the state took great pains to ensure that as many people as possible visited the exhibition by advertising on film and radio and organising special package tours and discounted train fares.²⁴

Museums and memorials that present a particular vision or interpretation of the past and hope for the future have similarly been used for political ends in South Africa. Flynn and King discuss how, in post-apartheid South Africa, the public commemoration of the past has been used as part of the government's policy of non-racist, inclusive, civic nation building. Existing apartheid-era museums and monuments that celebrate white Afrikaner South Africa have been largely left untouched, but a Legacy Project has undertaken the development of new heritage sites which celebrate the history of *all* South Africans. The two Afrikaner monuments that Flynn and King discuss are the bronze ox-wagon laager on the Ncome River, which celebrates the Afrikaner victory over the Zulus in 1838 at the Battle of Blood River, and the Voortrekker Monument overlooking central Pretoria, which celebrates white, Afrikaner subjugation of the interior. Both monuments are the focus of pilgrimages and celebrations by white Afrikaners. However, a new Zulu museum opposite the ox-wagon laager has recently been built which pays tribute to the Zulus who died during the battle, and in Pretoria work has begun on the development of Freedom Park. This park is on a neighbouring hill to the Voortrekker monument, and crucially, when viewing the memorial in Freedom Park, one's back is towards the Voortrekker monument, thereby physically symbolising its representation of a divided past whereas the Freedom memorial symbolises a united, inclusive future.²⁵ Thus, these two new monuments, without erasing the colonial era, act as a counterpoint to a narration of a solely white, Afrikaner past.

The history curriculum – who decides what is taught and why?

The great thing is that you don't need to teach patriotism. All you need to do is teach a completely objective, accurate account and the outcome is naturally patriotic because it is such a great story.

Andrew Roberts²⁶

The bankruptcy of history teaching in our schools has become a national danger ... A people who loses its memory, loses its identity.

François Mitterand²⁷

Who should decide the history curriculum: the government, historians, schools, parents, examination boards? Whose views and values will it foreground? Should the history taught in schools stress national endeavour, solidarity and achievements? Should it acknowledge the negative as well as positive aspects of a nation's past? Or should it be a neutral enquiry into the past for its own sake?

As the above quote from former French President François Mitterand implies, the history taught in schools plays an integral part in the dissemination and reinforcement of national identities. It provides students with a sense of self, an idea of where they came from, and of the values of their nation. This is most obviously evidenced by the fact that the history curriculum of a country focuses almost exclusively on the history of that state. Thus the history taught in the UK focuses on the Tudors, the Victorian age and Britain's role in the two World Wars. History in US schools looks at the colonisation of America by Europeans, the War of Independence, the Civil War and the civil rights movement. School textbooks and curricula provide further evidence as to how nation-states project themselves to their citizens. The post-1974 Greek history curriculum states that there are three objectives to the teaching of history at the level of secondary education: it should cultivate national sentiments and democratic ideas; it should facilitate the acquisition of historical knowledge and techniques; and it should promote the Greek nation's historical continuity and its role in the development of global civilisation. The post-1985 Turkish history curriculum is very similar in its goals, and aims to inform Turkish school-children of the place of the Turkish nation in world history and the contribution that Turks have made to humanity and world civilisation; to strengthen national feelings; to foster an appreciation of the distinctiveness and aptitude of

the Turkish nation; and to nourish the values of national independence and democracy.²⁸

Key therefore among the aims of teaching history to Greek and Turkish school-children is a desire to promote a sense of national identity and pride. Moreover, it can also be argued that both education systems are using history education as a means of legitimising Greek and Turkish claims to national status. By emphasising the longevity of both cultures and the contribution that they have made to the world, and stressing the importance of democracy, they are in effect presenting an argument for their status as natural nation-states. These aims are reinforced by the subjects covered in the curriculum. History teaching in Greece stresses the longevity of the Greek 'nation', beginning with Ancient Greece, continuing through the Byzantine Empire, glossing over the period of Ottoman rule and culminating with the modern Greek nation-state. The emphasis on the role that Ancient Greece played in the foundation of a wider European culture also re-situates Greek national identity firmly in Europe. The period of Ottoman rule is given proportionally less space and is depicted as a negative period in the history of Greece. The Ottoman Turks are depicted as uniformly aggressive towards Greeks, first destroying their empire and occupying 'their' land, and then stealing their children, all of which ultimately led to the temporary alienation of Greece from the path of western European development, and thus its underdevelopment. This narrative of [Ottoman] Turkish aggression is continued into the present day, culminating in the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus.²⁹ Through all this the Greeks are presented as resisting Ottoman rule and ensuring that their ethno-cultural identity remained intact.

Similarly, in France the teaching of French history is explicitly acknowledged as a fundamental means by which Frenchness is transmitted. It is a primary means of acquiring ideological integration and social order, instilling a love of the institutions and values of the Republic and cultivating a shared sense of belonging in students.³⁰ Since the 1890s, school textbooks have, by foregrounding the lives of French heroes, achievements and culture, articulated a vision of France as unified, indestructible, enduring, unique and exemplary.

James W. Loewen has argued that American history textbooks similarly present mythologised and ideologically distorted depictions of American history.³¹ In a study of twelve American history textbooks he concludes that most of them depict an American past as being one full of challenges and difficulties that Americans heroically overcame in order to build a great and promising nation of unity which should make contemporary Americans proud

and give them hope for the future. The titles of these textbooks exemplify this meta-narrative: *The American Adventure*; *Life and Liberty*; *The Challenge of Freedom*; *Triumph of the American Nation*; and *Land of Promise*.³² However, Loewen argues that non-white American students do not seem to feel included in this patriotic vision of the past because they view history classes with a special dislike and comparatively do far worse in them than in other subjects.³³ This may be because much American history in textbooks is narrated from a white American perspective, and non-white (particularly black) Americans are frequently depicted as helpless or primitive and their voices are silenced by the exclusion of relevant primary sources.³⁴ Similarly, while history textbooks do discuss the brutality of black slavery in the United States, they minimise white complicity in it, presenting it as a national tragedy that was finally overcome, rather than as a moral wrong.³⁵ Moreover, they tend to ignore (or not discuss at any length) the racism that was behind both black slavery and the rampant discrimination against non-white Americans that still continues today. This depiction of slavery also contributes to the depiction of US history as one of continual progress and advancement: there used to be slavery and lynchings, but now there aren't.³⁶ This, Loewen argues, is part of a general trend to erase or gloss over anything bad in America's past, in favour of a focus on American 'heroes', who are portrayed in an exclusively positive light. For example, half of the textbooks omit to mention that Jefferson owned slaves, and those that do stress that he believed it to be wrong. As such, US textbooks ignore the fact that Jefferson was an advocate of the expansion of slavery into the western territory, that he owned 267 slaves, whom he treated inhumanely, and that he freed only eight of his slaves, who were all blood relatives.³⁷

We could equally cite other similar ways in which textbooks discuss aspects of US history – most obviously the Vietnam War.³⁸ The point is that a self-congratulatory depiction of American history creates an impression among American students that their country is the home of human rights and democratic values, and that over the past few centuries Americans have continuously striven to make their nation and the world a better place, something that they are still continuing to do in the present day. Such a depiction of American history is ideological and politically motivated. It is, in Loewen's words, simply ethnocentric cheerleading, designed to make Americans feel good about themselves and their government and its actions. The emphasis on the continual progress of the nation as an explanatory frame for understanding American history has a number of political consequences. It stifles criticism of institutions and practices and it tends to reinforce the status quo.

After all, if America is seen as having been a beacon in the past for social and economic progress, and as the champion of freedom, democracy, tolerance and diversity, then why question its authority in the present? History in this sense functions as a force for conservatism. These textbooks are essentially 'handbooks for acquiescence'.³⁹

Although Loewen wrote his book in the 1990s, the politicisation of American history teaching in schools continues. A recent example of this is the controversy surrounding the Texas Board of Education's vote to make a number of key amendments to the history curriculum, ostensibly with the intention of correcting the liberal bias thought to exist in the American education system. The amendments reflected a right-wing, religious bias and stipulated that the Founding Fathers' commitment to Christian values should be stressed, while their dedication to the separation of church and state should be questioned; that the new secular dating system of BCE and CE should not be introduced; that the superiority of American capitalism should be emphasised; and Republican policies should be presented in a more favourable light. The board, which is made up of fifteen elected officials, ten of whom are Republicans and five Democrats, voted along party lines and passed the amendments.⁴⁰

History education in the UK is not free from such political or ideological elements either. In 1988, Kenneth Baker, the then Secretary of State for Education, argued that school pupils should be taught about 'the spread of Britain's influence for good throughout the world'.⁴¹ This understanding of history education as a means of instilling national pride was echoed by the then Conservative Shadow Minister for Education, Michael Gove, in 2009, when he argued that 'There is no better way of building a modern, inclusive, patriotism than by teaching all British citizens to take pride in this country's historic achievements'.⁴² He developed this theme in interviews leading up to the 2010 general election, arguing that school history lessons should focus on Britain's achievements – particularly those of the British Empire – and that 'guilt about Britain's past is misplaced'.⁴³ Since becoming Secretary of State for Education in the 2010 Conservative-Liberal Coalition government, Gove has continued to make similar statements. Most recently, during a discussion at the Hay Festival, he praised the right-wing historian Niall Ferguson and offered him a job redesigning the history curriculum. Ferguson, who is the author of a controversial pro-imperial history of the British Empire entitled *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, has plans to develop a four-year history syllabus on the 'rise of western domination of the world', which is *the* story of the past 500 years.⁴⁴ On his website, Gove praises Ferguson

for taking ‘a degree of pride in his country’ and for his ‘balanced approach’ to the British Empire, in contrast to many other historians who want ‘to put Britain in the dock for its past actions’.⁴⁵ While Ferguson does at times note in passing some of the negative aspects of British imperialism, his book, as the title suggests, essentially celebrates the British Empire. Ferguson argues that the economic and civilisational improvements that the empire achieved – such as the triumph of capitalism, the internationalisation of the English language, the influence of Protestantism, the Anglicisation of North America and Australasia and the spread of parliamentary institutions – outweigh the negative aspects of slavery, genocide and colonial occupation.⁴⁶ Ferguson’s history is a Eurocentric, teleological, celebratory model that conveniently devalues the contribution that other states and peoples have made to the modern world. It is therefore ideological, like all other histories. Its particular ideology reflects a politically right-wing, pro-capitalist, free-market perspective, which makes its appeal to Conservative politicians understandable. Not everyone, however, believes that the function of history education should be to celebrate a nation’s history uncritically. Some argue instead that it should encourage students to question and engage with their own and others’ pasts in a thoughtful manner – as can be seen from the lively debate that Gove and Ferguson’s interaction ignited in the columns and letters pages of various newspapers.⁴⁷

The power of the professional historian

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 ongoing 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.

Keith Jenkins⁴⁸

As the quote from Jenkins suggests, despite historians’ protestations that they are above the ideological fray and are writing objective history for its own sake, the history written and taught in a university context is just as politicised as that taught in schools. Jenkins goes so far as to argue that professional histories can be understood as expressions of how the dominant ideologies currently articulate history ‘academically’.⁴⁹ Just as school curricula reflect the dominance of the nation-state, so too does the work of professional historians.

This can manifest itself indirectly in the choice of research topics and sources, or in the explanatory frameworks and assumptions used to interpret the evidence. Alternatively, it can be seen as a more overt commitment to a nationalist narrative.

Geza Dávid, Pal Fodor, Klara Hegyi and Lajos Fekete are respected Hungarian historians of the Ottoman–Habsburg borderlands in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ottoman Hungary who are known for their thoughtful, well-researched articles and books. However, while in theory they acknowledge that borders are places of interaction, acculturation, migration and technological and cultural transmission, they deny that this was the case along the Hungarian–Ottoman–Habsburg borderlands. Instead, they claim that there was no long-lasting interaction between the Hungarian civilian population and the Ottomans; Ottoman rule amounted to nothing more than a military occupation and Hungarian society and culture remained intact and unpolluted by the Ottoman invasion. Furthermore, they argue that Christians who converted to Islam or who worked for the Ottoman military-administrative structure were not ‘proper’ Hungarians but were Slavs. This insistence on the cultural, ethnic and religious preservation of a pre-Ottoman Hungarian community through the entire period of Ottoman rule, despite evidence of a degree of interaction and acculturation between the communities, could be interpreted as being a response to the power of the nation-state paradigm, which encourages historians to stress the longevity and cohesiveness as well as the achievements of ‘nations’. Such a depiction of the past helps to create and maintain a sense of Hungarian-ness and also validates the relatively recent Hungarian nation-state.⁵⁰ Hungarian scholars are not alone in narrating the past from a present nation-state perspective. Such cultural chauvinism is apparent in Braudel’s very nationalistic and conservative *The Identity of France*, which claims that French borders have not changed significantly since the thirteenth century and that French blood has not been diluted since prehistory, thus providing geographical and racial evidence of a continuous French identity.⁵¹ It is also evident in Niall Ferguson’s narration of the ‘superior’ achievements of Britain and its apparently incomparable contribution to the making of the modern world.

The political paradigm of the nation-state is so ubiquitous, and so rarely explicitly interrogated, that it is able to influence our constructions of the past in very subtle (and in some much less subtle) ways. Examples of the less subtle ways include a number of university press-published histories of South-West Asia in the early twentieth century which aim either to exonerate western imperialism in that region or to justify Zionist territorial claims.

Charles D. Smith cites the example of Bernard Lewis's *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* as an example of an account that exonerates western imperialism for the political and economic problems faced in the Arab world today.⁵² Smith also discusses the work of Isaiah Friedman and Elie Kedourie. Both writers, he argues, misrepresent sources in order to support their claims that the British in no way misled the Arabs about their prospects of independence after the First World War, and that furthermore, because the Arabs agreed to the principles of Zionism at that time they therefore have no historical basis for challenging it now. Such scholarship is intended to legitimise Zionism while simultaneously delegitimising Arab (and particularly Palestinian) national claims, and is common not only in Israel but also in America (see, for example, the work of David Fromkin and Efraim Karsh).⁵³ Ann Curthoys has similarly demonstrated how a conservative Australian academic, Keith Windschuttle, has selectively interpreted sources to construct a version of the past that draws into question the genocidal practices of the 'white' Australian state against its indigenous populations and posits European colonisation as an example of morally justified human progress.⁵⁴ Such 'denialist' accounts thus become a political resource for undermining indigenous populations' claims for reparations for past injustices at the hands of the colonisers. Moreover, they also help to maintain a particular Anglo-centric form of Australian nationalism which has no place for genocidal impulses in its narrative of identity. Dirk Moses has noted that the genocide debate in Australia also has a political dimension and constitutes part of its 'culture wars', with a collective of conservative, right-wing politicians, media pundits and academics believing that these claims of genocide are being inflamed and exaggerated by left-liberal intellectuals keen to establish or reinforce their own cultural hegemony.⁵⁵

The power of the archive

Archives are very powerful institutions. Rather than transparently making traces of the past accessible for historians to study and analyse, by virtue of their selective process in acquiring, collating and maintaining documents they play a significant role in determining what can and cannot be written. Only traces from the past that are deemed legitimate, or that were considered to be of value by the bureaucratic administration that established the archive in the first place, will find a place in the archive.⁵⁶ Moreover, further interpretative filtering occurs when private individuals or institutions donate material to archives, as they often select the letters and documents that best represent

their interests and agendas. Similarly, sensitive or classified government material may be kept closed for up to thirty years and some documents related to defence, security or foreign relations may remain closed indefinitely.

State archives, libraries and museums often have specific political agendas, and in particular work to articulate the identity of the state and nation and to preserve and project particular memories. They are often housed in imposing buildings, located centrally and near to other architectural projections of state power. A national story can be implicitly suggested by the ways in which particular documents, individuals or topics are prioritised within an archive. Tony Ballantyne describes how the national archive in New Zealand consciously promotes the state ideology of biculturalism: a policy that imagines New Zealand as containing two distinct populations that have essentially harmoniously co-existed since the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. Biculturalism functions as a framework for narrating the state's history, and the architecture of the national archives as well as its layout reflects this – signage is in both languages and artwork represents both cultures. The organisation of documents in the archives also reflects this biculturalism, and sub-collections of documents that do not easily fit into this framework are distributed in a rather chaotic fashion around the library.⁵⁷ As Ballantyne argues, although the National Library does not preclude heterodox readings of the material held there, 'it does provide a series of powerful ideological statements about the kind of visions of the nation and its past that library users should produce'.⁵⁸

To further complicate matters, archives and guides to archival material are often organised in ways that direct researchers to particular material or which encourage the formulation of particular questions. Jeff Sahadeo describes how the Soviet-era published guides for the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan promoted a particular vision of politics and society through their categorisation of documents. The division of the guides and of the archive itself into historical and revolutionary sections makes locating continuities across regimes difficult, and thus further directs the type of history that can be (manageably) written. Published guides also do not necessarily mention all available or relevant sources – for example, the above-mentioned guide to the Uzbek archives excludes a significant amount of the archive's holdings.⁵⁹

More problematically, some states restrict access to documents that deal with sensitive issues, or exclude certain people from accessing them on a variety of grounds. Craig Robertson, in an article describing his work in the National Archives and Records Administration in the USA, mentions that he was denied access to documents relating to the development of the passport

in the USA through a combination of bureaucratic entanglements, respect for personal privacy and national security considerations, and the personal power of the man responsible for the documents who had already written a history on the subject himself.⁶⁰

The sympathies and interests of archival staff to a particular project can further facilitate or hinder a researcher's access to documents, either formally or informally. If the topic seems to be counter to nationally acceptable narratives, then staff may not directly hinder access or exert active censorship (although in some countries they do), but they may be less willing to search out or to suggest documents that could facilitate the project. For example, Durba Ghosh recounts how archive staff in India tried to control and mediate her work in the archives and were particularly resistant to her investigation into the extent of personal and sexual relations between British men and local women in India. The dominant national narrative in India currently argues that such miscegenation did not occur and that when British men did form sexual relations with local women it was with Muslim rather than Hindu women: Hindu culture is thus seen to be preserved from contamination by the 'occupying' power. In contrast, evidence of sexual interaction between British men and Indian women serves a positive role within the framework of the postcolonial agenda in Britain. As Ghosh argues, it enables racial tensions to be overwritten by narratives of familial sentiment and thus presents the colonial encounter in a far more positive light.⁶¹ To this extent she found archive staff in the UK to be far more helpful. Ghosh also notes that primary sources can reflect the political agendas of their authors and subsequent historians or archivists. For example, it is extremely hard to find any evidence of native Indian women in eighteenth-century British colonial documents because they were either renamed or left out of baptismal records, a practice that continued into the twentieth century, when the names of mixed-race children in baptismal and marriage records were omitted when these primary sources were published in the academic journal *Bengal Past and Present*.⁶²

Lastly, communities, nations or peoples without states also lack the infrastructure that can facilitate the writing of their history. The Palestinian state lacks official museums and archives within which documentary evidence could be stored, kept safe and made available to historians. In order to write the history of the 1948 Arab–Israeli war, the ethnic dislocation of Palestinians from their homes and the subsequent obliteration of their villages, historians have generally had to rely upon the archives of the Israeli state and the Israeli Defence Force, which, despite the claims of some historians, are not

ideologically and empirically impartial, but instead reflect the perspectives and broader political aims of the Israeli state. For example, Palestinian villages physically destroyed in the conflict have subsequently been textually erased from official Israeli maps, so there is therefore very little documentary evidence of their existence. Moreover, where documentary evidence does exist that could be used to tell the story of the *Nakba* ('catastrophe') – the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians from their homes – from a Palestinian perspective, it generally reflects the voices of the male elite. In the 1940s 66 per cent of the Palestinian population were agrarian peasants, with a literacy rate of about 15 per cent. The majority therefore were not in a position to document their experiences or view of the war. One means to overcome this archival bias is to use oral testimony from Palestinians. For example, Walid Kahlidi's *All That Remains* is an encyclopaedic work which aims to recover and document the memories of inhabitants of more than 400 Palestinian villages that were destroyed or depopulated in the 1948 Arab–Israeli war. Because there is very little material or textual evidence attesting to the previous existence of these villages, Khalidi and his team of researchers relied upon the oral testimony of former residents and local guides as well as other Arab and western sources in order to compile an economic, topographical, architectural, social and cultural picture of each village.⁶³

The myth of history for its own sake

Following Jenkins, we should perhaps not waste time trying to prove that history can be objective, neutral and is written for its own sake, but instead enquire of individual histories for whom it is written, and why.⁶⁴ The dominated and the dominant will each have different histories of an event, histories which legitimise their actions and practices and which reinforce their identities.⁶⁵ Histories will therefore always be contested. The histories we write and the histories we approve of generally reflect our broad political or ideological positions. While histories can obviously be more or less politically motivated, those who argue that some academic histories are neutral and objective whereas others are politically motivated and biased are being rather disingenuous. It is too easy to dismiss opposing views to our own as biased or ideological, and to mistake those viewpoints that we happen to share as being universal, 'common sense' and objective. As we have seen in this chapter, history is and always has been used for political and ideological purposes. As historians, we need to be honest and open about our use and interpretation of sources. But we also need to be explicit about our own biases, presumptions

and viewpoints, and about the interpretative models we employ and the reasons why we use them.

All history writing relates to questions of power. A historical account written by a professional historian and published by a reputable press conveys a veneer of authority and legitimisation on the people or event described and on the viewpoint from which it is narrated. Some subjects and theoretical approaches are still considered to be more appropriate than others for historians. While it is not true to say that all history reflects the dominant discourses of a society or that it represents the concerns and interests of the elite, it is probably reasonable to claim that much of the history taught in schools does to some extent reflect these discourses and serves to reinforce the views of those in positions of power. Jenkins has noted that in schools, and also to a large extent in universities, we do not see a black, Marxist, feminist perspective in subject matter and methodological approach in the teaching of history. This is not because such an approach is any more biased or subjective than standard traditional, reconstructive history but rather, that those who tend to write such history are not generally in positions of power and so cannot significantly influence curricula.⁶⁶

Similarly, Denning has pointed out that it is only now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that the study of indigenous peoples from their perspective, using their sources and featuring their voices, has begun to be accepted as legitimate and interesting – within both the academy and the wider public sphere. But he argues that a massacre of First People defending their land is still not accorded the same *gravitas* or historical significance as an armed rising of miners against what they perceived to be unjust taxation.⁶⁷ In the next chapter we will look in more detail at how and why historians have gradually started to write the histories of those traditionally excluded from the dominant western historical narrative, and at the impact this has for our discussions about histories, ideologies and identities.

Further reading

- Antoinette Burton (ed.) *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005). Contains a range of personalised reflections from scholars about their experiences of working in archives. The testimonies collected are a useful reminder that, while archives remain central to historians' work, they are anything but neutral repositories of information.
- Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, with contributions from Supriya Mukherjee *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow: Pearson, Longman, 2008). An insightful and very detailed exploration of Afro-Asian historiography.

James W. Loewen *Lies my Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). A critical examination of US history textbooks.

Claire Norton (ed.) *Nationalism, Historiography and the (Re)construction of the Past* (Washington: New Academia Publishing, 2007). An edited collection of essays that examine the myriad ways in which nationalism has impinged on the narration of the past.

Q. Edward Wang and Franz L. Fillafer (eds) *The Many Faces of Clio: Cross-cultural Approaches to Historiography, Essays in Honor of Georg G. Iggers* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007). A collection of essays taking a comparative approach to the study of historiography.

Histories from another perspective

The adjective 'political' is used as a label to discredit any work for daring to violate the protocol of pretended suprapolitical objectivity.¹

Introduction

In this book we have argued that many historians currently understand history writing to be a situated, perspectival practice unavoidably influenced or affected by the assumptions of the author, their preferred theoretical models and the wider socio-political context in which they conduct their research and write their books. In the last chapter we discussed how, despite historians' claims to objectivity and neutrality, history teaching and writing is an inextricably political or ideological undertaking. History is never studied for its own sake; consciously or unconsciously it is always written with a particular objective in mind. Many, if not most, historians do not explicitly discuss or acknowledge the ideological dimension of their work. However, in recent years this has begun to change. Some historians, understanding the transformative power inherent in historical narratives, have begun not only explicitly to acknowledge the perspective from which they are writing, but also to write histories that are intended to have practical political effects. In particular, they seek to make the silent voices of dispossessed, marginalised, subaltern peoples heard. This chapter will explore how non-Eurocentric, post-colonial, feminist, queer and black historians have challenged the traditionally

very white, andro-centric character of modern academic historical writing and what this means for the history profession.

As we saw in Chapter 7, Niall Ferguson's *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* depicts the past 500 years as a period of predominantly white European male agency: as the title suggests, he argues that it was essentially Britain that was responsible for making the modern world. In this manner he erases the contributions, challenges and actions of the majority of the world: he writes them out of history. Such a Eurocentric view is relatively common in historical discourse. Landes and Jones, in their histories of 'the rise of the west', similarly foreground the activities and achievements of Europeans while ignoring or denigrating the contribution made by Afro-Asians and other non-European peoples.² Such histories are teleological, that is, they assume that there is an end-point to history which provides meaning for all that happened before. Eurocentric histories are teleological because they assert that the inevitable end-point of historical development is the domination of the West and its culture, systems of governance and economic practices. The past becomes the story of the inevitable progress of western civilisation (progressive and nationalistic histories are nearly always teleological). Moreover, such histories explain what they consider to be the advance of European culture in terms of permanent and unique cultural or geographical advantages which led it to be in some ways superior to other peoples and cultures. They interpret the West and East as two distinct separate entities: Westerners or Europeans are depicted as dynamic, curious about the world, interested in commerce, motivated by a desire to gain control over raw materials and trade routes, as developing sophisticated governmental and economic practices and as loving freedom and liberty. In contrast, the non-West or Afro-Asia is depicted as stagnant, against innovation and trade, irrational, motivated by religion and superstition and as preferring rule by despotic sultans or bureaucrats. Landes argues that 'the Chinese lacked range, focus, and above all, curiosity. [...] Unlike the Europeans they were not motivated by greed and passion', they abhorred mercantile success and, believing in their own superiority, they isolated themselves from the rest of the world.³ Similarly, Jones argues that the Ottomans encouraged obscurantist thought and 'were against the borrowing of western techniques and against native inventiveness'. Instead, he presents the Ottoman Empire as 'a plunder machine which needed booty or land to fuel itself, to pay its way, to reward its officer class'.⁴ Such histories can also be read as apologies for colonialism, as they argue that the colonised countries and peoples were already suffering developmentally before colonialism happened, so their current underdevelopment is not a consequence

of colonialism but a result of their environment or culture not providing the conditions necessary for modernisation. As Jones argues: 'The Ottoman, Mughal and Manchu systems were all alien, imposed military despotisms: revenue pumps. They were primarily responsible for the blighted developmental prospects of their subjects: prospects already dimming independently of the colonialism, treaty ports, unequal trade agreements, and indemnities with which Europe was to beset them in the nineteenth century.'⁵

Non-Eurocentric history

Eurocentric versions of the past and the belief in European exceptionalism have been challenged by non-Eurocentric historians such as Hobson, Blaut, Goody and Frank, among others, who argue that the caricature of Afro-Asian civilisations and peoples portrayed in Eurocentric histories is contradicted by the available evidence. Non-Eurocentric historians argue that we cannot really talk about the rise of the West, or how the West made the modern world, because for hundreds, if not thousands, of years there has been close cultural, economic and political interaction between states and peoples in both the West and the East. Easterners have not passively sat by and watched the West invent modernity and accepted their role as victims or subjects of western power. Instead, they have been active participants in modern developments and have contested and challenged western power in many ways. Many inventions or discoveries that we assume are unique European inventions have non-European antecedents. For example, see Hobson's discussion of the eleventh-century Chinese 'industrial miracle', in which many of the developments that we associate with the eighteenth-century British Industrial Revolution occurred, such as massive growth in iron and steel output, the mass production of cast-iron implements, the use of blast furnaces and piston bellows in smelting, the substitution of coke for charcoal, water-powered spinning machines, canals and pound locks.⁶ See also Goody's discussion of the development of banking and accountancy practices such as double-entry book keeping, bills of exchange and the formation of joint-stock companies in South-West Asia and China years before they were transmitted to Europe.⁷

Furthermore, Eurocentric history only makes sense, that is, we can only write a narrative of linear European progress and domination, if we take the current politico-economic situation as the finishing point of history. If 250–300 years ago, we had decided to write an account of the development of the world up to that point, then a very different story would have been told, one which would have focused on explaining the dominance of China, the

Ottoman Empire and Mughal India. Similarly, with the recent exponential development of India and China, if in 100 or 200 years we were to look back at the past millennium, we might again tell a different story from that of inexorable European progress and domination of the world. We might instead interpret the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a brief period of European cultural, political and economic florescence before power reverted to its previous centres in Asia.

Non-Eurocentric historians restore agency to non-western cultures. Hobson, for example, challenges the idea that Europeans had a monopoly on long-distance travelling and exploration, scientific curiosity and economic adventures in his discussion of Chinese and Islamic technological and navigational developments. Goody similarly demonstrates the eastern origin of many inventions and practices that we consider to be quintessentially European, such as banking, various commercial practices, rational systems of thought and the structure of the family. Frank challenges the linear narrative of Western European economic progression, development and dominance through his 'global perspective on early modern economic history', in which he replaces the Eurocentric paradigms that have been used to interpret the evidence with 'a more humanocentric global paradigm'.⁸ He argues that the linear 'rise of the west' narrative might be more usefully replaced by a cyclical model which sees the world as a global, economically interrelated system within which areas of the world oscillate between economic and cultural hegemony and relative 'decline', which in turn allows other areas to advance. He argues that only in the nineteenth century did the locus of economic and political power, previously primarily centred on India and China, definitively shift to Europe, and that this was largely as a result of late eighteenth-century economic decline in Mughal India, the Ottoman Empire and Qing China.⁹

The discovery of the small-pox vaccine

The late eighteenth-century British scientist and doctor Edward Jenner is generally recognised as the inventor of the small-pox vaccine and father of immunology.¹⁰ Jenner's 'invention' is most frequently interpreted within a broader Eurocentric narrative of European progress and development, even when the Chinese and Islamic antecedents of small-pox vaccination are acknowledged. It is understood as another example of curious Europeans instigating scientific discoveries, exerting control over their environment and bringing benefits to the world. However, the development of the small-pox vaccine could be interpreted differently. Rather than being used as an argument for European knowledge and superiority it could instead be

read as an example of the trans-global exchange of knowledge and as evidence of how different communities interacted with each other and have contributed to the making of the modern world.

Although Jenner is credited with developing a vaccine for small-pox, there is evidence that inoculation against the disease was widespread in China in the sixteenth century, but had been known in both China and India many centuries previously. In China inoculation against the disease was done not with the cowpox virus, but with powdered scabs inhaled up the nose from people who had either already been inoculated or who only had a mild case of the disease *variola minor*. Moreover, the scabs were often kept in a vial close to the body for up to thirty days, depending on the season. This had the effect of rendering 80 per cent of the living virus particles inactive so that they could therefore not give anyone small-pox, but, like vaccination, they would stimulate the body to make antibodies.¹¹ In the eighteenth century, when Lady Mary Wortley Montagu visited the Ottoman Empire, inoculation against small-pox was widely practised (powdered scabs were scratched into the skin), and she provided a detailed account of this and the inoculation of her own children in her letters.¹² She also actively promoted the procedure upon her return to Britain. There is also evidence of the practice occurring in America in the early eighteenth century. The first recorded instance of inoculation is by Boston doctor Zabdiel Boylston, who was told about the technique by Cotton Mather, who learnt it from his Guramantese servant Onesimus and had it confirmed by other Africans and Levantine sources.¹³ The story of the eradication of small-pox is therefore more complicated than its simply being another case of scientific discovery by a white European man. By shifting the interpretative stress we can write a different story of the past 1,000 years, one in which Afro-Asian peoples are not portrayed as passive and backward, but are credited for developing and innovating ideas and technologies. The transmission of small-pox inoculation practices between India and China and then to the Ottoman Empire and Sudan also challenges the Eurocentric notion that it was Europeans who discovered or opened up the world to globalisation. If we tell the story of the development of the small-pox vaccine by focusing mainly on the actions of Jenner we erase the contributions of Chinese and Islamic cultures and erroneously depict Europeans as being somehow different and special.

Postcolonial history

Postcolonialism is a general term used to describe a body of interdisciplinary scholarship that seeks to analyse and critique colonial and neo-colonial relationships. We saw in Chapter 7 that history was used as an important means of legitimising the colonial enterprise and controlling subject peoples. Historical narratives are crucial to identity – they help to validate a sense

of communal self – but colonial and Eurocentric histories do not acknowledge the achievements, struggles and experiences of tricontinental and other indigenous people.¹⁴ Postcolonial history attempts to redress this balance. It does not privilege the activities, beliefs and culture of the colonists or imperialists, but seeks to reinstate people previously relegated to the footnotes of academic texts and depicted as passive recipients of colonial violence or beneficence. However, postcolonialism is not only about telling the stories of the colonised; it also seeks to make explicit the means by which colonial powers dominated, exploited and oppressed their colonial subjects, as well as examining the various means by which colonial power was contested, mediated and overcome. While still acknowledging the achievements of Western Europeans, postcolonialism seeks to tell a story of the past 2,000 or more years without presenting western cultures as superior and without eliding the achievements of non-western cultures and disregarding the viewpoint of the colonised. It seeks to foreground the fact that many of the so-called economic and political successes of the modern world were achieved at the expense of indigenous populations, who were decimated, enslaved, forcibly dislocated and whose cultures were destroyed. For example, although Niall Ferguson's *Empire* stresses the benefit of the spread of the English language and British religious and legal practices to the colonised, he fails to realise, or acknowledge, the negative effects that the imposition of western forms of knowing had on indigenous cultures. Moreover, he spends less than ten pages discussing slavery, and much of these ten pages is consumed with the narrative of a white abolitionist. The horrific impact of slavery is thus glossed over, and examined largely from a white, western European perspective – no attempt is made to convey the viewpoint of the enslaved because they are not important in this nationalistic tale of British dominance and 'success'. Postcolonialism, on the other hand, seeks to make explicit the violence inherent in the colonial venture, and also to analyse why and how it is erased from later histories and memories.

In terms of scope, postcolonial scholarship engages with issues of cultural and ethnic diversity and the power relations that surround such constructions in a historical, anthropological, literary, economic and sociological context. It explores issues of race and how it was instrumental in legitimising the colonial enterprise and in dominating subject populations; analyses the politics of settler societies, the environment, globalism, migration, slavery and diasporas; and considers how and why difference was, and is still, constructed.

Postcolonial writing does not pretend to be neutral, objective and disinterested. Instead, it outlines a politics of the subaltern or the dispossessed. It is

a form of activist writing and it focuses not simply on the oppression of the colonial past but also on the forces of coercive domination that are the inheritance of colonialism. It seeks to articulate a form of emancipatory politics and works not only to give a voice to subordinated peoples but also to correct injustice, erase current inequalities and provide equal access to resources for everyone.¹⁵ It aims to empower the dispossessed, promote toleration of diversity and difference, and refuses to impose western ways of thinking on tricontinental societies. Postcolonialism has had a close association with Marxist critiques of past and present inequities and its proponents are generally politically left wing. However, while it often interprets the past from such a perspective, the Marxism it employs is flexible and transforms itself to respond to different local and historical conditions.

Postcolonial histories challenge mainstream Eurocentric meta-narratives, including the 'rise of the West' narrative. Writing the history of tricontinental states and peoples within such a meta-narrative means that these histories are essentially about Europe: such a history of India, North Africa or of South-West Asia will always position itself comparatively in relation to the progress and development of the West – it becomes simply a variant of the master narrative of the history of Europe.¹⁶

Lastly, postcolonial writing challenges the representation of tricontinental peoples within the interpretative framework of Westerners. It argues that, rather than impose Western European interpretations onto the subaltern, they should be allowed to speak for themselves. For example, anthropological, historical and social discussions in western discourse of the veiling by some Muslim women are frequently (mis)interpreted within a western analytical framework which positions it as an example of female oppression and as a sign of the despotic and backward nature of societies in which it is practised. The veiled woman is the archetypal passive subject of the western gaze: a woman who needs to be freed by the enlightened, civilised West. Such an interpretation imposes the social practices and assumptions of the observer onto the women. But, is it less oppressive to demand that a woman *not* cover her head than to demand that she should? The Shah of Iran, as part of his efforts to westernise that country in the 1970s, banned the black *chador* often worn by rural and traditional urban Iranian women. France and Turkey similarly ban women from veiling their heads in certain public spaces. In contrast, in Saudi Arabia and in post-revolution Iran all women are required to cover themselves. Which is more oppressive? Moreover, in the months leading up to the Iranian revolution and the Shah's deposition, politically active secular women in Iran frequently took to the streets wearing the *chador* alongside

their more religious compatriots as a sign of protest against the Shah and his regime. The veil thus became a symbol of agency and opposition.¹⁷ Furthermore, following the revolution, during the Iran–Iraq war stamps and posters were produced by the Iranian government that depicted militant, veiled women bearing arms, conveying the message that the *chador* does not and should not hamper a woman’s activities either at home or in serving her country – it is simply an expression of her chastity.¹⁸ Similarly, the choice today by many Muslim women to cover their heads is an active symbol of their identity and their political and religious beliefs. Postcolonial scholars argue that events and practices should be interpreted in terms of what they mean for the people involved and not what outside observers assume them to mean.

Subaltern studies

The journal *Subaltern Studies* was founded in 1982. According to its editor, Ranajit Guha, it was established in order to challenge the dominant historiography of India, which, he argued was elitist in that it portrayed the independence movement and Indian nationalism as the work of key bourgeois political figures. Instead, he wanted articles in the journal to explore the histories of the lower castes and peasants, the ordinary people who had been left out of the standard modern Indian historical narrative. In particular, one of the key assumptions of the subaltern approach was that it was not only the political elite who possessed agency and a political and historical consciousness; the ‘subordinate’ or lower classes did as well, and they actively participated in the making of Indian history. Because the ‘subordinate’ classes left very few written documents, alternative means of accessing or analysing their voices and their political ideas were required. These took the form of a deconstructive reading – that is a reading ‘against the grain’ – of official or colonial records, in much the same way that the Annales historians had read Inquisition and court records, together with a study of peasant uprisings. Subaltern historians in the 1980s and 1990s were clearly influenced by Marxist ideas. They challenged the essentialism of much nationalistic history writing through foregrounding issues not only of class but also of gender and ethnicity.¹⁹ However, in recent years they have been inspired by postmodern thinking. As such, they have often questioned the Rankean-inspired historical methodology favoured by western academia, particularly the almost exclusive reliance on archival sources which, in turn, privileges the history of government and social elites. They argue that the writing of history mirrors the structure of power in society, with the politically powerless subaltern voice being excluded from official archives and thus rendered culturally speechless.²⁰ For example, Kancha Illaiah, in an article on the Indian *Dalits* (Indians of low caste) written for *Subaltern Studies*, wished to incorporate the *Dalit-bahujan* perspective into

mainstream historical writing and in the process 'raise Dalit-bahujan consciousness'.²¹ To do this, as a political gesture he deliberately rejected the traditional historical methodology and epistemology, arguing instead that he would write from his own direct personal experience and not qualify statements, nuance his claims or use footnotes, because the discipline of history in its present form does not enable the *dalit-bahujans* to construct pasts that would help them in their struggle.

Over the past twenty-five years the term 'subaltern' has broadened and has been used to describe a variety of marginalised, oppressed groups, generally in a postcolonial context. However, some theorists such as, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, have challenged this use and argued instead that it should refer only to those who are excluded from, and not necessarily simply oppressed by, the hegemonic imperialist discourse, or the dominant cultural narrative. Spivak, in her article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', has also problematised the means by which the subaltern are given voice. She argues that postcolonial scholars may unconsciously reproduce in their work (neo-)imperialist imperatives of cultural, economic and political exploitation and erasure through the practice of western academics and intellectuals in effect speaking for the subaltern, or 'allowing' them a space in academia in which to speak.²²

For the voice of the subaltern to be heard, postcolonial scholars must generally adopt the practices and protocols of western academia. Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that even in such a politically and intellectually sympathetic space as the journal *Subaltern Studies*, there was a debate as to whether to publish Kancha Ilaiah's article cited above.²³ The 'western' academic thus retains the position of explanatory power. As bell hooks has said: *'No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk.'*²⁴ This problematisation of the subaltern's voice is exacerbated by the favourable reception that subaltern works have received within the western academy, despite the subaltern school's opposition to the hegemony of western scholarship and historiographic practice. Indeed many members of the subaltern school are now working in western universities or have close ties to colleagues there. This is why histories by authors such as Kancha Ilaiah are so important.

Feminist and gender history

Feminist history, like postcolonial history, is overtly political, and developed out of the new social history movement which was considerably influenced by British Marxist historiography and second-wave feminism's demands for

equality in the late 1960s and 1970s. Feminist history has an overt agenda of political equality for men and women and seeks to democratise historical discourse by not only recovering women as active participants in the making of history, but also decentring the male subject and challenging patriarchal ways of thinking and institutions that are presented as natural, rather than socially constructed.²⁵ It is heavily influenced by postmodernist and post-structuralist ideas which prompt us to question the very categories we use to understand the past. Feminist history is now more or less an established part of mainstream academia. There are a number of well-known centres for gender or women's studies; journals, books and conferences in the field have proliferated; and most university history degrees offer courses in one or more of the overlapping fields of feminist, women's or gender history. Joan Scott, however, worries that, as academic feminism has become mainstream, it has lost its connection to the political movement that inspired it.²⁶

Early feminist histories de-privileged the public sphere as the only site of meaningful and authentic historical activity and argued instead that women had been active historical subjects within the domestic or private sphere, where they created a discrete women's culture. This has been understood by some feminist historians, such as Estelle Freedman, as a generative site of feminist identity that shaped later social and political activism. To this extent women became active historical agents and histories about women were legitimised.

However, later feminist historians sought to go beyond 'finding' women in history and argued that discourses of gender could help us understand how power relationships are constructed, and how these relationships changed over time. They challenged this depoliticisation of feminist history and argued that the romanticised portrayal of female domesticity was not an effective means of challenging patriarchal structures. It perpetuated rather than challenged the male-female dyad inherent in traditional history. Challenges to the separate-spheres model increased particularly with demonstrations of the interrelatedness of the spheres inhabited by men and women.²⁷ Laurel Ulrich's study of how a midwife contributed to household sustenance and social relations in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Maine, for example, demonstrated the vital role of women's labour in maintaining families and communities, and explored how this labour contributed to larger transformations in the modern gendered economy.²⁸

While women's and feminist history was tolerated by some, by others it was seen as subversive, essentialist and exclusionary. Gender history offered a means of bridging the gap. Gender historians sought not only to put women

back into the past, but also to recognise how gender as a key axis of power in society provides an important understanding of how society is organised and structured.²⁹ It focuses on how differences between men and women are discursively produced and therefore how different gender identities have been constructed over time and reified through social institutions and structures. For example, the socially constructed and fluid concept of 'masculinity' makes sense only in relation to its binary opposite of 'femininity', and the meaning of both changes over time. Gender history is also concerned with problematising the methodologies, periodisation and meta-narratives that historians employ. Not all feminist historians, however, welcomed the emergence of gender history into the academic field. Its deconstruction of unified subjects, its descriptions of how multiple subjectivities are discursively constituted and its rejection of meta-narratives all appeared to preclude the possibility of invoking 'women' or 'female' as stable social categories that might provide a platform for activism based around identity politics, or the writing of new emancipatory narratives.³⁰

Some historians are particularly interested in how gender and sexuality are constructed, and how this has shaped our understanding of the past.³¹ Queer history emerged out of feminist historical critiques of sexuality, and queer historians have struggled with some of the essentialist/constructionist debates that have dogged feminist historians.³² Queer history seeks to make lesbians and homosexuals visible in the historical record, to explore how homosexual identities are constructed, to expose the homophobia and the prejudice of dominant social discourses and institutions and to provide a positive history for gay people. Queer studies therefore has an explicit political agenda and a strong theoretical basis. Like black history, it emerged from the establishment of university student groups, during the civil rights and social justice movement of 1960s America, which agitated for courses that were relevant to their identities and concerns.

John Howard poses the central dilemma of queer pedagogy, whether one should teach queer history or queer the teaching of history. That is, should one take historical lesbian and gay people (and the state and society's attitudes towards them) as the subject of historical enquiry, or should one, in Howard's words, 'engage audiences in the theoretical exercise of destabilising present categories, such that we all see our individual and varied collective investments in multiple histories of gender, sexuality, and difference'.³³ In other words, should it extend discourse theory's critique of normalcy and explore how ideas of deviancy were created and reproduced over time? Queer theorists argue against sexual essentialism and are therefore not so interested in

searching for, or defining, the lesbian or gay subject. Instead they focus on how lesbian and gay subjectivities have been constituted through discourses of resistance and transgression over time. Queer theory also opposes heteronormative readings of sexuality and gender – that is, readings in which heterosexuality is assumed to be the natural and normative state, whereas homosexuality is figured as deviant and not normal.³⁴

Lastly, there has been considerable criticism in recent years of the white ethnocentrism of much feminist history. Amos and Parmar accuse white feminist scholarship of ignoring black women or using them as ‘exotic’ contrasts.³⁵ While white women have a more visible presence in the historical record, black and brown women are still absent or marginalised. When they are present, it is through the representations of white female missionaries, educators or colonial wives. Although feminism has successfully challenged the idea that the construction and maintenance of the British Empire was an exclusively male undertaking, it has not so successfully acknowledged the racial privileges enjoyed by white women in the colonies and it has done very little to correct the invisibility of indigenous women. This has recently begun to change through the work of postcolonialist and black feminist scholars such as Antoinette Burton and her *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture* (1994).³⁶ Similarly, writers including Iris Berger, Sylviane Diouf and Jennifer Morgan have explored how the intersecting categories of race, gender, class, religion and region have shaped divisions of labour, movements for social reform and national liberation struggles among twentieth-century Africans and African Americans.³⁷

Black history

Just as with postcolonial, non-Eurocentric, feminist and queer history, black history is explicitly political. The acceptance of black history as part of mainstream historical education in the USA and Britain came about only as a direct result of political activism in both countries. In the USA histories before the late 1960s were basically concerned with narrating the achievements of white people, mainly white men. When white historians discussed black people it was usually in the context of slavery or the period of Reconstruction, and they uniformly depicted black people as less civilised and intelligent.

However, there were some radical reinterpretations of black history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by scholars such as George Washington Williams, author of *History of the Negro Race in America 1619–1880* (1882) and W.E.B. Du Bois, whose prodigious output included

The Souls of Black Folk (1903), now considered to be one of the pre-eminent modern texts on African-American cultural consciousness, and *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), a sociological work on the urban black population of Philadelphia. Du Bois was a historian, sociologist, teacher, pan-Africanist, envoy, editor, socialist and activist. He was the co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and worked throughout his life for African-American liberation and equality. He also supported anti-colonial and independence movements in Africa, and attended pan-African conferences. His experience teaching in the south of the USA inspired his revisionist histories of the slave trade and Reconstruction. His *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) not only challenged the dominant view of white historians that Reconstruction had been a disaster and had given black Americans political and economic rights too quickly, but also made explicit the racist elements inherent in the arguments of such historians. In the late nineteenth century the history of Africa and African Americans was not part of the American university or school history curriculum. The scholarship and activism of Du Bois began to change this, and because of his efforts Africa was slowly accepted as a legitimate subject of historical study. Moreover, Du Bois was writing at a time when popular white American culture was suffused with racist depictions of black Americans. He challenged these views, particularly the idea that the most successful or worthy elements of African civilisation were the result of non-black Africans. In doing so he gave a sense of communal pride and identity to black Americans at a time when their rights were under great pressure.³⁸

Just as second-wave feminism led to the acceptance of women's studies and women's history as a legitimate area of scholarly enquiry, so the 1960s social justice and civil rights movements in the USA instigated radical changes to American social and political organisations, including educational establishments, and led to the formation of black studies programmes. Student agitation helped establish many Black Studies Departments: between 1968 and 1975 over 500 programmes and departments offered black studies courses.³⁹ Like feminist studies and queer studies, black studies is a multi-disciplinary endeavour that encompasses the social sciences, history, literature and anthropology. It attempts to redress the centuries of popular and academic representations of black people as inferior and seeks to understand how race is socially and politically constructed. It challenges canonical texts which perpetuate racist perspectives, critiques traditional politics, histories and social affairs and works to transform the existing social order to make it more inclusive and equal. Black history does not simply make black people a legitimate subject

of historical enquiry, it also seeks to engage with contemporary societal issues and aims to challenge the exclusion or marginalisation of black people from mainstream political, economic and cultural life in America and the UK.

Despite the fact that black people have lived in the British Isles since Roman times, when African soldiers were part of the Roman army defending Hadrian's wall, James Walvin has argued that, up until the 1970s, black history was completely absent from mainstream British historiography.⁴⁰ Four key factors contributed to the gradual acceptance of black history as a legitimate field of historical enquiry: the success of social history, with its emphasis on reclaiming the histories of the common people, the marginalised and the dispossessed; the rise of African studies as a result of African nationalism and independence movements; the development and proliferation of African-American studies in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s; and the activism of educationalists such as Len Garrison, who pushed for black history to be incorporated into the history curriculum and pioneered the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton.⁴¹ However, the situation is still far from ideal, and the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has recently argued that '[t]oo little attention is given to the black and multiethnic aspects of British history. The teaching of black history is often confined to topics about slavery and post-war immigration or to Black History Month. The effect, if inadvertent, is to undervalue the overall contribution of black and minority ethnic people to Britain's past and to ignore their cultural, scientific and many other achievements.'⁴² Slowly the situation is beginning to change, with historians gradually telling the stories of the numerous black individuals and communities that have lived in Britain during the past 2,000 years. However, the paucity of sources poses a problem for historians. As we noted in Chapter 7, just as Indian women have no real presence in many British Indian colonial sources, so too the black presence has been consciously or unconsciously erased from British sources. For example, Bressey has demonstrated that the records and sources that we do have do not always explicitly acknowledge that an individual is black. She cites the example of two poor working-class women, Caroline Maisley and Mary Matthews, who spent some time in Colney Hatch asylum. The hospital records make no mention of their skin colour, but a photograph of the patients shows that they were black women.⁴³ This invisibility of black individuals in the historical record has led some commentators to argue, incorrectly, that there were few or no black people in Britain before the mid-twentieth century and thus they are not really an integral part of British life, society and culture. The work of geographers such as Bressley and others committed to making black history more widely known effectively

challenges the assumption that an absence of explicit colour in the archives equates to whiteness.

Conclusion

All of these approaches to history are explicitly political and ideologically motivated – that is, they express particular perspectives and are written for specific functions. This, however, does not make them inferior histories, as they still adhere to the key protocols of the profession. Moreover, as we saw in earlier chapters, the claim that historians write objective, disinterested history for its own sake is disingenuous. While some historians may claim that this is what they are doing, in reality it is impossible to step back from our beliefs, assumptions and interpretative strategies. The above historical approaches are therefore not so different from other histories, except that the authors are open about their perspectives and their aims in writing them. Histories which celebrate Columbus, or which focus on the positive aspects of British colonial domination are just as positioned and politically motivated as non-Eurocentric or postcolonial histories which focus on the suffering caused by the European colonial adventures.

As we will see in Chapter 9, history can be very conservative – that is, it can be used to legitimise and justify the political, social and cultural status quo. However, as we will outline in Chapter 10, it can also be challenging, emancipatory and inspiring. Hayden White has argued that, because correspondence to reality is no longer an adequate or effective means of distinguishing between different historical narratives, choices are made between different histories on the basis of aesthetic preference. We would suggest that we also choose between histories on an ethical or political basis. That is, we like or agree with those accounts of the past that cohere with our own political perspective, that use interpretative models to make sense of our world and society that we think are useful and correct. Both Frank and Ferguson have written an economic history of the development of the modern world. Both have adhered to the protocols of the profession and both have used extensive, but different, sources in a professional manner. However, they have used different interpretative paradigms and have approached their subject with different assumptions as to how society works, and with a different political agenda.

Chakrabarty calls for a history that makes explicit in its narrative the role it plays in narratives of identity and citizenship.⁴⁴ The histories discussed here do just that. The postmodern challenge has demonstrated the futility of trying

to distinguish so-called objective histories from those that are positioned and political. Instead, when we read a history we need instead to ask whose politics it represents, what is its ideological basis and what functions it serves.

Further reading

Allida M. Black (ed.) *Modern American Queer History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, Claudine Michel (eds) *The Black Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Andre Gunder Frank *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). A global perspective on early modern economic history that challenges the linear narrative of exclusive Western European economic progression, development and dominance.

John M. Hobson *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.) Non-Eurocentric history of Afro-Asia that challenges the idea that Europeans had a monopoly on long-distance travelling and exploration, scientific curiosity and economic adventures.

Sue Morgan (ed.) *The Feminist History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006). A collection of interesting articles from some leading feminist historians, with a detailed introductory essay.

Robert J.C. Young *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). A very short introduction to the subject in the format of a montage.

Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001). A longer introduction to postcolonialism.

Popular history

History without historians

In *Theatres of Memory* (1994) Raphael Samuel wrote that history – which he regarded as a ‘mass activity’ – was more popular than it had ever been in Britain. We live, he argued, ‘in an expanding historical culture, in which the work of inquiry and retrieval is being progressively extended into all kinds of spheres that would have been thought unworthy of attention in the past’.¹ *Theatres of Memory* was a pioneering book. Samuel was the first British historian to elaborate and *welcome* the many varied ways in which people incorporated references to the past into their social and private lives: visiting historic houses, buying period furniture and bric-à-brac, wearing vintage trainers, reading Sir Walter Scott’s novels, collecting old vinyl records, keeping boxes of photographs, watching period dramas on film and television. History, he stated, was a collective form of knowledge, the work in any given instance of a thousand different hands rather than the exclusive property of the academic historian. Fifteen years after *Theatres of Memory* was published David Harlan noticed something similar about US contemporary culture. He observed that perhaps ‘Americans are more intensely interested in history now than they’ve ever been’.² History, he pointed out, was now a staple of today’s entertainment and leisure cultures: museums are crowded, Hollywood produces several big-budget historical dramas every year, historical documentaries like Ken Burns’s works on jazz and baseball reach a mass television

audience and historical fiction has rediscovered the kind of popularity it last enjoyed in the first half of the nineteenth century. *Cold Mountain* (1997), a story set in North Carolina in 1864, was the most commercially successful novel of recent times. Following from this, in the last thirteen years historical novels have won six National Book Awards and seven National Book Critics Circle Awards in the USA.³ This literary trend is paralleled in Britain, where all six short-listed titles for the 2009 Man Booker fiction prize had historical settings.⁴

One significant point about this popular turn towards the past is that it has largely bypassed academic historians. Only a very few such historians have a presence within a wider public culture or consciousness, with most of the remainder isolated in private conversations with colleagues about their research specialism.⁵ As Robert Rosenstone said about this problem of specialisation: 'A thousand books is a very good sale for an academic work in the United States, with a population of 220 million. Doesn't anyone think there's something wrong with that, something not just in the public but in us?'⁶ Consequently, the field has been left open for others to describe, reference or interpret the past in ways that satisfy more popular (and commercial) tastes. In *History Goes to the Movies* (2007), Marnie Hughes-Warrington cited a US survey from the late 1990s that asked how people learned about the past. It found that 81 per cent of people questioned had watched a film or TV programme about the past in the previous year. This compared with 53 per cent who said that they had read a history book.⁷ To make the point another way, novelist Yann Martel said in an interview in 2010: 'A great novel from Colombia, [Gabriel García Márquez's] *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, will be read around the world, whereas who's going to read a history of Columbia? A fraction of those people who might read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.'⁸ Perhaps this puts the issue in overly stark terms (and ignores the ways in which novelists and historians mutually trade knowledge and inspiration across genre boundaries), but the main point holds true. People can (and do) engage with the past within the realms of aesthetics and sensibilities, not only within the 'hard' domains of knowledge, analysis and empirical observations that are the common currency of historians. Artists, novelists, film-makers, poets, griots, folklorists, comic-book authors, music anthologists, architects, designers and others besides have their own ways of working with the materials bequeathed by the past. Moreover, they often do so in ways that resonate widely in the public sphere. So how might historians regard these other (and frequently more popular) ways of referencing the past?

Academic historians are apt to regard their collective work as ultimately the 'proper' history against which all other accounts of the past are benchmarked. This means that they regard these other ways as being in some ways inferior to their own professional practices: as being 'corrupted' or 'amateur' or *ersatz* history. Historians frequently complain about factual inaccuracies in popular historical accounts: perhaps, for example, the actor playing King Henry VIII in a television drama wasn't fat enough for *that* point in the reign.⁹ More broadly, historians are likely to dismiss other modes of portraying or referencing past events because they see them as uncritical, intellectually undemanding and pandering to popular myths about the past. Critics such as David Lowenthal and Sean Wilentz have been particularly aggressive in their attacks on popular 'histories' for what they see as their 'mind-numbing nostalgia' and their 'sticky-sweet compounds of yearning and melancholy'. These forms of history, they argue, provide a captivating distraction from present concerns for a popular audience, but they simultaneously castrate that audience's mind.¹⁰ For critics, popular history is devoid of any critical content and shorn of any qualities that might conflict with popular tastes.

In contrast, historians like David Harlan, Ann Rigney and Dipesh Chakrabarty see the future of academic history (and the historical method) as one where academics forge an accommodation with alternative mnemonic practices rather than dismiss them as impostors. In other words, they urge that we should stop judging other historical practices by the standards of academic history, and instead acknowledge that each form of historical representation has its own methodology, its own forms, codes and conventions, and its own cultural value. Ann Rigney argues that we should widen the scope of academic history and understand historical practices in more inclusive, pluralist and multidimensional ways – thereby embracing different modes of presentation, methodologies, disciplines, institutions and topics for study.¹¹ She suggests that professional historians might usefully borrow some of the practices from outside their discipline in order to make their work more accessible to a public that seemingly needs narratives of the past. Without becoming more outward looking in terms of methodology and practice, academic history risks becoming increasingly entombed in a 'pyramid of irrelevance', read solely by professional historians and a handful of history students.¹² This would leave academic historians excluded from the ongoing discussion of what our pasts mean to us today. As David Harlan argues, academic historians must engage with the new histories being produced in other cultural forms if they want to inspire people's historical imaginations in morally sustaining and politically relevant ways. Or, in Rosenstone's

words, we need to ‘paint, write, film, dance, hip hop and rap the past in a way that makes the tragedies and joys of the human voyage meaningful to the contemporary world’.¹³

Popular history

History pervades popular culture so thoroughly that any attempt to investigate ‘popular history’ as a set of cultural entities would fill several books. Jerome de Groot’s *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (2009) is perhaps the best single volume to pursue this line of enquiry, largely in a ‘British’ context – but mindful always of the transnational character of today’s postmodern culture. De Groot uses the term ‘historiocopia’ to refer to the overflowing plenty and abundance of historical meanings that confront us in our daily lives, citing examples that range from computer games, *The Da Vinci Code* and Wikipedia, to day-time television, metal detecting and ‘celebrity historians’. If space had allowed, De Groot notes, he could equally have discussed other modes for referencing the past, such as vintage fashion, historical painting, what-if? novels (these are counter-factual historical novels), ‘found’ magazines and items, outbound tourism and historical holidays.¹⁴ De Groot’s main argument is that historians should recognise ‘the crucial value of studying contemporary cultural-historical practices’ and relinquish their self-appointed rights to ‘mark history out, to control and boundarise it’.¹⁵ This advice mirrors the kind of thinking described in the section above, and we endorse it as a way of approaching popular history. As such, we will discuss here how historians might critically inspect one such ‘popular history’ text as an example of ‘contemporary cultural-historical practice’. We believe that the point of such critical work is to think about how any representation of the past can be made meaningful only as part of a network of communication (other representations of the same, information, knowledge, discussion, criticism) that is necessarily both time and culture bound. Texts do not have single, implicit meanings that all people everywhere and forever will read in the same way. Therefore, historians can usefully reflect on how various ways of referencing the past help to generate (plural) meanings as they interact within specific settings (social, cultural, historical). This, we argue, is a more fruitful approach than one that would see the point of such critical work as an enquiry into how far and in what ways popular history falls short of the standards of ‘proper’ (academic) history.

Case study

History on film: *The Battle of Algiers* (1966)

Historians often begin their study of a film like *The Battle of Algiers* by asking questions about its production: Who made this film? Who financed it? Why was it made? Why was it made *then*? Who was it made *for*? *The Battle of Algiers* is a feature film that dramatises the defeat of the Algerian Nationalist Liberation Front (FLN) by French colonial forces in the city of Algiers in 1956–57. It was a co-production between Casbah Films (Algerian) and Igor Film (Italian), it cost about \$800,000 and it was shot on location in Algiers in the summer of 1965 – less than a decade after the events that it portrayed. It was made with the consent of the newly independent Algerian government under the then Presidency of Ahmed Ben Bella (who was deposed in a coup as the film was being shot in June 1965). Although the film describes what was a major defeat for the FLN, it signposts Algeria's eventual victory in the war by concluding with a brief re-enactment of the popular uprising of December 1960 – which it portrays as a spontaneous and unstoppable demonstration of national will. Thus, even the most serious of military setbacks, we are invited to infer from the film, cannot prevent the 'historical inevitably' of victory by the colonised over the colonisers. As writers like Frantz Fanon and Régis Debray had seemingly promised, the efforts of a small 'revolutionary vanguard' (in this case the FLN leadership in Algiers) were shown to have functioned as a starter motor (albeit with a delayed action) for mass insurgency. We might reasonably conclude here that the film was conceived as part historical record, part monument and part cultural building material for the creation of the modern Algerian nation. At a time when Algerian characters barely featured in films, it was also a vehicle for portraying Algerians to international film audiences – not as 'exotic enigmas' or 'imitation Frenchmen', but as people speaking their own language (Arabic) and with the power to act decisively.¹⁶ Although *The Battle of Algiers* was not distributed on anything like the scale of a major US film production, it was shown in cinemas in Italy, Sweden, Denmark, the USA, Belgium, West Germany, Finland and France in the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁷

Historians also rightly pay close attention to the textual properties of the film itself. But perhaps because of the dominance of narrative in history writing, they tend to focus solely on diegesis (this refers to the imaginary world that the film creates, in which characters 'live' and events 'happen', and that we as spectators are able to watch). In that regard, they would note how *The Battle of Algiers* was acclaimed from the outset for its 'realism', and for what *Time* magazine called the director's 'absence of editorial comment'.¹⁸ Indeed the film's Italian director, Gillo Pontecorvo, who co-wrote the screenplay with Franco Solinas, made a point of explaining that the script was produced 'after a year of studying documents and listening

to eyewitness accounts of the real battle of Algiers'.¹⁹ The screenplay also used as an important source Yacef Saadi's *mémoire, Souvenirs de la bataille D'Alger, Décembre 1956–Septembre 1957* (1962). Saadi had been the military leader of the FLN in the Casbah in 1956–57, he was also a co-producer of *The Battle of Algiers* (as the managing director of Casbah Films), he helped to write the screenplay and he played a version of himself in the film (the character 'Djafaar'). There is not space here to look in detail at how the film organises, narrates and resolves its story. But we should point to the relatively 'even-handed' treatment in the film between the FLN and French police and paratroopers (noting, by the way, that even-handedness is itself a form of editorial comment, not its absence). Both sides are shown killing civilians indiscriminately; the French set off a bomb in the Casbah, the FLN retaliate with bomb attacks on two European cafés and the office of an airline company. Both sides are allowed space within the film to articulate and defend their actions (without refutation). As spectators, we are encouraged to identify with main FLN characters like Djafaar and Ali la Pointe, whose point of view is often adopted in the film. But the same also holds true for the French paratroop commander 'Lt Colonel Mathieu' (a composite representation of several senior French soldiers), who is portrayed as a sympathetic figure – humane, reasonable and honourable.²⁰

Historians often focus on diegesis because they believe it will allow them to judge whether a film's portrayal of past events is 'accurate' or 'faithful' to those events themselves. On these grounds, *The Battle of Algiers* has been praised by some for its 'honest' and 'objective' depiction of events, but also criticised by others for its handling of the subject matter: for example, its failure to mention that more than 1 million Algerians died in the war, against 20,000 French; its unwillingness to explore the psychological motivations of its characters; its failure to mention other Algerian nationalist movements apart from the FLN; its inattention to ideological divisions within the FLN; its omission of any reference to those European Algerians who supported the FLN; and its failure to mention the importance of Egypt's support for the FLN.²¹ But, as Marnie Hughes-Warrington argues, there are two main problems with this kind of approach to analysing historical films. First, it typically resorts to using written histories as the foundation for judging questions of 'accuracy' and 'faithfulness' – on the false assumption that written histories are largely unproblematic representations of the past, against which films should be held to account. Second, it holds that the discursive meanings and functions of films can be determined and *exhausted* by studying their diegeses alone – those things that we see and hear on screen. Yet this denies the role that spectators perform in actively constructing meanings as they watch films – indeed, we could say that there is no textual meaning without readers/viewers. And it overlooks the fact that the various ways in which spectators construct those meanings are influenced by many factors outside the film text itself. What do these include?

As viewers, we watch films in different settings and for different purposes: audience reception studies suggest that these will affect our reading of the film in question. Sometimes we watch films alone, sometimes with others. We might see a film in a cinema, at home, on a laptop, on a plane, in a university seminar room or on a mobile device, and these settings shape the ways we can interact with a film (whether we watch in silence or not, pause a film or skip parts, sing and dance along with the film, eat while we watch, fall asleep, watch DVD special features before or after the main film, throw things at the screen...). And of course the broader social and political context in which a film is viewed changes over time, altering the ways in which particular groups can use a film for their own purposes. In the 1960s the African-American revolutionary group the Black Panthers viewed *The Battle of Algiers* as a manual for urban guerrilla warfare. In 2003 Pentagon officials screened it as the basis for discussing tactics following the military occupation of Iraq. In June 2010 the Algerian national football team watched it as a motivational tool on the eve of its World Cup match against England. Also, films come to us already laden with reviews and critical status that might direct our expectations of them. *The Battle of Algiers* has the reputation of a 'classic'. It won the Golden Lion Prize at the 1966 Venice Film Festival and was nominated for three Academy Awards. It features in academic film books and is taught in university courses. It was restored and re-released in 2003–4, including a 3-disc DVD set in the USA that features interviews with Gillo Pontecorvo and Yacef Saadi, a documentary narrated by Edward Said and interviews with Spike Lee, Mira Nair, Julian Schnabel, Stephen Soderbergh and Oliver Stone about its cinematic importance.²² The film – along with accompanying interviews, commentaries and viewers' posts – can also be accessed in chapters on YouTube, and researched on sites such as the Internet Movie Database (where it currently has an average viewer rating of 8.2/10).

Films like *The Battle of Algiers* are important mediums for constructing narratives of past events, not least because of their potential to attract a mass audience. They also have the potential to generate controversy and debate, both within and between different communities (national, political, ethnic, religious, ideological, intellectual) and as a focus for the interpretative functions of the popular media. Historians can play an important role in such debates – including pointing out those portrayals of events in a film that do not cohere with the available evidence. Nevertheless, we argue that historians are best advised to ask questions about the ways in which films generate meanings on their own terms (as films) rather than regard them as diluted forms of 'proper' history. What caused the film-makers to make the film the way they did? What are the possible implications of making this film in that way? How have interpretations of the film (and the uses which it is seen to be able to serve) varied between times and places? What causes us (as individual historians) to read the film the way that we do?

People's relationships with their pasts

People's sense of who they are and their beliefs about what they should value in the past are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. This relationship is evident both for individuals and for collectives. The most obvious example of it for individuals is genealogy, currently popularised in the British and US television series *Who Do You Think You Are?* In these programmes, well-known figures trace their family trees, the idea being that in knowing more about their ancestors the subjects might come to understand more about themselves. Something similar was at work in Barack Obama's best-selling memoir, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995). In the book's preface, Obama described his project as 'a boy's search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American'.²³ In the act of writing his memoir (itself a strong literary tradition within the African-American community) Obama embarked on a quest for self-knowledge via his own past experiences and those of his ancestors – both familial and cultural. In a more collective sense, and as we discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, cultural communities use particular versions of the past as a resource for imagining, defining and maintaining their common identities. The most familiar forms of this in practice operate at the national level: through monuments, national anniversaries or commemorative days, sites of national heritage and widely (if never universally) shared accounts of the past learned via pedagogy, folklore and popular culture. Collective memory as a concept simply recognises that nobody's memories are formed in isolation; our memories are formed, maintained and given meaning as part of a social group.²⁴ Thus we can recognise the importance of the fact that within cultures there are common points of identity that refer to aspects of the past – often battles, victories, defeats, betrayals, atrocities or perceived injustices – and that these resonate among group members in ways that can bind people together. Moreover, as Eviatar Zerubavel noted, it is possible as part of this process that people are able to incorporate into their own pasts things that happened to the groups to which they belong that predate their membership of those groups.²⁵ This is why rival versions of the past that different communities adhere to often carry enormous political and affective weight: think, for example, of the Israel–Palestine question, or the debates in a reunified Germany about how to mark publicly the country's recent past.²⁶

The ways in which people – individually and collectively – relate to the past have become the focus of growing scholarly attention. By 'relate to the past' we mean all the many ways in which people selectively narrate, represent,

identify and commemorate aspects of the past – including what they repress, forget or otherwise remain silent about. This burgeoning field is categorised under the heading of ‘memory studies’ and it spans several academic disciplines – mainly anthropology, cultural studies and history, but with important contributions from psychology, sociology, literature and film studies. Instead of treating ‘memory’ and ‘history’ as being either identical or opposite terms, memory studies looks at their mutual interaction and dependence. In Dominick LaCapra’s formulation, memory helps us to determine what in history deserves preservation in living traditions, and history serves to test and question memory critically.²⁷ Alternatively, we might say that memory is what makes history possible – because without memory humans would have no concept of the ‘before now’, and because all of our written sources for history are dependent upon writers’ memory work at some level.²⁸ Moreover, the dominance (or at least popularity) of particular narratives of the past within cultures at different times helps to shape which kinds of memory are likely to find an audience within the public sphere and which ones are likely to be marginalised and thus only really articulated in private settings. As Wulf Kansteiner has argued, memory studies should aim to interrogate the interaction between several factors: ‘the intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past, the memory makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions, and the memory consumers who use, ignore, or transform such artifacts according to their own interests’.²⁹

As a research field for academic historians, memory studies became established principally in the 1990s, assisted by the founding of a new journal, *History and Memory*, in 1989. The 1990s boom in memory studies also owed something to the cycle of fiftieth-anniversary commemorations relating to the Second World War that were observed internationally between 1989 and 1995. These generated, according to Geoff Eley, ‘an extraordinary amount of commemorative excess, saturating the spaces of public representation and the TV screens in particular’.³⁰ Historians (some at least) became interested in what analysis of such commemorative activities might suggest about the relationships between a series of dualisms: memory/history, past/present, public memory/private memory, academic history/popular history. Alan Confino and Peter Fritzsche describe how the ‘first generation’ of memory studies was principally concerned with cultural representations of memory, which they criticise for its failure to engage with questions concerning social relations, mediation and reception. Thus they welcome the recent emergence of a ‘second generation’ of memory studies that seeks to shift the focus away from the museum exhibit and the monument. This ‘second generation’ of

work analyses how memory operates within social networks, it explores what people 'do' with their memories and it investigates how shared understanding of memory informs state and institutional policies and practices.³¹

Other developments in the 1990s that spurred interest in memory studies included the work of post-apartheid South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (where people related their traumatic stories of life under the old regime as part psychotherapy and part legal testimony),³² the harnessing of mythical accounts of the past to the violent nationalist rhetoric of politicians in states in the former Yugoslavia, and significant events in Holocaust representation and remembrance, such as the release of the film *Schindler's List* (1993) and the dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC in 1993.

The turn towards memory also reflected the influence of postmodernism (which we discuss more fully in Chapter 6) within universities. For historians who were sceptical about conventional models of history writing, the conceptual field of memory offered an alternative means of writing accounts of the past. As Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone explained in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (2003):

the concept of memory seems to offer a more cautious and qualified relation to the past than the absolute assertion that for some is associated with history. Working with the concept of memory – provisional, subjective, concerned with representation and the present rather than fact and the past – suggests a way out of the impasse into which historiography might have been driven by the poststructuralist assault on truth.³³

Perhaps the most frequently cited work among historians who turned to the study of memory was *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984–92), the multi-volume, collective study of symbolic 'memory places' in French national identity. This was supervised and edited by Pierre Nora and was later translated into English as *Realms of Memory*. Nora's collection does not focus solely on those physical places that would immediately come to mind when we think of sites of memory (although it features essays on such subjects as monuments, cathedrals, Versailles, the Eiffel Tower). It broadens its gaze to the 'remembrance of things French', the kinds of symbols and signifiers of bygone traditions that help constitute an imagined French national identity.³⁴ In Nora's own words, these symbols include: 'the archives and the tricolor; libraries and festivals; dictionaries and the Pantheon; museums and the Arc de Triomphe;

the *Dictionnaire Larousse* and the Wall of the Fédérés (where defenders of the Paris Commune were massacred by the French Army in 1871).³⁵ These realms of memory come to be regarded as such (and thus of analytical interest), argued Nora, because in late twentieth-century France there were no longer any settings in which memory was a real part of everyday experience.

In Europe, much of the recent writing on memory relates in one way or another to the Second World War and the Holocaust. As discussed in Chapter 7, an example of memory work in a different context is Walid Khalidi's *All That Remains* (1992), a work which aims to recover and document the memories of inhabitants of more than 400 Palestinian villages that were destroyed or depopulated in the 1948 Arab–Israeli war. As Nur Masalha states, the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians from their former homes – the *Nakba*, or ‘catastrophe’ – remains the most important focal point for Palestinian collective memory (whether those Palestinians are inside Israel, in the occupied territories or in the diaspora). Khalidi's book uses this memory as a way of legitimising Palestinian claims for redress of their suffering since expulsion. Israel sought to suppress *Nakba* memory as a threat to the state, but Masalha argues that the policy has been counter-productive: attempted suppression has intensified Palestinian determination to mark, remember and commemorate the *Nakba*. Denied statehood and state archives, Palestinian historians, intellectuals and artists have been gathering the oral histories of those who were expelled, writing memoirs, making films and producing art, all of which are oriented towards memory.³⁶

History and heritage

We are living through an era of commemoration. Throughout Europe and the United States, memorials, monuments, commemorative plaques and sites are being erected to remind us of our heritage. In itself, this is not a new development: At the battle site of Thermopylae in Greece, the Leonidas Monument (erected in 1955) reproduces an ancient text exhorting passersby to remember the heroic defeat of the Spartans at the hands of Xerxes in 480 bc. The English have long celebrated and commemorated defeats (from Hastings in 1066 to Dunkirk in 1940); Rome is a living memorial site of western civilisation; and the brief story of the US is recounted, incarnated, represented, and monumentalized across the land, from Colonial Williamsburg to Mount Rushmore.³⁷

Tony Judt's introductory essay in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (2008), quoted from above, reminds us that although heritage work has itself a long history, only recently has it acquired its current cultural prominence. David Lowenthal thought that the rise of what he called the 'heritage ascendant' was a thoroughly regressive trend, and he bemoaned the fact that, by the late 1990s, '[o]ne can barely move without bumping into a heritage site'.³⁸ Heritage work is the practice of identifying, preserving, marking and increasing people's awareness of those things that are held to be of historic and cultural significance. As Judt describes, such work might involve building monuments or erecting commemorative plaques to mark particular sites. It also includes preserving and conserving the material fabrics of the past, as well as old customs and habits – protecting historic remains, renovating old houses, curating museum exhibitions, re-enacting life in a Tudor kitchen and so forth. It is difficult (and probably unnecessary) to date the rise of the modern preoccupation with heritage. Lowenthal argues that it dates from about 1980, at least in relation to Reagan's America, Thatcher's Britain and Pompidou's France. Alternatively, one could cite the meeting of European nations at the first historic monuments meeting in 1931 (joined by Tunisia, Mexico and Peru in 1964), and the coming into force of the World Heritage Convention in 1975 (which was extended from twenty to eighty countries in 1979).³⁹ To date, this Convention has resulted in a list of 910 properties (natural and cultural) across the world that are deemed to be of 'outstanding universal value' and thus worthy of international safeguards (and funding). These include sites such as Egypt's Ancient Thebes with its Necropolis, the Sydney Opera House, China's Great Wall, Brazil's Historic Town of Ouro Preto, Berlin's modernist housing estates built in 1910–33 and Britain's Stonehenge.⁴⁰ Heritage has now become a sizeable industry in its own right. In Britain, for example, the National Trust's membership climbed above 1 million in 1981 (in 2007 it reached 3.5 million). It was also estimated in 2006 that about £1 in every £1,000 in the UK economy could be directly related to the museums and galleries sector.⁴¹

In *What Is History Now?* (2002) Felipe Fernández-Armesto wrote disparagingly about the work of this heritage sector. Because there was now less history taught in schools, he argued, heritage had become many people's main point of contact with history – and for him it was a poor substitute. 'Some of this [heritage activity] is in the hands of scholarly museum curators and *fonctionnaires*. Much of it, however, is at the mercy of theme park economics, dire and dumbed down. Historians contribute relatively little guidance.'⁴²

Such criticisms, from the kind of commentators that Raphael Samuel called ‘heritage-baiters’, are as old as the heritage industry itself.⁴³ They rest on two main points. First, the heritage sector is charged with representing the past as a kind of Disneyland of the historical imagination. By this, critics mean that it turns aspects of the past into commodities and tourist kitsch – vulgar, trivialised, packaged for easy consumption and shorn of anything that might require those who encounter it to think. Heritage, they argue, has become just another option for discretionary leisure spending in our overly mediated societies, reframing the past as a kind of bland shopping mall in which we can ‘experience’ the times of our ancestors and buy replicas of things they used to own. Ludmilla Jordanova sees the way that museums represent the past as being typical of modern convenience culture – inauthentic, inorganic, satisfying initially but in the long run almost certainly bad for us. ‘[M]useums work in insidious ways’, she wrote. ‘The past they present is highly refined, in the manner of manufactured foods.’⁴⁴ Underneath this criticism, of course, lies the idea that ‘heritage’ and ‘history’ are not just different concepts, but that in most important respects they are antithetical. Lowenthal invokes a conventional epistemic model of ‘proper’ history to make just this kind of distinction: ‘heritage is not history at all; while it borrows from and enlivens historical study, heritage is not an inquiry into the past but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes’.⁴⁵

The second criticism often made of the heritage sector is that it pursues agendas that are politically and culturally conservative. On this reading, heritage growth ‘reflects traumas of loss and change and fears of a menacing future’.⁴⁶ There is a joke that captures this: How many preservationists does it take to change a light bulb? Four: one to change the bulb, one to document the event, and two to lament the passing of the old bulb.⁴⁷ In Britain, the rise of heritage was also interpreted as a symptom of the wider victory for New Right politics that kept Conservative governments in power between 1979 and 1997. Thus, in this period it was seen as implicitly nationalistic, offering the public an idealised version of a ‘glorious’ national past whose popularity grew, the more that Britain’s decline as an international power became apparent. Of course, decisions taken under the authority of the heritage industry have important political implications: What should be preserved or commemorated? Which heritage projects should be funded? What *counts* as ‘our’ national heritage (who decides, and in any case who are ‘we’)? Critics charge that these decisions are largely taken by, and reflect the interests of,

privileged and powerful elites. Heritage is therefore seen as something used by a ruling group to pass off its preferred version of history as ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’ – with the corollary that any attempts to contest this version are dismissed as ‘ideological’ or ‘biased’ histories. This is not simply a question of heritage being in thrall to the domains of the rich and the well-born – the palaces, castles, stately houses and gardens. Consider the words of the UK’s then Secretary of State for Culture, Tessa Jowell, in 2005:

The historic environment and wider heritage contributes to a wide range of Government ambitions to cut crime, promote inclusion, improve educational achievement, but it is worth supporting in itself, for the way it can encourage people to better understand and engage with their history and their community, and help slay that poverty of aspiration which holds so many people back from fulfilling their potential.⁴⁸

As Martin Davies pointed out, heritage was discursively positioned here as a component of the Labour government’s neo-liberal cultural and economic policies. Government support for heritage work in these terms was really an investment in personal social capital, a means of improving people’s employability and enhancing citizenship more generally. Moreover, the benefits from this would justify the government’s unwillingness to pursue the reduction of social and economic inequalities as a matter of policy. After all, according to Jowell, it was ‘poverty of aspiration’ (rather than, say, social class, a low-wage economy or various forms of discrimination) that was holding people back, and this could be overcome with the help of inspirational encounters with the heritage sector.⁴⁹

We agree with Davies that heritage activity loses its potential appeal when it is harnessed to a neo-liberal political agenda. We also have some sympathy with the argument that much of the work of the heritage sector has thus far been culturally predictable, politically quiescent and often nationalistic in its outlook (not just in Britain but, as Tony Judt observed, across much of Europe and the USA). But this reflects the aesthetic and political choices of the heritage sector’s guardians in those particular countries. It does not necessarily follow that heritage work is innately conservative – Raphael Samuel’s *Theatres of Memory* shows how, in different hands, it could be democratic and even liberatory.⁵⁰ Neither should we assume that heritage activity is a necessarily debased (as opposed to simply different) way of engaging with the past, in comparison to academic history.

Historicised culture

Contemporary culture's preoccupation with all things 'historical' is built on the premise that thinking about the past is more than just a congenial activity. Developing a 'historical consciousness' is held to be implicitly virtuous because it is equated with moral, ethical, social and political improvement. As we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, the idea that we should orientate ourselves in relation to the past is normally presented in beneficial and instrumental terms: we are told that we should 'learn the lessons' of history, use the past as a means to understand present conditions (which on conventional readings are taken to be the end-points of linear 'historical processes') and thus avoid the repetition of 'past mistakes'. History is portrayed – and not only by historians – as a kind of universal teacher and source of wisdom that we can turn to as a guide to help us live now. Indeed, exhortations about the need for people to 'think historically' have become so normalised and taken for granted they are hardly ever challenged – hence, as discussed above, the current popularity of museums, the TV History Channel, historical films, the cycle of 'significant' anniversaries in public cultures and the like. According to Martin Davies, the mode of thinking in which all aspects of our lives are conceived in relation to the past has become ubiquitous, and as such we live in what he calls an 'already historicized world'.⁵¹ By this he means that, in contemporary culture, everything is explained as being part of an unfolding historical process (and thus given a history or historical finish) and everything is seen to have one or more historical parallels (thus, nothing is regarded as truly new – it is only the latest version of something that has happened or existed before).

Not everyone has necessarily endorsed this culturally conditioned habit of viewing the present always in relation to the past. In 'The Burden of History' (1966) Hayden White problematised the habit in the following terms:

It is worth asking, then, why the past ought to be studied at all and what function can be served by a contemplation of things under the aspect of history. Put another way: is there any reason why we ought to study things under the aspect of their past-ness rather than under the aspect of their present-ness, which is the aspect under which everything offers itself for contemplation immediately?⁵²

White's answer to this was that historians should continue to write history, but in ways that recaptured the spirit of those thinkers in the first half of the nineteenth century – like Hegel, Balzac and Tocqueville – who used history

to 'show' that people were not victims of fate, but were able to make choices to shape a better present. White's objection was thus to a historicism that chained past and present together in a cosmic process of cause and effect, naturalising current conditions as the supposed destiny that history always had in store for us. 'The historian', he wrote, 'serves no one by constructing a specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it.'⁵³ Keith Jenkins posed a similar problem in 'Why Bother with History?' (1997), but argued *contra* White that the time had come to abandon the illusion that we 'needed' to think about the past (to historicise) at all. Jenkins arrived at this conclusion by setting out from the (by now) familiar postmodernist position: the past as such does not exist historically outside of the ways that historians constitute and represent it in various textual forms. Because, argued Jenkins, we can never access the past in itself, we must accept that there are no lessons in the past (about ethics, morality or anything else) separate from the ones that historians put into their representations of it. As he says: '[g]iven that history is constituted by the work of historians (historiography) the idea that we can "learn lessons from the past/history", actually translates out as simply, "we can learn lessons from historians"'.⁵⁴ Jenkins sees no reason why we should look to historians to provide these 'lessons' when we can get them elsewhere. As he says in relation to ethics, for example: 'Why not just have "ethics talk" and leave the temporal dimension out of it? Why not just "forget history" and historians?'⁵⁵

Whereas Jenkins argues that we no longer need to 'bother' with history and can safely let it drop, Sande Cohen and Martin Davies put the case against historicism in stronger terms. They regard the historicising habit in contemporary culture as an always-oppressive force that needs to be overcome. Their arguments are elaborate and difficult to summarise, but we can note the following points. History, on their reading, and echoing Hayden White, always rationalises and affirms how things are – however appalling that might be – because it explains the present as being the product of historical 'forces' or 'processes', the terminus of our current journey for now. 'To historicize', argues Cohen, 'means to lend time as a power to an existing claim.'⁵⁶ Moreover, instead of recognising the distinctiveness of our contemporary predicaments and attempting to think through some solutions to these, historical thinking has a tranquillising and socially stabilising effect. The main problem, according to Davies, is identitary thinking – the drawing of historical parallels – because this consequently denies that anything is new or unfamiliar (and familiarity becomes a form of acceptability). In his words, 'a society mesmerized into seeing "everything" as the same old historical thing soon

accepts phantasmic catastrophe as normal occurrence'.⁵⁷ Instead of critiquing war, genocide, disease and famine we historicise and therefore naturalise them as endemic features of the human condition. Thus the familiar injunction of seeing history as a guide to the present becomes an obstacle to alternative ways of thinking, as it 'encourages a consciousness that is never able to arrive at criticism'.⁵⁸ It acts as a default mechanism for taking us back always to what we already know, and is another way of saying that the past contains all that we can ever have. As Cohen argues, the most troubling implications of this lie in how our ways of invoking history can damage the future – by shrinking that future to our existing political and cultural 'sizes'.⁵⁹ Or, as Davies concludes:

The world, now, suffers from severe problems of political and social justice, scandalous inequalities of opportunity and the distribution of wealth and resources, alarming and irreversible environmental damage. This is how the world has, in historical terms, turned out: this is the historicized world. Historians ... are uniquely implicated in the way the historicized world is now. By their very function, their formal, social position, historians furnish the intellectual justification for its perpetuation and reproduction, for constantly symbolically re-enacting the historical changes throughout history that always perpetuate the same old thing.⁶⁰

We might return here to Robert Rosenstone's observation at the beginning of this chapter about the tiny size of the readership for most academic history books, and ask whether Davies has exaggerated the cultural or intellectual importance of historians. Moreover, Cohen and Davies might be criticised for their essentialism, because they claim to have 'got behind' history, to show how 'history really is' and to reveal how it functions as 'the intellectual instrument of dominant socio-economic interests'.⁶¹ As we argued in Chapter 7, there are many conservative, neo-imperialist, neo-liberal historians who currently write conservative, neo-imperialist and neo-liberal-oriented histories. But, as demonstrated in Chapter 8, we do not accept that historians are, by definition, necessarily tools of dominant authority. We prefer to describe history as one more cultural practice among many (another genre of writing, for example) that we can use to do the things that we want to do, or believe that we need to do. This could include informing our 'ethics talk' or helping us to think through our political choices, but we do not claim that historical awareness is a *necessary* or implicitly beneficial component of such

activities. Therefore, notwithstanding the force of the argument that history at some level reaffirms the status quo, we hold to the view that some histories – and some historians – are more culpable in this regard than others.

Further reading

Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds) *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003). An interdisciplinary collection of essays inspired by Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* (1994). The book is organised under four headings: 'Transforming memory', 'Remembering suffering: trauma and history', 'Patterning the national past' and 'And then silence ...'. The essays have a wide geographical range and explore different types of memorial cultural forms, including museums, television and oral testimony. There is a companion volume by the same editors, *Regimes of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003), which focuses on different theoretical approaches to the study of memory.

Pierre Nora (ed.) *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 3 vols (New York: Columbia University Press 1996–98). This English-language version (translated by Arthur Goldhammer) makes available 46 of the original 132 essays that were published in *Les Lieux de mémoire*. There is a useful Foreword by Lawrence D. Kritzman, and an important general introductory essay by Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History', in vol. 1, *Conflicts and Divisions* (1996).

Mark C. Carnes (ed.) *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (London: Cassell, 1996).

Alan Confino and Peter Fritzsche (eds) *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

Martin Davies, *Historics: Why History Dominates Contemporary Society* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009).

Marcia Landy (ed.) *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (London: Athlone, 2001).

David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994).

PART IV

HISTORY TODAY

The future of history

History is 'a conversation with the dead about what we should value and how we should live'.¹

Introduction

Postmodernism has changed the way we research and write history – it has changed the agenda of history, our understanding of its functions, the topics studied, the sources used and the way it is taught. History has become more interdisciplinary, more inclusive and broader in the range of methodologies and sources used. Despite the worries of some more traditional historians, this change is not something to fear. As we saw in Chapter 2, changes to the practice of history are nothing new, historical cultures and mnemonic practices are fluid and flexible and have differed between communities, times and places. The dominant form of academic history today is not a naturally occurring, inevitable way of imagining the past. It is a contingent, historicised product of its times – a way of narrating the 'before now' which was useful for what people wanted to do with the past in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but which has since lost some of its applicability. Not all historians writing new, innovative, experimental histories are happy to call themselves postmodernists. Not all embrace the epistemological changes that we believe postmodernism points to. All, however, have been affected and influenced in some way by postmodernism and tend to see the genre of history as comprising a series of often contested narratives which depict our pasts within

a rather flexible (and contingent) methodological framework. Denning, for example does not refer to himself as a postmodernist, instead he prefers the term neo-modernist, where his conception of neo-modernity ‘begins with the real and enlarges it with imagination’.²

What do these new histories look like? How do they differ from their traditional, empiricist counterparts? Future histories are self-aware, reflexive, carefully thought out, attentive works of scholarship. They try to disrupt the common understanding of history as coterminous with the past, as unique, given and singular. They foreground the subjective, contested, plural nature of this genre. They emphasise the form of historical writing to make audiences aware of its arbitrary and contingent nature. And they reconsider what the function of history is, and the social purposes it serves. This is not to say that traditional, empiricist history will no longer be written. There will be a place and an audience for this type of writing about the before-now, but we should also make space for different types of histories, histories that speak to different audiences, fulfil different needs and present different visions of the past and the future. Jenkins offers an interesting metaphor for the future of historical narratives. He compares historical narratives to loaves of bread in a bakery. Just as there are many different types of loaves that are suitable for different culinary purposes and which meet different people’s personal preferences, so too there are different types of history. So when asked for a historical narrative of a particular event, maybe we should reply ‘What type would you like?’ A Marxist, feminist, reconstructionist, military, non-Eurocentric, economic, environmental, postmodern, postcolonial, queer or cultural history?³ No one type is *the* proper type: if histories meet the community-agreed-upon criteria for the genre of history, then they are all proper histories.

This chapter will explore some of the ways in which historians have experimented with the content and form of their histories to reflect their different reactions to the postmodern challenge. It also discusses possible future functions for history now that ‘history for its own sake’ is largely, but not completely, acknowledged to be a rhetorical fiction.

Content: subjects, sources, questions

In the past few decades the history profession has greatly benefited from the contribution of other disciplines. Much of the most interesting history today is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing on insights from anthropology, literary studies and the social sciences. This interdisciplinarity has influenced

the sources used, questions asked and topics researched. For example, there is now a greater tendency to study the pasts of marginalised communities and a desire to give voice to the dispossessed and disenfranchised in society. Because such communities and peoples are often ignored in official state records and other traditional sources, historians have had to widen the range of sources they use in their accounts. Denning, in his desire to hear the voices of both sides of the native/stranger encounters in the Sea of Islands (Pacific Ocean), has argued that we should pay attention to the dances, songs, legends, myths, body paint, tattoos, carvings and poetry of the islanders, as well as the records of the 'strangers'. Horacio N. Roque Ramirez similarly argues that to give voice, visibility and identity to marginalised communities we need to use different sources, such as oral history interviews. In this respect, Teresita la Campesina, a male-to-female transgender Latina artist who lived in San Francisco, represented a living archive of evidence which is absent from the archives of both Latino history and the overwhelmingly white, queer archives.⁴ Likewise, Price, whom we will discuss in more detail below, uses the oral knowledge of Saramaka historians to write his histories of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Suriname. And Bain Attwood discusses the use of oral testimony in the case of the 'stolen aborigine children', which not only shifts the power from being exclusively in the hands of the historian, but also helps to produce a more empathetic history and recognises and validates the experiences of aboriginal communities.⁵

The theoretical challenges raised by postmodernism have also encouraged historians to focus on different subject areas and sources. The postmodern challenge to essentialist discourses inherent in much modernist history writing, such as racism and sexism, has led to an increasing acceptance that identities are not naturally occurring, but are instead constructed or performed. This in turn has prompted historians to explore how individual, communal and political identities have been constructed, negotiated and performed, and the role that narrations of the past have had in such imaginations. Linked to the performance of identities is the enactment or establishment of networks or relationships of power and authority. This concern with questions of authority, together with the interest of postmodern historians in giving voice to marginalised groups, has encouraged an interest in researching and making explicit concealed power relations in society and how differences of power and privilege were, and are, maintained.

Greg Denning has explored how and why the events leading up to, and following, the mutiny on the *Bounty* have been represented in different ways – from the perspectives of the mutineers, Captain Bligh, the admiralty, the

islanders and later audiences in Britain. He also considers how these textual, material and physical representations are intimately intertwined with questions about power and authority. Denning is not interested in writing a history that masquerades as a re-enactment of the past, instead he is keen to convey his understanding about the nature of power, symbol making, force, freedom and theatre, while also being explicit about his role in making his story and drawing attention to the 'systems at work in [his] narrative'.⁶

As a consequence of postmodernism destabilising the idea that the past can be accurately reconstructed, many postmodern historians have abandoned any attempt to tell *the* story about what happened, and instead focus on exploring how and why different people at different times have variously represented a particular past event. Gabriel Piterberg, for example, in *An Ottoman Tragedy: History and Historiography at Play*, explores how and why the deposition and execution of the Ottoman Sultan Osman II has been depicted in a variety of Ottoman sources.⁷

The linguistic turn and associated developments in theories of meaning have directed attention towards meaning in general, how histories are produced, the relations between the author and her historical subjects and implied audiences, and processes of knowing. It has also challenged the idea that we can recapture authorial meaning, and consequently historians have instead begun to explore how individuals and communities have responded to texts. This shift from author to reader has thus instigated an interest in how texts circulated, functioned and were understood by audiences in different times and places. For example, a new book by Cath Nall discusses the circulation and reception of Vegetius' *De re militari* in England in the fifteenth century and argues that its reception and inscription was affected by wider political and military contexts, particularly the end of the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of the Roses.⁸

The voice of the historian, the voices of others: self-reflexivity and a contextualised, subjective tone

Rosenstone's *Mirror in the Shrine* is often hailed as an example of a self-reflexive postmodernist history, one which acknowledges the role that the historian plays in constructing the narrative. It explicitly gives voice to the author, rather than attempting to erase his existence through the use of the passive voice and decontextualised language. Rosenstone argues that 'this book is [...] about the present. About the concern of the author who wrote it. About his relationship to the story he tells'.⁹ His goal is to 'make a history

which is more conscious of itself as an artifact, more ambiguous and open-ended; to introduce a reflexive note into narrative'.¹⁰ Moreover, Rosenstone, as a response to his belief that history does not represent the past as it actually happened, has abandoned some of the standard conventions of narrative history in favour of the narrative practices of modern novels and films, primarily the use of different voices, the direct address of the author to readers and characters in the work, the use of montages and short, disconnected scenes to make clear that there is no single, true, definitive account of the three men whose biographies he is writing and their experiences in Japan, but rather that there can be many versions of the same man. Likewise, he is aware of the positioned nature of his sources and also of what they do not tell us, what these three men do not commit to paper.¹¹

Anthropologist and historian Richard Price similarly draws attention to his own voice in his histories of the Saramake peoples of Suriname. In *First Time* he transcribes oral histories of the Saramake tribe on the top half of the page and adds his own commentary on the bottom half and, by doing so, destabilises our common assumptions as to whose voice is authorial and authoritative and challenges the notion of there being a single true account of the past which is necessarily that of the academic historian.¹² In *Alabi's World* he takes this one stage further and uses four different type-faces to represent the polyvocality of the work: univers 45 for his prose and quoted passages from other academic scholars, bold type for Moravian missionary writings, bold italics for material from predominantly the Dutch planters and colonial authorities, and italics for words spoken by Saramakas narrating their history.¹³ Rather than privilege the Dutch colonial records, he gives equal respect to the stories, histories and songs of the Saramakas today who are custodians of their past. The inclusion of large sections of primary sources decentres the narrative and to some degree fragments the author's authority, allowing other voices to be heard, rather than overwhelmed by the author's interpretation of the sources. This is further assisted by Price's choice to keep much of his commentary and analysis to a long notes section at the end of the book, thereby ensuring that the author's voice is not unduly prioritised in the main body of the narrative.¹⁴

Denning, like Rosenstone, creates a self-reflexive, subjective tone in his *Beach Crossings*. Here he intertwines his chapters on cross-cultural, Native/Stranger encounters in the Sea of Islands (Pacific) area with reflections on his work as a scholar and story-teller of cross-cultural encounters, and with further discussions about writing history, historical methodology, naming practices, his educational methods, 'ethnogging' and history as performance.¹⁵

These 'crossings', as he calls them, are printed on differently coloured papers and in different type-faces. His aim in these soliloquies is to explicitly situate himself, the story-teller, into his story, challenging the myth that historians can write decontextualised, objective history free from the contamination of the author's interests, assumptions and views.¹⁶

Denning also tries to give equal voice to everyone involved in the encounter. He writes history in a 'double-visioned way', arguing that each side of the Native/Stranger encounter can tell their history only by also telling that of the other.¹⁷ He notes that it is only in the twenty-first century that the history of the indigenous people living in the Sea of Islands has begun to be taken seriously and be accorded equal *gravitas* as a subject suitable for study. This is a cogent reminder that even today some subjects, some peoples and some events are deemed more worthy of historical study than others. Denning continues that not only should the voices of the others be heard, but also in important ways the past belongs more to those on whom it impinges today than to those in the academy who often narrate it.¹⁸ However, as we saw in Chapter 7, the politics of the archive in privileging a particular type of documentary source and the lack of sources that give voice to the marginalised means it is difficult to adequately adumbrate the perspectives of the subaltern. In particular, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued, using the example of Hindu widow immolation, that the speech of the subaltern woman cannot be heard because the socio-historical conditions of representation at the time did not permit her space in which to speak; therefore such examples in effect mark 'the limit of historical knowledge'.¹⁹ It is therefore important to redefine and widen the category of what counts as adequate historical evidence in order that these voices can, if possible, be heard, although they may be expressed in different forms to that usually associated with academic history, be they in dances, oral testimony, songs, legends, myths, jewellery, clothing, body paint, tattoos and carvings. Sanjam Ahluwalia offers an interesting example of how she has attempted to restore the voices of subaltern or marginal groups to the historical record. In researching the debates surrounding the discourse of birth control in nineteenth-century colonial India, she had access to the writings of western elite women, elite Indian men and middle-class Indian women, but the voice of the subaltern women was absent. To remedy, this she used conversations (oral interviews) with traditional midwives in order to recover unrecorded memories and experiences of poorer Jaunpur women. It is, however, important to remember that the oral archive that Ahluwalia has created is no less politically charged than are imperial archives, and should be subject to the same kind of critical analysis.²⁰

Disruption of the linear narrative

Another way in which historians have tried to draw attention to the artificiality and constructed nature of historical discourse is by playing with the predominantly linear form that most academic histories employ. Sven Lindqvist's book *A History of Bombing* takes the form of a non-linear game book in which there are multiple paths that the reader can take to the ending. One can read the book chronologically or begin at any one of the twenty-two separate 'stories' or chapters that weave their way through the book.²¹ Although the reader moves back and forth through the book, the directions at the end of the sections essentially guide one to read the twenty-two chapters in a linear manner – there is really only one path. However, the disrupted nature of the form does draw one's attention to the arbitrariness of the conventional format of history writing.

Rather than provide a standard chronological narrative of the development of bombing, Lindqvist's 'paths' approach the subject from a variety of perspectives and use often unconventional sources. For example, he explores the interconnection of fantasies of genocide, racism, colonialism and bombing in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels of a dystopian future; the development of the laws of war; and the various means by which the tactics of bombing enemy territory (and thus civilian populations) have been represented as a positive, bloodless solution to war in propaganda.²² Many of the paths have an autobiographical component which (like the writers discussed above) clearly situates the author in the text.²³ Moreover, Lindqvist does not attempt to provide a neutral, objective history of bombing. The text is situated within a wider discourse of European (post)colonialism and is very much written from the perspective of one who wishes to condemn the genocidal tendencies that have been facilitated by the development of such technologies and ideologies.

Gumbrecht's *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* is a more successful example of non-linear history. In three different sections he addresses a series of topics arranged in distinct, alphabetically arranged, encyclopaedic entries in order to show 'that there isn't any hierarchy among them' – with titles such as Elevators; Mummies; Reporters; Male v. Female; Silence v. Noise; Centre v. Periphery; Past = Present (Eternity) and Individuality = Collectivity (Leader).²⁴ Each entry includes a number of what would be termed hyperlinks if this were an Internet text, directing the reader to other related entries and establishing a web of cross-references. There are thus multiple ways of reading this text. There is no clear beginning or ending,

and the reader can make their own path through the text, following the links which interest them the most.

Gumbrecht comments that he has tried to produce a 'strictly descriptive' text which does not interpret events within an explanatory framework and which refrains from expressing the author's individual voice, in-depth interpretations and diachronic contextualisations. He does so because his aim is simply to provide readers with an 'experience' of being in 1926.²⁵ In doing this he is responding to his understanding that history no longer has a definitive pragmatic function, and also to the public's desire to 'experience' the past, as evidenced in the popularity of historical re-enactments, museum exhibits and historical dramas. Gumbrecht believes that the popularity of these other historical genres is a result of a deep desire in us to 'penetrate the boundary that separates our lives from the time span prior to our birth [...] to know the worlds that existed before we were born, and experience them directly'.²⁶ In effect, Gumbrecht's work is a form of history as reconstruction but without the realist and empiricist epistemological baggage, because he explicitly (and ironically) acknowledges the impossibility of achieving his 'reconstructionist' aim.²⁷

Another approach that would disrupt the linear narrative, foreground the contested nature of history and depict a multiplicity of voices and perspectives would be to use montage. In *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, Robert J.C. Young employs the technique of montage, juxtaposing often incompatible photographs, text and testimonials, with the aim of capturing the contradictions inherent in 'the history of the present'.²⁸ Synthia Sydnor has similarly produced a Benjaminian-influenced 'narrative pastiche' of synchronised swimming.²⁹ Walter Benjamin, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, is the author of *The Arcades Project*, which consists of multiple sections and sub-sections that include observations, phrases, quotes and references which, in the style of a montage, have no linear sequence. His aim was to provide an impression of the Parisian arcades, intertwined with an articulation of his Marxist-inspired philosophy of history.³⁰ Likewise, rather than present a linear, chronological description of the development of synchronised swimming, Sydnor, under a series of sub-headings, juxtaposes a number of heavily referenced quotations, short passages and word lists to create a 'hybrid text' or tableau of the sport.³¹ More specifically, she creates *her* tableau, thereby challenging both the dominance of the linear narrative in history and the idea of the historian as a transparent narrator, asking the reader instead to 'dive into *my* narrative tableau of a history of synchronized swimming. You can swim in circles, above and below, without having to gulp

a linear argument'.³² The multiplicity of references and lack of a clear authorial narrative encourages the reader interactively to follow up the references and to create *their* own history. In an epilogue she articulates the philosophy behind her experimental history-as-science-as-art, commenting that she has endeavoured to break up the form of history and to make explicit the artifice of the text and her history's construction.³³

Parallel versions of the pasts

Historians have also been influenced by the cinema. Specifically, the 1950 film *Rashomon* encouraged a number of historians to experiment with presenting different possible versions of an event in parallel, without privileging any particular account. In *Rashomon* the director, Kurosawa, depicts four people who narrate the story of a bandit attack to a Japanese judge from different perspectives which overlap (and also contradict) each other. Kurosawa makes no attempt to suggest whether some or all the participants are lying, whether they are telling the truth as they believe it or whether one of them is telling the truth – unless we assume that the last version of the story has some particular authority by virtue of its being presented last.³⁴

James Goodman, in *Stories of Scottsboro*, undertakes a similar approach, telling stories that present accounts and different points of view of an alleged rape of two white women by a group of black boys in the American South in the early twentieth century. The use of parallel versions of an event is one way to foreground the indeterminacy and often contested status of our accounts of the past while also acknowledging that there is not one ultimate truth, but rather different perspectives of events.³⁵

In a similar manner, Bryant Simon presents four fictive or imaginative accounts of a lynching in the Southern town of Blacksburg in the early twentieth century. These four accounts, like those of the bandit attack in *Rashomon*, overlap but also contradict each other. Moreover, they are essentially fictive. The available archival evidence of the events which led up to the lynching and murder of two African Americans is sparse and not sufficient to explain what happened and why. Simon wanted to tell the story of the lynching, and he wanted to discuss sexual desire, violence and class in the American South at this time, but because there was not sufficient evidence to write a traditional historical narrative he turned to fiction. Basing his account on the evidence available and also on his extensive knowledge of life, sexualities and lynching in the turn-of-the-century South, he imagined four scenarios from four different perspectives that might explain what had happened. By doing so

he used fiction not to distort or misrepresent the past, but to explore or make sense of it.³⁶ Moreover, he tells an engaging story of sex, life and death which has an immediacy that is lacking from many more academic narratives. As we will see below, this imaginative or fictive reconstruction of possible events is reminiscent of techniques used by a number of other historians experimenting with form, and might be considered one way in which historians could make their work more accessible and relevant to wider audiences.

Graham Allison adopts a similar approach in a political science context to explain the Cuban missile crisis. He argues that the theoretical assumptions we make, and the conceptual frameworks and categories we use when we analyse or try to explain a past event, magnify or foreground different aspects of the event. Therefore, in his book *Essence of Decision* he tries to understand what happened in the Cuban missile crisis by applying three different theoretical models to explain the available evidence, arguing that each will provide a different perspective or emphasise different significant factors. The three models he employs are the rational actor, the organisational behaviour and the governmental politics models.³⁷ He argues that, in explaining why governments did what they did, the use of different models not only opens the analyst's mind and provides a variety of insights, but also reminds us of the limitations and distortions inherent in the models and interpretative schemas we use for interpreting the world. Such an approach may prove beneficial to historians trying to explain similar events.

Fictive elements

In *Dead Certainties*, a book about the deaths of two very different men, Simon Schama plays with what he calls 'the teasing gap separating a lived event and its subsequent narration'.³⁸ Schama was not looking to establish with certainty what really happened. Instead he was trying to make explicit the possibilities inherent in the multiple narrations and irreconcilable memories that can exist of a single event. In many ways he plays with the conventions of history writing: he does not tell a story with a beginning, middle and end, but leaps into the action *in medias res* and concludes with many things being unresolved; he does not include footnotes, but provides a note on sources; most crucially, he notes that although the stories appear to observe the conventions of history writing they could also be described as historical novellas, because some of the passages are 'purely imagined fiction', despite being closely based on the archival documents.³⁹ This is not to say that he scorns 'the boundary between fact and fiction', but rather that he draws attention to

the fictive, imaginative and inventive nature of history writing inherent in the act of choosing sources, selecting and interpreting facts, commenting on events and passing judgement.

Robin Bisha has conducted a similar experiment, combining fictive elements with historical scholarship in her pseudo-biography of Daria Mikhailovna Menshikova, the autobiography that Bisha thinks Daria could, or might, have written.⁴⁰ Bisha was inspired to adopt this approach because the paucity of sources and studies on elite women in eighteenth-century Petrine Russia frequently led historians to resort to legends or rumours to fill in the gaps in their narratives. Rather than quietly rely on unhistorical rumours, she wrote a fictive autobiography based on extensive reading of memoirs of this era and early Russian women's autobiographies.⁴¹ Events mentioned in the pseudo-autobiography are footnoted and references are given to where Bisha obtained the information. While this work is an example of rigorous scholarship, it contains imaginative or fictive elements, but in doing so it brings alive and includes in the historical record a little-known aspect of Russian history. Daniel Goffman also uses the rhetorical device of a pseudo-biographical account of an Ottoman bureaucrat to bring to life Ottoman history. In *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* he prefaces each of his chapters with a biographical vignette describing events from the life of Kubad and his trips to Venice, which resonate with the topics subsequently discussed in the chapter. These vignettes are carefully footnoted and are based on Venetian sources for events in Kubad's life and on Ottoman primary and secondary sources for background information. Goffman argues that he has introduced this fictive element to 'flesh out and personalize the historical record' and that his aim 'is not to concoct fables, but to conjecture on the basis of available information how a particular individual in a certain situation might have behaved'.⁴²

In a similar manner, Zinsser combines rigorous scholarship closely based on sources with an imaginative approach to the form of her narrative in her biography of the marquise Du Châtelet.⁴³ She begins the biography in three different ways, thus emphasising the artificiality of beginnings and endings – they are not naturally found in the sources, but are constructed by the historian. Moreover, by beginning in different ways, she places emphasis on different aspects of the marquise's life and a subtly different story is told. Likewise, by exploring how earlier biographers have narrated the marquise's life in comparison to her own approach, she further affirms the fact that historians write within an intellectual framework of assumptions and opinions specific to their own time.

While Denning denies that he writes fiction, he acknowledges that 'to catch the lost passions in places, history will have to be a little more artful than being a "non-fiction"'.⁴⁴ He also acknowledges the use of his imagination in writing 'true' stories about the past. He uses the term 'historiography' to describe what he does, to describe the means by which the past is transformed into words, or dance, or paint or music, to describe the continual process of engaging with and constructing the past.⁴⁵ But for Denning there is always a factual component to historiography, as he says: 'I tell the story with the certainty of my factual knowledge, the probabilities of my understanding and the possibilities of my interpretations.'⁴⁶

Price also uses his 'educated imagination' to occasionally add fictive elements to his text in order to more dramatically present an event for which specific documentation is unavailable. For example, consider the fictional Indian fisherman and the book-keeper in the introductory scene, when Lanu and Ayako are taken from the slave ship, and the accounts of Abini's and Akoomi's funerals, where he fills in the gaps in the evidence with educated guesses while still generally staying within the bounds of what is known.⁴⁷ Price argues that an ethnographic historian, like a good novelist, should try to evoke the texture of past or different worlds, but not lose sight of the gulf separating the author from the historical actors and the authors of the historical sources.⁴⁸

We noted in Chapter 9 that historians might benefit from borrowing certain practices, forms of expression and modes of presentation from other disciplines. In particular a number of historians have begun to explore the contribution that fiction, and in particular the narrative techniques of historical fiction, could offer to the discipline. Pinto argues that historians see historical novels as problematic because of their fictional content and their emotional tone. But the emotional tone of such novels can have an analytic and interpretative power, which suggests that perhaps emotion also has a place in non-fictional histories. Moreover, exploring the role of emotions in shaping historical understanding foregrounds the manner in which historians themselves use rhetoric to constitute the way we feel about our pasts.⁴⁹ Similarly, Southgate demonstrates that novelists have succeeded far more often than historians in 'popularising' to a wider audience key issues in historiography such as those concerned with truth, memory, identity and ethics.⁵⁰ Furthermore, he argues that historical fictions can both convey the emotional inner lives of people in the past and also relate the pasts of subaltern or subordinate peoples in a more effective and empathetic manner.⁵¹ As we saw in Chapter 7, colonial archives often exclude the voices of the colonised and therefore histories based on sources contained therein can conflict with the memories and pasts

of the colonised or subaltern. Jerome de Groot explores how historical novels have disputed accepted histories, made known to a wider audience untold or ignored atrocities and reinserted marginalised communities into mainstream pasts.⁵² In particular, he discusses the depiction of the violence of nineteenth-century frontier America and Mexico in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), Sebastian Barry's revisionist account of the First World War from the perspective of Irish troops pressed

**Jonathan Walker *Pistols! Treason! Murder!*
*The Rise and Fall of a Master Spy***

Walker's history of the first professional Venetian spy, Gerolamo Vano, is not only engaging and informative, but also experimental in form, self-reflexive and explicit about the process by which history is constructed.⁵³ Walker states that his book is not only about the spy Vano, but also about 'the process whereby historians assemble stories'. He wishes to not only tell stories, but also deconstruct the process of story-telling.⁵⁴ In particular, he draws attention to the fact that his sources, primarily the intelligence reports written by Vano, do not organise events into a plot or story or offer interpretations, but that he has had to stitch together the various sources and the information they contain in order to make a coherent narrative. He wishes to make explicit the manner by which he has pieced together the fragments that make up his story and not imply that his story is somehow the version of what happened.⁵⁵

Walker does not present a standard narrative, linear description of Vano's life as a spy, nor of the role he played in the execution of the Venetian nobleman Foscarini. Rather, he employs a number of innovative means of presenting information to the reader, particularly in his use of comic strips and contextual asides in the form of fictional conversations between academics in various Venetian drinking establishments. The comic strips dramatise narratives constructed by the author from primary sources, often using direct quotations from these sources and with the characters dressed in near-contemporary Venetian clothing, as illustrated in costume books from the time. The latter 'pseudo-conversations' provide crucial background information on the Venetian economy, average prices and wages; the political tension between Venice and the Habsburg Empire; the Council of Ten, and everyday street life and, despite being fictional, they are based on historical facts sourced from real historians.⁵⁶ They therefore illustrate the intertextual and dialogic nature of historical narratives. Where inconsistencies arise in the information derived from the sources, Walker offers a variety of possible interpretations, on one occasion also providing odds on which may be the more likely, in his opinion.⁵⁷

into service in the British army, *A Long Long Way* (2006), Tony Morrison's novel of American slavery, *Beloved* (1987), and Sarah Water's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), which explores nineteenth-century lesbian identities. De Groot also draws attention to how historical novelists more effectively problematise historiographical conventions, interrogate ideas of identity, historical progression and objectivity, foreground the artificiality and thus the legitimacy of narratives therefore undermining authorial authority, and depict in a more experiential manner what our pasts might have been like. This is particularly effective when trying to depict the horror of war, slavery and genocide. The above historians are essentially arguing that the simplistic equation of truth with non-fiction and falsehood with fiction is no longer useful in the context of writings about our pasts. Instead, a judicious use of both fictive or imaginative elements and the narrative techniques used in historical fiction can help historians more effectively to tell their 'truths'.

The future function of history

In Chapters 7 and 8 we discussed the ideological positioning of histories and the fact that it is very hard, in the light of the postmodern challenge, to continue to argue that we research and write about history for its own sake. History has to have a purpose, it has to be useful, otherwise why bother with it?⁵⁸ Historians have therefore recently begun to rethink what they understand the function of history to be and the role that it could play in our culture and society. In this section we will consider a number of possible functions that people have ascribed to historical narratives. These include history as a means of imagining or reinforcing the identity of individuals and societies; history as an ethical meditation on how we can make a better future; history as hopefulness; history as political activism; and the end of history.

Ethical meditations and identity

The postmodern challenge has foregrounded the fact that history is never neutral, it always has a moral dimension and is written from a particular ethical perspective. Ethical considerations influence not only our choice of research topic but also the interpretative strategies and models we employ. David Harlan argues that in the early part of the twentieth century history written and consumed in America was one of the culture's main means of moral reflection, but from the 1950s this began to change. For Harlan, like Southgate, the future of history and the historical profession lies in a return to this

key, earlier function. Harlan does not think that the role of professional or academic historians is simply to transmit 'professionally certified knowledge' to students, but that it is instead to help them 'develop historical imaginations that are morally sustaining and politically relevant', to be reflective readers or viewers of all the forms by which their society represents the past.⁵⁹ For Harlan, history should therefore be primarily understood as a form of moral reflection or ethical edification. Narratives of the past can provide models or exemplars of behaviour that we can choose to emulate or repudiate. They can be viewed as a means by which we can articulate values that we think are important and thereby imagine a better world. We should teach and write in such ways that our students develop a historical imagination that will help them to say: 'This is how we mean to live but do not yet live; this is what we mean to value but do not yet value.'⁶⁰ In essence, history can provide hope-inspiring examples, the hope that we can make a better world, free from cruelty and intolerance.⁶¹ Both Southgate and Harlan argue that it is the ability of Ken Burns' historical documentaries of American life and society to offer not only a sense of identity, but also hope for the future of America that account for their massive popularity.⁶² If academic history is to become more relevant to a wider public and if academic historians are to play a role in determining the pasts we have, then it might be useful to explore further these potential uses of history.

This is not to say that we can find absolute moral truths in the past. The past can only provide us with examples that exemplify the moral values we agree with and which reflect the type of people we want to be.⁶³ The ethical dimension to history is also closely linked to the practice of identity formation. As Harlan says, 'our every attempt to define who we *have been* is [...] densely and irretrievably interwoven with our hopelessly subjective attempts to define both who we *are* and who we wish to *become*'.⁶⁴ Southgate echoes this opinion, arguing that a future role for history could perhaps be as an explicit means of constructing or reinforcing identity for both individuals and societies. Instead of constructing cultural or geographical 'others' to define ourselves against, we could instead use chronological 'others' – 'others' from the past.⁶⁵ History is thus a way of thinking about ourselves and our experiences. When we research the past we are not so much looking to establish or determine the meaning of the past, but we are searching for the meaning of our present. History is a means by which we can give our lives meaning and can grow as individuals, and work for a better, more just society.⁶⁶

Ann Rigney similarly argues that one of the future uses of history may lie in the fact that it defamiliarises the present, it allows us to look at the present

from an unfamiliar view, it provides a critical distance which facilitates a recalibration of our perception of the world, ethical position and self-understanding.⁶⁷ This sentiment is echoed by Rosenstone, who believes that we need a 'history that surprises and startles us', which exposes us to things we have not seen, heard or felt before.⁶⁸ Munslow argues along similar lines in his latest work, contending that postmodern multi-sceptical forms of history will 'demand a highly self-conscious ethical interventionism' by historians in the histories they write.⁶⁹ Such historians, rather than uncritically employing the traditional form of history writing, will express their history according to their preferred emotional, ethical, aesthetic and epistemic choices. In this regard it might be more useful to view history as an 'expressive artwork' – a meditation in which the historian's ethical and aesthetic judgements, sympathies and discernments are central.⁷⁰ Therefore, rather than understand the function of history as the production of mimetic representation, Munslow, like Southgate and Harlan, sees history as a means of expressing or considering 'all things human'.⁷¹ Therefore what he describes as 'history artwork' is a means of using the past to meditate upon new insights, understandings and emotions, to produce an 'ethically inspired cultural catharsis'.⁷²

Political activism

As we saw in Chapter 8, many historians are writing history with the explicit aim of challenging what they consider to be sexist, racist and other essentialist discourses. And as discussed above, others are writing to recover the lost histories and voices of subjugated or marginalised groups and thus to empower or raise the consciousness of present-day communities. Both of these activities are essentially political acts. Many historians see the function of history today as a form of political activism. History can have political effects in very immediate ways. For example, Chauncey describes how he participated as a professional historian in ten gay rights legal cases where he testified as an expert witness, wrote *amicus* briefs and submitted affidavits on the history of sexual regulation and anti-gay discrimination which all played a role in the final decision of the judges.⁷³

History writing can also be political in more general terms. Joan W. Scott argues that historians should use their narratives of the past as levers to unearth and challenge the foundational premises on which our social and political institutions rest. The point of this, she continues, would be to demonstrate that these institutions, and the concomitant assumptions and power relations inherent in them, are not natural and enduring, but are contingent,

historicised and open to change.⁷⁴ Southgate, like Scott, argues that we need histories that expose the contingency of our presuppositions, customs and practices because, by emphasising that things could have been different, there is therefore hope that we can make things different in the future.⁷⁵ Ramírez, quoting Mario T. García, similarly argues that oppositional histories can be used as political tools to critique oppressive institutions and to make public the stories of those often marginalised by dominant narratives, those who are erased by history.⁷⁶ Likewise, Dening also argues that there is a political aspect to his research. For Dening, words can empower and disempower.⁷⁷ He does not want to understand the world, but to try to change it, to disturb ‘the moral lethargy of the living to change in their present the consequences of their past’.⁷⁸ He wants to tell true stories, inclusive stories, stories that acknowledge the identity of those ignored by history, the dispossessed. He wants to help them use their words to say who they are.⁷⁹

The end of history?

In contrast with the historians discussed above who believe that the postmodern challenge to history necessitates a re-evaluation of its function, Jenkins argues that it in fact spells the end of history as a worthwhile intellectual pursuit. As we saw in Chapter 9, he argues that traditional or empiricist history no longer serves any useful function and that while we could instead reconceptualise history as a reflexive, positioned, moral reflection on life, a means of articulating identity or a way of facilitating emancipatory thinking, he, *pace* Harlan, does not think that we need history to do this. Jenkins believes that there are more interesting ways by which we can achieve the same result. He thinks we should forget history because the term and genre is too laden with empiricist and realist connotations and is therefore best abandoned.⁸⁰ We can think about our present and future ethically and in emancipatory and democratising ways without the need for historical narratives of the past.⁸¹ For example, as we noted in Chapter 1, we do not necessarily *need* to study the Nazi era in order to come to the conclusion that genocide is morally wrong. It is perfectly possible to make good ethical choices without studying history – as countless millions of people have done and continue to do.

Further reading

David Harlan *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow *The Nature of History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004). Contains a number of excerpts from experimental histories as well as histories written from a reconstructionist or constructionist perspective.

Alun Munslow *The Future of History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone (eds) *Experiments in Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 2004). An excellent collection of experimental histories which demonstrate how postmodern critiques of the history genre can be integrated into the actual writing of history.

Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice, edited by Alun Munslow and James Goodman. The main journal publishing experimental histories.

Conclusion

Human individuals conceive of their identity in terms of the historical narratives that they tell themselves about their past.¹

Humans have been ‘doing history’ for thousands of years. Societies and cultures continue to tell stories about the past, although they don’t all necessarily have something that corresponds to the genre of history. This book has largely been about one particular way of narrating pasts, that of history. In Chapter 2 we saw that this particular set of practices for creating and handling knowledge of the before-now is a global phenomenon, crossing chronological, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Interestingly, there are considerable similarities in the ways in which different cultures have answered historiographical questions concerning the function of history, its epistemological status, the use of sources, the duties of the historian, suitable subjects and the pattern that history makes. Such similarities can come about from the transfer of knowledge between communities or can arise independently, and thus may indicate a universal characteristic of human culture or society. For example, Woolf notes that in both ancient Chinese and Greek cultures similar negative descriptions of enemies and barbarians in historical narratives were used in order to define identity through difference.² Likewise, the early Islamic historiographical genres of chronicle and prophetic biography served the purpose of enabling Muslims to understand the Qur’an in much the same way that the Chinese *Zuo Commentary* was written to help explain the Confucian classic *Spring and Autumn Annals*. And both Islamic and Chinese historians also

used historical examples to instruct the ruling elite in how to prolong the life of political dynasties.³ We see a further parallelism in the eighteenth-century evidential learning movement that developed in East Asia and the ‘antiquarian movement’ that originated around the same time in Europe, both of which were concerned with developing innovations in source criticism.⁴ Moreover, although knowledge of Ranke was introduced into Japan through Zerffi’s work *The Science of History*, Wang notes that what made Rankean historiography so popular in Meiji Japan was the fact that it expressed the ideal of evidential learning and demonstrated a similar historical methodology and philosophy.⁵

The fact that all societies in some way memorialise the before-now, in conjunction with the fact that there is considerable congruence and comparability between different cultures’ understanding and practice of the genre of history, suggests that story-telling about our pasts fulfils a key human need. Ankersmit develops this line of thought in a discussion of Barthes’ argument that using the Greek middle voice with the verb to write – I write myself – makes explicit the idea that we can sometimes become ourselves through the act of writing: writing shows us what we really think and therefore who we really are.⁶ Ankersmit suggests that western civilisation ‘writes itself’ through historical culture, that the genre of history provides a mirror by which it envisions and reifies identity.⁷ We would go further and suggest that perhaps all cultures to some degree construct and become conscious of their identities through narrativising their pasts; that story-telling about the past in whatever format allows us to ‘write’ ourselves. History and other mnemonic practices may therefore serve an ontological function: that is, they constitute a fundamental part of what it means to be human, they are activities that all human societies and cultures engage in as part of a wider practice of self-definition and the articulation of identity.

If story-telling about the past does serve an ontological function, it might be more useful for twenty-first-century historians to broaden their understanding of the means by which they can talk about the past rather than to remain constrained by the historically determined and contingent genre protocols of nineteenth- and twentieth-century academic history. This does not mean that we foresee (or necessarily desire) a collective abandonment of these genre protocols entirely, but it does mean that we favour more plural and heterogeneous definitions of what constitutes ‘history’ – as this is understood inside and outside universities. We could engage in what Denning calls historying – a term that describes the varied and ongoing means by which pasts can be transformed into words, or dance, or paint or music.⁸ We think therefore, *pace*

Davies and Cohen, that forms of historical thinking or historical consciousness are not inherently conservative practices that reinforce the status quo. Nor do we think, *pace* Jenkins, that we would be better served by leaving history out of our ethical and political discussions. We prefer to live in a culture in which historiography (including texts written by people with a different epistemological position from our own) continues to provide us with material that helps us to think. History books, in our view, are one cultural resource among many that we can use for our particular purposes (critical, intellectual, cultural, aesthetic, ethical and so forth), and we will continue to use them in these ways. Thus we agree with Harlan that, whilst it is perfectly possible to have ethical discussions without any reference to the genre of history, narrations of the before-now, in a variety of forms and media, can provide a stimulating and engaging means of contemplating political and moral questions. They enable us to articulate '[t]his is how we mean to live but do not yet live; this is what we mean to value but do not yet value'. History as an academic discipline might therefore move forward, as Megill suggests, not in terms of 'dredging up new facts', although presumably that would happen as well. But primarily it would be concerned with engaging 'in the philosophical task of reflecting on the significance of facts already in some sense "known"'.⁹

Preface

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Chapter 1

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- 5 *Ibid.*, 16–19.
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Chapter 2

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- 3 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 4 vols, trans. C.F. Smith, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1969) 1.21.1 quoted in Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* (London: Routledge, 2000) 320.
- 4 Ibid., 1.21.1.
- 5 Ibid., 1.22.2.
- 6 S. Qian, 'Shih chi 130: The Postface of the Grand Historian', in B. Watson *Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958) 51, quoted in Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers* 292.
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- 25 *Ibid.*
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Conclusion

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