HISTORICAL THEORY

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IN MEMORY OF HOWARD (1949–2001)

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INTRODUCTION

Reading certain theoretical works of the past few decades, one might be forgiven for thinking that until the later twentieth century, everybody had agreed that historical accounts were simply accepted as True Stories containing Important Facts about Things Which Really Happened. History was, at least since the more scientistic turn of the twentieth century, a discipline quite distinct from literature. Literature was about things that had not happened, and history was about things that had. Literature was about imagination and invention; history was about telling the truth. Historians wrote about facts, to be clearly distinguished from fiction and myth. And, on this allegedly traditional view, historians were trained to do it properly, objectively; using appropriate sources and methodology (known by critics as 'source fetishism'), with appropriate time spent sweating in the archives ('archive positivism'), their results could be trusted. Then along came some theoretically sophisticated postmodernists, much influenced by French post-structuralism, who mounted a mortal attack on this happy picture of historians earnestly in pursuit of truth. With the 'linguistic turn', history dissolved into relativist discourse; the 'truth' could not only never be known, but was indeed itself merely an article of faith. Historical works were essentially fictions written in realist mode, with conventions such as quotations from sources and scholarly footnotes serving to bolster the reality effect. Meanwhile, however, the vast majority of practising historians ignored the unintelligible theorists, and simply got on with the job of reconstructing the past; and their readers continued to read their books as if they had something interesting and accurate to say about the past.

Of course such widespread agreement on the nature of history never existed. Differences over the character of history as a discipline for acquiring knowledge of the past are hardly a recent development. Debates over approaches to knowledge, understanding and explanation in the historical and social sciences have been going on for generations, indeed centuries.[1] Recent skirmishes over postmodernism have merely added some new twists to old scepticisms. In the context of current debates, I seek in this book to argue a case for historical knowledge as distinctively different from fiction or propaganda, but to argue this without falling into a naïve empiricism resting on a simplistic appeal to 'the facts'. I seek

to explore the extent to which historical knowledge can in some sense be 'true', testable, capable of progress within certain parameters; the extent to which, and the bases on which, there will remain fundamental and irresolvable differences of approach and assumptions among different historical communities; and the extent to which the human imagination and capacity for inter-subjective communication have roles to play in bringing knowledge of aspects of the past to different audiences in an ever-changing present.

My underlying premise is that theory is fundamental to historical investigation and representation. Part of my aim in this book is to raise certain theoretical issues to the attention of those who remain relatively blind to the importance of theory in history. All history writing is, whether historians acknowledge this or not, an intrinsically theoretical as well as empirical enterprise. There are historians who consciously claim to be theoretical – who claim that their work is informed by explicit bodies of theoretical debate such as Marxism, structuralism, discourse theory, or feminism. And there are historians who, in contrast, claim to be simply 'doing history', exploring the archives, trying to find out as best they can 'what really happened' or 'how it really was'. Implicitly they, too, are working within bodies of assumptions of which they may be more or less aware: assumptions about what is already 'common knowledge', assumptions about how best to pose and frame the questions guiding their inquiry, assumptions about what to look for and where to look for it, assumptions about how to define who are the key historical actors (social classes, 'great men'?), and assumptions about what would constitute satisfactory answers to their questions. These often hidden, implicit assumptions are as much bodies of theory as are the concepts and strategies of those operating within an explicitly theoretical '-ism'.

This book is thus about the ways in which all historical writing is inevitably theoretical. It is not about 'history and theory', as though the latter were in effect an optional add-on; such an approach is based in a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of historical inquiry, as though 'history' could simply choose whether or not to 'borrow' theories and concepts from cognate disciplines in the social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, geography, or economics. As I hope to show, even the most wilfully 'a-theoretical' historians actually operate – and have to operate – within a framework of theoretical assumptions and strategies. Nor is the book about particular 'theories of history', 'theoretical approaches to history', or substantive historical controversies. There have been many such books, serving to introduce readers to particular bodies of debate and controversy; I take these as given and have no desire to seek to replicate the often excellent surveys and introductions to particular approaches to history or bodies of substantive historical work.[2] Finally, the book is not in the nature of an introductory methodological survey, however sophisticated, where again there are a number of useful primers.[3] This book is, rather, about the intrinsically theoretical nature of historical investigation and representation. More particularly, it seeks to explore and come to a view on two specific issues which have concerned and puzzled me over a long period of

time, and it is written in the context of a more general challenge to the nature of history.

The two major issues which puzzle or bother me may be put quite simply, although it is far harder to work through to a satisfactory solution of the questions they raise. I have in part written this book because I wanted to work out an answer to the conundrums they pose. The first issue is precisely that of the multiplicity of theoretical approaches to historical investigation referred to above. If we believe that historical investigation is the pursuit of true accounts of selected aspects of the past, and yet we have competing accounts of the same phenomenon – for example, Marxist and non-Marxist accounts of the origins of the French Revolution, or 'functionalist' and 'intentionalist' accounts of the genesis of the Holocaust – is there some way of deciding between them on grounds that are not purely rooted in political, moral, aesthetic or personal preferences and prejudices? How, in other words, do we deal with the plethora of competing theoretical approaches or 'paradigms' of historical inquiry? The second issue is closely related to this. If we (want to?) believe that historical investigation is the pursuit of truth about the past, and yet competing paradigms seem to be closely related to particular positions on the political spectrum – left-wing, radical, conservative and so on – what, if anything, is left of notions of 'value-freedom' or 'objectivity'? Should such notions be simply jettisoned as intrinsically unattainable, even undesirable, and replaced with a wilfully situated, partisan notion of historical inquiry? But what then – if anything – distinguishes history from myth, ideology, propaganda? What is left of a notion of history as the pursuit of truth about the past?

The more general context of current debate is that of the new twists provided by postmodernist challenges to long-running controversies about relativism, radical scepticism, and the possibility of saying anything at all about the past which is not in some sense fictional, constructed, contestable, unstable, incapable of any form of rational verification (if only in the sense of being in principle open to falsification). In the past few decades, a number of scholars have brought insights from linguistics and literary theory to bear on history, seeking to argue that history is in some senses merely another form of fiction. These challenges have taken several different forms: some postmodernists argue that we can never really know anything about the 'past as such'; others concede that individual factual statements about the past may be true, but hold that the infinity of possible ways in which we can 'emplot' individual facts into coherent narratives, or 'impose' stories on the past, indicates that historical interpretations are essentially constructions in the present, not – as traditional historians would claim – reconstructions of the past.

The debates about postmodernism have recently provoked a number of quite heated responses, many of which seem to me not to deal adequately with the issues raised by the more serious postmodernist theorists. A thread running through this book, therefore, will be that of responses to postmodernism. But I do this alongside trying to grapple with what seem to me the more fundamental questions raised by the issues of paradigms and politics mentioned above. I seek

to provide a view of historical investigation as a matter of collective and theoretically informed inquiries into selected aspects of the past, in which it is possible to make 'progress', at least within given parameters of inquiry, and to be clear about the roots of or bases for residual differences in fundamental – metatheoretical – assumptions.

It seems to me that part of the problem lies in the way in which recent debates have become unnecessarily polarised, both in terms of substance and in terms of tempers. While empiricists tend to focus on the evidence of past reality, driven by a degree of optimism about their capacity to evaluate and make good use of that evidence, postmodernists tend to focus rather on issues relating to the lability and unrootedness of current representations of that past (whether or not they have much faith in the 'evidence'). The two barely meet. In particular, postmodernists tend to emphasise heavily the gap between an essentially unknowable past and an imposed (and, it is often implied, almost arbitrarily constructed) representation in the present, while empiricists often tend almost to ignore the character of this gap altogether. Meanwhile, walls of values separate a variety of general approaches from one another, less on theoretical or empirical grounds than on political and personal ones. There has been a relatively widespread temptation to be content with simple assertion, enumeration or juxtaposition of opposing views. This book seeks to analyse the nature of the gap between the 'facts' and empirical traces of the past, so heavily emphasised by empiricists, and the constructions, interpretations or even 'fictions' of the present on which postmodernists tend to lay most emphasis. The gap, I believe, can be bridged only by developing a degree of theoretical awareness.

The facts of the matter?

Why do these issues matter? Why bother our heads with often abstruse theory? Should not historians simply 'get on with the job', rather than engaging in introspective examination of their own enterprise; should they not leave theorising to intellectual historians and philosophers who, by not engaging in the hard slog of substantive research, have the luxury of time to spare for such ruminations? Many practising historians arguably share Geoffrey Elton's 'suspicion that a philosophic concern with such problems as the reality of historical knowledge or the nature of historical thought only hinders the practice of history'.[4] By and large, probably a majority of historians persuade themselves that postmodernist positions, in particular, are rather extreme and need not be taken seriously, although views vary as to whether there is a real threat or not. Lawrence Stone's beleaguered perception of a 'crisis of self-confidence' among practising historians, and his fear that history might become 'an endangered species', are disputed by postmodernist Patrick Joyce, who suggests that, at least in Britain, 'rank indifference rather than outright hostility' is 'the dominant response'.[5] Would it not be better, then, just to turn to practical manuals of 'how to do it', guides to 'source criticism' and the like?

There are several reasons why answers to perennial questions about the nature of history matter, and should matter even for those historians who think they can ignore such questions. Most historians make at least an implicit claim for some degree of truth value for what they are saying. They are generally viewed by the public as 'experts' whose accounts should be distinct from, and superior to, those of myth-mongers, propagandists, pleaders for special interests. Those historians with paid positions in the education system and in what may be termed the 'public history' industry bear a degree of public responsibility and accountability for the ways in which they spend their time. Lay readers on the whole turn to the works of historians with the assumption that they have some expectation of (to use the much-cited quotation from Ranke) finding out 'how it really was': not how someone imagined it might have been, with a combination of inspiration, invention, rhetoric on the one hand, and selection, exploitation and collation of the flotsam and jetsam of surviving 'evidence' on the other; nor how someone would prefer one to think it had been, in order to argue a political or moral case for one side or another in a particular controversy, or to construct an acceptable identity in which a previously underprivileged or marginalised group can take pride.

Yet the very plurality of approaches in history suggests that there is in fact no single disciplinary approach: that 'history' actually only refers to the subject matter – that which has gone, the past – and not to a distinctive set of theories and methodologies. Even what is worthy of constituting an object of inquiry in the past is itself often a matter of controversy: for example, the narrow definitions of their subject matter by historians of high politics have increasingly come under fire from those who view other aspects of human experience as being equally valid or at least potentially illuminating objects of study. But also, and more importantly: if mutually competing accounts are produced, from different theoretical (or political, or personal) perspectives, of the *same* phenomenon in the past, and there appears to be no rational – or at least mutually agreed – means of adjudicating between these approaches, then what is the status of any notion of historical truth? Are not the competing accounts simply acts of faith? If there is no agreement on the character of the phenomena to be studied, then what has become of a 'discipline' which cannot even agree on its object of inquiry, let alone any mode of interpretation or explanation?

A familiar, if somewhat extreme, example will serve to illustrate some of the basic issues. In Nazi Germany, around six million people were murdered on grounds of 'race', politics, religious belief, or alleged physical 'inferiority' (the Nazi notion of 'life unworthy of living', *lebensunwertes Leben*). There are an almost infinite variety of ways of trying to recount and represent this horror – none of them, arguably, adequate to its reconstruction and explanation. Any notion of history writing as mimesis – an accurate reproduction of the past in its entirety, or in its 'essence' – instantly breaks down in face of this tragedy. This extreme example also presents an extreme challenge to notions of history as rational explanation in terms of a complex combination of causes under particular

circumstances, or as interpretive understanding of the motives of actors. Even the very construction of a single *explanandum* – the Holocaust – rests on the assumption that millions of different individual acts of brutality and murder, scattered across different parts of a continent over an extended period of years, can be brought together under a single conceptual heading positing some unity and cohesion to these disparate events. As such, constructions and interpretations of the Holocaust would appear to give important fodder to the postmodernist case.[6]

Those historians coming from an essentially empiricist position would place primary emphasis on empirical accuracy. It is of course important to ensure that 'the facts' are correct – as illustrated in the notorious libel case brought (and lost) by David Irving against Deborah Lipstadt and the publisher of her book on revisionist interpretations of the Holocaust, Penguin Books. The facts are clearly essential building blocks in the development of historical accounts. But investigating history is about more than simply digging up 'true facts' about the past, and jettisoning false assertions or exposing fraudulent misrepresentation. Even a very brief glance at historical controversies over Nazi Germany will reveal that there are a wide range of positions which may be held by historians who do pay appropriate respect to the evidence. There is, for example, the so-called 'intentionalist/functionalist' controversy over the way in which Nazi racism developed into mass genocide, with major differences in theoretical assumptions between those placing primary emphasis on Hitler's intentions, on the one hand, and those explaining increasing radicalisation in terms of the way the regime functioned, on the other.[7] A quite different approach is developed by those such as Daniel Goldhagen, who effectively resurrects older notions of 'national character' by positing some form of German collective mentality characterised by 'eliminationist anti-semitism' persisting over centuries.[8] Similarly, in explaining Hitler's rise to power, there are worlds of theoretical difference between those who emphasise long-term structural features such as Germany's alleged 'special path' to modernity, or *Sonderweg*; those who put a heavy explanatory burden on the medium-term consequences of Germany's defeat in the First World War and the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, or the weak structure and development of the Weimar economy; those who lay primary emphasis on the alleged charisma of Hitler, coming as it were out of nowhere; or those who highlight the political narrative of short-term decisions and mistakes of individual politicians in the closing years of Weimar democracy. Thus, even among historians with a serious respect for the evidence, the self-same historical facts can be emplotted in many different kinds of narrative.

Thus, while an emphasis on empirical evidence, and on the skills of critical evaluation and interpretation of sources, is highly important, it is not in itself sufficient as an argument for history being more than ideology or myth, a belief system akin to any other. This is the somewhat unsatisfactory position which, at heart, Richard J. Evans' *In Defence of History* boils down to.[9] I agree with Evans that it is essential to get the facts right. But I do not think that he has dealt adequately with related arguments about varieties of possible ways of emplotting

the same facts. Nor is it sufficient to say that there may be many perspectives on a phenomenon, all potentially of equal value, as some other commentators argue. Historical knowledge and interpretations are too important an aspect of our lives for us to rest content with a view that history is all 'just perspectival', or that, essentially, 'anything goes' and that evaluation is more a matter of where one's political sympathies lie than of the (essentially unattainable) 'truth' of any given account. Oddly, Ludmilla Jordanova's recent account, *History in Practice*, combines both these views. She places a great deal of emphasis on the essentially 'common sense' skills of the practitioner, and brushes off very lightly the problem of personal moral and political sympathies, simply acknowledging and accepting these as an element in adjudicating competing accounts. This is also the central problem with the attempt to rescue some notion of truth presented by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacobs, in *Telling the Truth about History*.[10] Their essentially whiggish (though transposed to American history) account of the development of historical approaches culminates in the proposal that we should simply celebrate a democratic, multi-cultural, multi-perspectival, pluralism of historical approaches without seriously addressing the – still – relativist implications of this view, which (if taken to its logical conclusion, which they fail to do) would imply that only political sympathies can ultimately adjudicate between 'better' (= underdog, enabling, empowering, etc.) and 'worse' (= conservative, elitist, etc.) accounts.

If historians agree on the facts – dates, events, 'what happened' – but do not agree on the broader framework of interpretation or explanation, should we simply accept that all accounts are merely 'perspectives', in principle equally valid (or equally fictitious)? Or can we develop some means of looking, not merely at the accuracy of the individual building blocks, but also at the wider interpretive framework? It is the latter which primarily concerns me in this book. And historical theory, in this sense, is not a purely 'academic question'.

To return to our example: it is clearly desperately important, for a whole variety of reasons, for historians to continue the attempt to gain as accurate – and as objective and unbiased – an analysis and explanation of the Holocaust as possible. For explanations of this mass murder are at the same time attributions of culpability or guilt on the one hand, and declarations of exoneration on the other. And these attributions have played a major role in the societies which have come after Hitler. From war crimes trials to the facilitation or blighting of professional careers, from radical sociopolitical restructuring to kicking over the traces, from private and public commemorations to selective reinterpretation and repression of memory, interpretations of the past are inevitably also a part of the present.[11] It is all the more important, then, to be aware of the parameters and claims to truth of historical scholarship; of the ways in which the production of historical knowledge is an integral part of an ever-changing present; and of how historical consciousness affects the ways in which we engage with the present and help to shape the future.

The organisation of the argument

The book is broadly divided into three parts, although all of these overlap. The rest of Part I examines approaches to history, both in the sense of the discipline of historical investigation, and in the sense of historical perspectives on the past. Chapter 2 introduces recent theoretical debates about 'the nature of history' in the light of longer-term disagreements over the contested character of historical inquiry. At the end of that chapter will be found a guide to what I intend to argue in relation to those debates throughout the rest of the book; an argument which requires some knowledge of current debates and which therefore cannot so easily be placed here, where it might otherwise belong. Readers familiar with the theoretical background and the issues around postmodernism (and who are no doubt used to skipping about on CD-Roms) can easily hop directly to this summary of arguments at the end of Chapter 2 if they so wish. Chapter 3 turns to what I consider to be the most important and difficult challenge: that of the sheer variety of historical traditions, the diversity of approaches, or paradigms, in history. Rather than simply recounting the histories of different theoretical traditions, I seek to examine the ways in which different paradigms in the present affect the diversity of routes into the past, and explore the underlying bases of the current plethora of theoretical positions, some of which are more compatible with one another than others.

Part II then turns to analyse the diverse ways in which historians can seek to investigate the past, paying particular attention to strategies for seeking to bridge the gap between present concerns and assumptions, on the one hand, and the complexities of myriad aspects of the past, on the other. I look explicitly at the essentially theoretical problems – which are common to historians of all theoretical persuasions, including those who claim to have none – of framing questions, devising appropriate conceptual frameworks, assessing what is always theoretically netted 'evidence', and constructing answers which serve to satisfy curiosity. Chapter 4 argues that, contrary to the position of postmodernists, the much vaunted 'death of metanarrative' does not logically entail that any narrative is merely a fictive construct imposed almost arbitrarily at the whim and fancy of the historian in the present. Rather, historians work within given frameworks of questions and puzzles, seeking to find answers to such communally defined problems using sets of concepts and methodological tools which are more or less open to amendment and development. In the process of seeking answers to questions, they may develop new approaches, insights or theories. Chapter 5 looks at the issue of concepts as the nets through which we seek to capture the traces of the past. It argues that there are serious theoretical issues which all historians need to address with respect to the selection and development of appropriate conceptual frameworks for netting the evidence. Chapter 6 then examines the ways in which historians do not arbitrarily 'emplot' titbits of evidence or individual factual statements into a continuous narrative, but rather search for conceptually netted evidence or clues in order to try, rationally and

logically, to answer their theoretically informed questions about the past. Both individual factual statements and wider historical pictures or theories are thus, *contra* the views of postmodernists, potentially 'disconfirmable' (to use the neologism favoured by one of their prime exponents, Hayden White). Chapter 7 draws attention, however, to the rather diverse ways in which curiosity may be satisfied, depending often on far wider assumptions which are not rooted in the empirical evidence. In particular, historians and their audiences differ greatly with respect to underlying assumptions about such questions as the relative roles of structure and agency, of wider constraining and constructing forces versus individual motives, decisions and actions, or the underlying drives and emotions of a hidden psyche. Depending on wider philosophical assumptions about what it is to be human, and other beliefs which may well be beyond the scope of empirical or rational argument, different historians will appeal to, or rest content with, very different types of analysis. While there may be no obvious rational means of choosing between different approaches at this level, at least it will be possible to be clear about what such choices might entail by way of wider beliefs or leaps of faith.

Part III then turns to aspects of bringing selected, interpreted knowledge of the past to the present, examining issues of representation, reception and political implications of our knowledge of the past in the present.

I argue that, while all historical knowledge is inevitably situated, we need to work towards a more complex understanding of the ways in which historical accounts are coloured by contemporary political and other connotations than has so far been available in analyses focussing primarily on the attributes and assumed prejudices of individual historians. Historical investigation, representation and reception are collective endeavours. I conclude by exploring the status of partial (in all senses) historical knowledge as a central part of our lives as human, social beings. I argue throughout for the possibility of inter-subjective communication across cultures separated by time (history) as well as – but in different ways from – inter-subjective communication between different individuals, social groups and places in the contemporary world. As a creative, sociopolitical and cultural endeavour, history is no less subject to vicissitudes and failures of communication (difficulties of translation, inaccuracies, indeterminacies, ambiguities and loss of meaning, unintended distortion or downright dishonesty) than any other form of mutual understanding; but this does not mean that, in the babel of tongues, ideals cannot be articulated, standards enunciated, progress made. In short: *pace* postmodernism, but without rushing to join the anti-theoretical barricades of some empiricists, I think it is possible to seek responsible, accountable ways of investigating and representing the past – all the more so if we know the implications and limits of the theoretical language in which we are talking. It is the purpose of this book to explore some of the parameters of those collective conversations.

2

THE CONTESTED NATURE OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

Historians have never agreed about the nature of their craft; and yet this has never prevented people from continuing to engage in historical investigation and debate. For centuries, western conceptions of history have combined, in different measures, views of history as a branch of literature or poetry, an ingredient of politics in the sense of praising heroes and denouncing villains, a contribution to collective memory in the keeping of chronicles and annals, and an essentially religious stamping ground for moral lessons for the present and future. Debates over questions such as 'how did this state of affairs come to pass' or 'who is to blame' or 'let us now praise famous men/fallen heroes' are inevitably ones which arouse high emotions and violent disagreements. Such disagreements inevitably spill over into questions not merely of substance but also of method. Historical understanding, in short, has for centuries been an integral and contested element of human life in an ever-changing present.

Even when the notion of history as scientific investigation of the past became widespread, historians continued to disagree dramatically over the character and implications of their investigations. While some sought for the 'laws' of human development, others sought merely to reconstruct unique aspects of the past 'for its own sake'. Some thought, with Marx, that rather than merely investigating the world, the point was to change it; others followed Ranke in eschewing any political role at all in the attempt at modest reconstruction of the past 'as it actually was'. Most recently, some theorists of history have posed fundamental queries as to whether the past can be known at all – or whether we are not essentially back with history as literature, politics and myth.

The diversity of historical traditions

With the eighteenth-century Enlightenment recognisably 'modern', 'scientific' versions of recounting and exploring the past began to appear, as in Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, which sought to identify and explain in secular terms regularities and variations in types of government. Yet even in the writings of the great German Enlightenment philosopher Hegel an older, fundamentally religious framework was present: the heritage of the Judeo-Christian tradition,

with its notions of the original fall and the progressive struggle towards redemption in the 'final day of judgement' can be clearly discerned in Hegel's key notion of historical stages in terms of 'World Spirit realising itself'. Many of the great historical works of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries continued to be marked by a combination of moral engagement and literary endeavour; many historical analyses were also prompted by serious political engagement with the key issues of their time (Tocqueville, Burke and others on the French Revolution; Tocqueville on America). These features of history – its engagement with the past from the perspective of the present – continued to be central even with its establishment as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century.

With the new faith in positivist conceptions of science, history was established as a university subject, worthy of study in its own right alongside other academic disciplines. A key figure in this 'scientisation' of history, and founding father of what is often confusingly termed 'historism' or 'historicism' (a term subsequently deployed in a very different sense by the philosopher Karl Popper, as we shall see in a moment) was the German historian Leopold von Ranke. While his very substantial body of historical works have faded into a dusty distance, he is extraordinarily well-known for one brief phrase: his oft-quoted dictum that historians should show 'how it really [or actually] was'. Given the odd grammatical construction of Ranke's oft-quoted phrase, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, which always feels as if it is missing a final verb (*ist*), it is perhaps worth for once quoting the full sentence, which could roughly, if somewhat inelegantly, be translated as follows: 'History has been ascribed the office of judging the past in order to teach the contemporary world for the use of future years; the present attempt is not subservient to such high offices; it only seeks to show how it actually was.'[1] The thrust of the comment is thus to emphasise history as a modest endeavour concerned solely with retrieving the evidence and reconstructing the past irrespective of any moral judgements or potential uses for contemporary purposes.

Yet such a notion was not universally shared, even within Ranke's own German cultural environment. At precisely the time Ranke was promoting a notion of investigating the past 'as it actually was', his more radical contemporary, Karl Marx, began – as he saw it – to uncloak bourgeois notions of history (and particularly heroic narratives of high politics) as disguised ideology. Struggling free from the Hegelian heritage of German Idealism, Marx sought to show that history was at heart the record, not of some mystical 'World Spirit realising itself', but rather of the collective struggles of real people. In effect, Marx simply replaced one metanarrative with another. In place of World Spirit came the progressive history of humankind to produce and reproduce, in the process entering into distinctive sets of social relations (or class relations), constantly developing the technical means of production, and proceeding through revolutionary struggles to ever higher stages in the history of human emancipation. Without entering into any detail here over the massive corpus of Marx's work and the continuing debates over its interpretation, it is worth highlighting three general features of the Marxist heritage.

First, despite his reaction against the substance of Hegel's idealist view of history, Marx inherited the somewhat metaphysical 'grand narrative' in terms of historical progress towards an ultimate goal, the 'end' of human history: in his case, this was to be an indistinctly defined, because as yet unrealised, communist society of plenty. There have been many subsequent reactions against this, often simply replacing one grand narrative with another, such as the rise of liberalism, democracy, 'Progress' – or, in the case of postmodernism, with a narrative of chaos and indeterminacy. Second, Marx wrote in the positivist context of nineteenth-century faith in science, and belief in the possibility of discovering underlying social and economic 'laws'. Again, while reacting against any general notion of historical or social 'laws', there have been subsequent variations on the theme, questioning whether it is possible to develop valid historical generalisations or provide causal explanations which do not give much – or indeed any – weight to the actors' perceptions and ideals. Third, Marx was (at least in his early writings) acutely aware of the importance of human agency, and the power of people to affect and change circumstances: his notion of revolutionary 'praxis', in contrast to mere philosophical understanding of the world, effectively challenged any notion of merely observing the past 'for its own sake'. This too has proved to be an extraordinarily fertile source for future notions of historical interpretation as interventions in the present – and has been massively opposed by those coming from the Rankean tradition of history as a documents-based study of the past 'in its own terms' or 'for its own sake' (however laden these latter phrases might also be).

Despite the often extraordinarily prescient insights, detailed theories and ambitious scope of his work, Marx failed to integrate these three features (some of which have been submerged into general 'common sense', others of which are rooted in wider quasi-metaphysical presuppositions which very few would share today). It is important to note, however, that Marx's attempt to construct a truly 'scientific' alternative, allegedly revealing the hidden 'laws' of social development – which yet required a little helping hand from a politically enlightened vanguard – shifted attention away from the motives and actions of individuals to underlying economic and social structures and collective class actors. This faith in the possibility of 'scientific analysis' of what was 'really' the case, beyond the expressed ideas and values of individual historical participants, combined with an activist notion of political intervention to effect future change, inaugurated radically different traditions of historical writing in the twentieth century from those emanating from other nineteenth-century academic currents.

Thus, even as history began to be established as an academic discipline, it was one with remarkable internal diversity of objects of inquiry, and notions of methods and goals. In the form of Marxism-Leninism, Marx's approach was institutionalised in the historical academies of twentieth-century communist states, and also became, in the rainbow colours of western neo-Marxisms, highly influential among left-wing circles in many capitalist states, although with dramatic variations and much internal factionalism. While Marxist historians

were among the most prolific and engaged writers in some national contexts, they were well-nigh outcasts in others. At a philosophical level, Karl Popper's famous critique of the 'poverty of historicism' (note the misnomer) accused Marxism – and Freudian psychoanalysis – of being an essentially unfalsifiable belief system on a par with religion. Nevertheless, a combination of Marx and Freud fed into, for example, the highly influential writings of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. The critiques of the Enlightenment heritage, and more activist notions of praxis, initially developed by Adorno and Horkheimer, fed into later twentieth-century historical and social analyses in the United States and Germany, most notably in the works of Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas. Quite different forms of Marxism which almost wrote human agency out of human history entirely were to be found among the structuralists associated with Louis Althusser in France, who, in turn, clashed violently with humanistic Marxist historians such as the British historian E. P. Thompson. Thus the ambiguous legacy of Marx was one to which many heirs laid claim.

In western states, a wide variety of alternative non-Marxist theoretical traditions proliferated. The sustained attempts of Max Weber to develop a methodologically self-aware approach to problems of world history resulted in a highly sophisticated set of concepts and theses. Weber sought to combine the systematic pursuit of valid historical generalisations with an emphasis on the need for an 'interpretive understanding' of the internal meanings of human behaviour, both in the sense of individual motives for action and in the wider sense of collective belief systems which could not be reduced, as in Marx's work, to some 'underlying' material base. Weber also sought to separate academic analysis from political prescriptions, with his notions of 'value neutrality' and objectivity.

In the course of the twentieth century, the growth of higher education in the western world sustained – even, with its emphasis on originality, actively fostered – a wide variety of competing theoretical approaches, squabbling heirs, in different ways, to the Rankean or Enlightenment heritage, with often cataclysmic differences in underlying assumptions. This is not the place to provide any kind of history of historical scholarship; but it is important simply to note the sheer diversity – and continuing diversification – of historical traditions and approaches. Historians focussing on high politics and international diplomacy were challenged by others seeking to pay attention to labour history, social history, women's history; these in turn were challenged by those seeking to refocus attention on issues of mentality or culture. Nationally defined histories were viewed in new ways by those coming from post-colonial perspectives. Differences over subject area were cross-cut by theoretical and methodological debates. Those writing 'traditional' historical narratives couched in terms of individual motives, actions, contingencies, combinations of circumstances, unintended consequences and unique chains of events, were challenged by those proposing a more analytical approach to history in terms of 'factors' and generalisations, often based in explicitly formulated hypotheses and systematically assessed by means of stringently comparative or quantitative analyses. There remained major

differences over the extent to which historical research and writing could or should be value-free.

Thus, over the course of the past two centuries, a wide diversity of approaches to history have developed in the educational establishments of the industrialised world. To bowdlerise only slightly, the historical landscape of the later twentieth century might appear to a Martian observer roughly as follows. While pragmatic stalwarts sought to hold the terrain of objectivity or value neutrality, and some continued the pursuit of 'governing laws' on a widely prevalent model of the natural sciences, theoretical ambushes were mounted on all sides. So-called 'hermeneutic' theorists pointed to the importance of 'interpretive understanding' of rule-guided behaviour, in contrast to notions of causal explanation, arguing that there were key differences between interpretations of human actions and explanations of natural phenomena. Those influenced by anthropology entered the thickets of meaning in quest of 'thick descriptions', picking up on a much-quoted notion of Clifford Geertz. Non-Marxist structuralists of one variety or another engaged in underground exploration of 'deep structures', whether of the economy or the 'human mind'; others looked rather at structures in terms of visible social relations, facets of political organisation and institutional arrangements. Meanwhile, some dogged historians simply plodded on, empiricist hats on heads to protect against the dazzling glare of theory, spades in hand in order to dig up the empirical facts of the past and explain what had happened by providing a simple chronological narrative of what they had found. Then, finally, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, along came the postmodernists: to tell everyone that it is in principle impossible to access the 'signified' behind the 'signifier', itself a mere product of 'discourse'; that reality can never be tapped in representation.[2]

Such a brief sketch of course entails massive oversimplification of the past two centuries of theoretical controversy. But it does perhaps serve to point to a long-standing and rather startling state of indecision (or, to put it more strongly, fundamental disagreement in principle) about the nature of historical investigation. Underlying these different approaches are quite diverse assumptions about the nature of historical actors, the character of historical inquiry, and the relations between investigation of the past and standpoint in the present. Many of these debates revolve too on comparisons between modes of investigation and the production of 'knowledge' in history and natural science. Differences in historical approach have also frequently been fundamentally linked to different positions in the political spectrum. Narratives of high politics have often been linked to conservatism, for example, while social history, labour history or feminist history have often been associated with self-professedly left-wing or radical historians. Yet for many decades a notion of objectivity nevertheless held sway among probably the majority of western professional historians.

Recently, there has been – and note the paradox of the way I am about to describe this – a marked re- or de-politicisation of history for extraneous, world-historical reasons. Commentators vary as to the direction in which they think this

trend is going: while right-wingers see the 'death of Marxism' as heralding a de-politicisation or 'death of ideology', left-wingers see the 'triumph of conservatism' as rather a politicisation in the other direction. Whichever way one cuts into these debates, there is a startling formal symmetry, roughly running along the lines of 'my history is objective and true; yours is ideological and false'.

The critique of western 'bourgeois' history as ideology had of course long been a refrain of Marxist historiographical approaches, particularly those sustained by the communist regimes of the former Soviet bloc. In practice, historians under communist regimes had varying degrees of leeway, and not all Marxist history written under the constrained and censored circumstances of different eastern European communist regimes adhered to the bald tenets of the ruling parties.[3] This was of course even less the case among the wide variety of western forms of neo-Marxism, many of which developed almost entirely unconstrained by political considerations (and some of their more abstruse proponents apparently barely aware of any real world outside the ivory tower exchanges, virtually unintelligible outside the charmed circles of the converted). Ironically, the end of the Cold War has in some areas simply shifted, rather than removed, the political barriers in history. The collapse of the communist regimes of eastern Europe in 1989–90 of course carried with it a rejection of Marxism as the legitimating ideology of dictatorships now discredited, not only by the western 'victors of history' in charge of the 'restructuring' of institutions of teaching and research in the former Soviet bloc, but also in the eyes of those who had formerly lived in, even many of those who had sustained, these regimes. But, in the process, an interesting shift began to be notable at least in certain corners of western historiography not previously associated with political intent: there was a more overt politicisation of much western historical writing, a more explicitly condemnatory or laudatory tone than had been fashionable for some time in quarters previously noted for their claim to 'objectivity'. The end of détente signalled a return to quite strident – victorious – overtones in many conservative quarters in the West. On the right, there has recently been a vociferous rejection of the long-held postulate of 'value-free' scholarship. The resurrection of 'totalitarianism' as a concept, once utterly discredited as an instrument of Cold War propaganda, is indicative of this trend towards the explicit and wilful repoliticisation of history on the right.[4] So too, of course, is the proclamation of the 'end of history'; the triumph of western liberalism as the (quasi-Hegelian?) goal towards which all of History had been striving.

The diversity of historical perspectives, and the close links between particular theoretical approaches and political standpoints, have presented a major challenge to any notion of history as the pursuit of truth. This is not limited to the long-running debates between 'left' and 'right', but has diversified with the plethora of 'new approaches' to history in the later twentieth century. Some have gladly acknowledged and even celebrated the inevitably situated character of historical knowledge, including for example the challenges to 'traditional' historical narratives mounted by those coming from feminist or post-colonial perspectives.

Others have clung to a notion of historical truth as unrelated to contemporary political standpoints. Some have implicitly assumed that competing interpretations can in some way be combined in principle in a wider synthesis, as 'new perspectives' serve to widen old horizons; others have taken the dazzling, ever-changing mosaic as indicative of the kaleidoscopic character of contemporary pictures of the past, which can itself never 'really' be known. On the latter view, history is about the imposition of interpretations, the construction of meanings: endowing and investing selected remnants of the past with meanings in the present, not reconstructing it 'as it actually was'. The issues raised by this diversity of assumptions and approaches will be addressed throughout the rest of this book.

The postmodernist challenge

The currently fashionable theoretical terrain for debating these rather longstanding questions about the character of history is that of postmodernism, which has shifted attention to the relations between history and literature. A growing sense of unease with both the positivist and the Marxist traditions led many historians in the 1970s to pay greater attention to issues of language, culture, and 'discourse'. But this was no mere shift of subject matter or substantive area of interest, as had been the case with many previously heralded 'new approaches', such as labour history, economic history, women's history, social history, the history of everyday life. Rather, it posed a fundamental challenge to the very possibility of doing history at all – at least in the versions which had predominated, across a wide range of areas of historical inquiry, for the preceding two centuries. It was premised on quite different notions both of 'knowledge' and of ontology, or modes of being in the world. As David Harvey puts it, 'fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal and "totalising" discourses (to use the favoured phrase) are the hallmark of postmodernist thought . . . [and] a rejection of "metanarratives" (large-scale theoretical interpretations purportedly of universal application).'[5] This shift inaugurated – or was accompanied by – a widespread scepticism about being able to know and/or say anything about the real past which was not in some sense fictional.[6]

There is a very widespread view that history is about real people and real events, which really happened, and from the surviving traces of which a relatively accurate account can be constructed. This is without doubt the most prevalent view among lay people, who read history books, go to museums, look at exhibitions, watch documentaries, in the faith that they can rely on the professionals to present to them some approach to an accurate picture of the past 'as it really was'. It is also a view which embodies a belief in the possibility of progress, of cumulative advances in knowledge, as professional research tells us more about things which we only imperfectly knew about or understood before. It places faith in the professional expertise, hard work and skills of historians to pursue the empirical quest and present the results with integrity. And it is precisely this faith

which has been challenged head-on by postmodernists. So, whatever one makes of some of their more abstruse formulations and ontological claims, it is important to attain some clarity about what precisely they are saying and whether or not it makes sense. If it does, the enterprise of historical investigation cannot deliver what most people, particularly lay consumers, think it can; if postmodernist claims do not make sense, then we need an explicit articulation of where precisely postmodernists have gone wrong.

On some views, postmodernism is less a theoretical position than an inescapable contemporary condition. To take the example of one vocal exponent (following Lyotard's notion of the 'postmodern condition'), in Keith Jenkins' view, whether we like it or not, we have no choice: 'Today we live within the general condition of *postmodernity*. We do not have a choice about this. For postmodernity is not an "ideology" or a position we can choose to subscribe to or not; postmodernity is precisely our condition: it is our fate.'[7] On Jenkins' view, our only choice appears to lie in whether we celebrate and enjoy our condition, or grumble, mutter, and ineffectually seek to resist the inevitable. But not all would share this analysis of our age and our intellectual condition. Others (including myself) might prefer to conceive of postmodernism as a claim – or, rather, a loose set of only partially related and seriously contested claims – rather than a *fait accompli*. I should emphasise – and the reader should take it as given throughout – that a lot more goes under the amorphous label of postmodernism than is relevant in this context: in an architectural and design context, for example, postmodernism has been defined as 'anti-Bauhaus'.

My concern here, in any event, is not to define postmodernism as such (a definitional game which would be both of little import and doomed to disintegrate in qualifications), but rather to focus on certain questions posed by self-proclaimed postmodernists which are of direct relevance to the practice of history. In particular, there seem to me to be two separate issues raised under the banner of postmodernist approaches to history, which do not necessarily always go together. One has to do with the possibility – or otherwise – of unmediated access to a real past; the other has to do with what is done with the surviving traces (whether deemed to be 'texts', or considered as essentially unproblematic 'events' or 'facts') of that past in the present. The focus of postmodernist critiques of 'traditional' history varies according to whether they are more concerned with the former or the latter, or, in the more radical versions, both.

There are some rather extreme proponents of the 'all the world's a text' variety – or, to use Derrida's now popular formula in French, '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' – who suggest that all we have in history is a series of constructed texts commenting on constructed texts commenting on constructed texts, in a seemingly endless circle of constructed meanings which cannot be directly assessed against an unmediated 'real' past. The past is on this view simply not available as an objective criterion for adjudicating among discourses.

F. R. Ankersmit, for example, has presented this view. He disputes that one can go back to a still extant written text from the past – he uses the example of

Thomas Hobbes – to adjudicate among competing interpretations of that written text, which is actually still available to us in the present (in a way in which actions, emotions, personalities, relationships, indubitably are not): he states with direct reference to the example of Hobbes that 'we no longer have any texts, any past, but just interpretations of them'.[8] The situation is even worse with respect to comparisons of different interpretations of the same historical topic; in Ankersmit's view, there is simply no way of appealing to some independent court of evidence, the past:

> There is no past that is given to us and to which we could compare these two or more texts [competing interpretations of the same topic] in order to find out which of them does correspond to the past and which does not . . . [T]he past as the complex referent of the historical text as a whole has no role to play in historical debate . . .[!] Texts are all we have and we can only compare texts with texts . . . [W]e can never test our conclusions by comparing the elected text with 'the past' itself . . . [N]or is such reference [to 'the past'] required from the point of view of historical debate.[9]

On this view, history acts not as a window on, but rather as an artistic substitute for, the past which it seeks to replace. The criterion for judging any historical account is thus not whether it is faithful to some real past, but whether one likes it or not – on political or aesthetic grounds, rather than the criteria of accuracy or explanatory power favoured by more empiricist historians. Keith Jenkins – at least in his very widely read incarnation of the 1990s – acts as a useful secondary exponent of postmodernist views developed by Ankersmit and others. Jenkins tells us that postmodernism entails:

> an understanding of the past which asserts that such an understanding is always positioned, is always fabricated, is always self-referencing and is never true beyond peradventure; that history has no intrinsic meaning, that *there is no way of privileging one variant over another by neutral criteria* and which sees histories located at the centre, or on the margins, not necessarily by virtue of their historiographical rigour and/or sophistication – for brilliant histories can be variously marginalised – but by their relationship to those that have the power to put them there.[10]

Historians, on Jenkins' view, have always only been able to engage in some form of intertextuality; what he finds suspicious are the imputed motives for resistance to acknowledging that this is what historians do and always have done.[11] (Jenkins does not consider the possibility that his own views, which he appears to hold with more passionate conviction than clarity of argument, might legitimately be challenged.) The only arbiters here of 'truth' appear to be personal and political sympathies.

These are views plucked from the more extreme end of the spectrum, denying any kind of access to knowledge of the past 'as it really was' (to return to Ranke's useful phrase). There are also less extreme versions of this emphasis on textualism. Patrick Joyce, to take a relatively rare example of one who not only preaches but also seeks to practise postmodernist history, does not dispute the reality of a past. However, that past is only present to us in a discursive, textual form:

> At one level we may of course posit a dualism between the 'real' . . . and representations of it. The 'real' can be said to exist independently of our representations of it, and to affect those representations [note the concession, unlike Ankersmit and Jenkins!]. But this effect is always discursive, and it must be insisted that history is never present to us in anything but a discursive form, here taking 'discursive', of course, to denote all forms of communication, including those beyond the verbal alone . . .
>
> The major advance of 'postmodernism' needs to be registered by historians: namely that the events, structures and processes of the past are indistinguishable from the forms of documentary representation, the conceptual and political appropriations, and the historical discourses that construct them . . . There is no overarching coherence evident . . . Gone . . . are the grand narratives that historicised the notion of social totality.[12]

The emphasis here is on the discursive, in the sense of pre-interpreted, character of all social reality. There can be no access to any putative 'past as such'.

There is another version of postmodernism, particularly associated with Hayden White, which focusses less on the character of the surviving traces of the past (as in the Joyce example just quoted) than on what the historian does with these traces in the present. Many people whom one might call postmodernists do *not* deny that the past was real, or that real evidence has survived from it.[13] In that sense, they do not disagree with the empiricists, who often weaken their case by punching an extremist straw man. (It might also be noted in passing that, while Hayden White's classic text on *Metahistory* of 1973 is often seen to have heralded the advent of postmodernism in history,[14] the question of what constitutes a historical 'fact', and how it is plucked from the past and actively woven into a constructed story in the present, is far from new: even Carr and Elton batted this particular topic about.[15]) In its postmodernist incarnation, this view claims that while individual statements may be true (or false), the way the historian shapes them into a coherent interpretation or representation is a product of the present, imposed in an almost infinite variety of possible ways on the traces of the past. What Hayden White and his followers have done is thus to focus less on the sources themselves than on the uses the historian makes of them when making a selection from them and imposing a constructed account in re-presenting them: it is the extraordinary lability and range of interpretations possible in the mode of

representation, rather than problems concerned with evidence from the maelstrom of an undisputed past *reality*, which is the prime focus of their concern.

Hayden White has highlighted what appears to him to be the devastating revelation that stories are not given in the wealth of material that has survived from the past. The past did not unfold as narrative; this has to be superimposed on it, to give it coherence and meaning, in retrospect. Thus the form which historians impose in reconstructing and representing the past is itself essentially also a content. Hayden White puts it thus: the 'traditional view' is that

> what distinguishes 'historical' from 'fictional' stories is first and foremost their content, rather than their form. The content of historical stories is real events, events that really happened, rather than imaginary events, events invented by the narrator. This implies that the form in which historical events present themselves to a prospective narrator is found rather than constructed . . . The story told is a mimesis of the story lived in some region of historical reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation, it is considered to be a truthful account thereof.[16]

Hayden White argues that:

> this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and only can be imaginary.[17]

There are variations in the ways in which this imposition of narrative on selected events from the past is conceived, and some of Hayden White's own analyses seem unduly symmetrical and arbitrary (unlike the more traditional historians' penchant for the number three – causes, course and consequences; beginning, middle, end – White has a proclivity for dividing things into four). The problem here is less the inaccessibility of a real past than the general implication that there are a wide, if not quite infinite, variety of ways in which the 'same' past can be differently recounted, as different 'emplotments' are imposed on historical material, leading to a potentially dizzying relativism in which it is hard to discern any rational criteria for prioritising any one interpretation or representation over another. (Hayden White has in fact subsequently conceded that certain emplotments of the Holocaust – for example, as comedy – are simply not acceptable; and while Roberto Benigni's often very humorous film, *Life is Beautiful*, may at first blush appear to contradict this, on further reflection it does not constitute 'comedy' in the classical definition.)[18] This is little different, in effect, from Ankersmit's notion of 'narrative substances' or historical concepts (such as 'the Cold War') which are imposed on, rather than given in, the past.[19]

On this view – and not without reason – history has begun to collapse towards literature, as theorists have adopted some of the tenets and concepts of literary

criticism to analyse the writing of history, and been struck more by similarities than by differences. As we shall see further in later chapters, scholars such as Hans Kellner have developed more fully the notion that history cannot be about 'getting the story straight', because there is simply no story 'out there' to be told.[20] Others, such as Robert Berkhofer, have deeply unsettled any view of history as we traditionally have known it, whether as writers or readers, without yet being able to present any stable or clearly defined alternative.[21]

There is clearly a problem for notions of historical knowledge if these views are accepted. As three American commentators, Appleby, Hunt and Jacobs, have put it, the question for the postmodernist is:

> how does the historian as author construct his or her text, how is the illusion of authenticity produced, what creates a sense of truthfulness to the facts and a warranty of closeness to past reality (or the 'truth-effect' as it is sometimes called)? The implication is that the historian does not in fact capture the past in fruitful fashion but rather, like the novelist, gives the appearance of doing so.[22]

They also note that the term itself is uneasy: 'post-' is not a declaration of what it *is*, but rather what it is *against*, what it *comes after* but does not securely replace. To quote Appleby, Hunt and Jacobs again:

> At the heart of modernity is the notion of the freely acting, freely knowing individual whose experiments can penetrate the secrets of nature and whose work with other individuals can make a new and better world.
>
> Postmodernists' primary goal has been to challenge convictions about the objectivity of knowledge and the stability of language . . . Postmodernism renders problematic the belief in progress, the modern periodisation of history, and the individual as knower and doer.[23]

This is rather curiously linked to a degree of what might be called perspectival pluralism. Since an almost infinite number of stories can be told about (or constructed from, or imposed upon) the 'same' past, from an almost infinite variety of perspectives, and since there is no means of access to the 'real' past beyond texts or discourses about it, there is no metatheoretical means of adjudicating between stories. So what at first sight appears to be a principled (and arguably 'politically correct') support of pluralism, of 'multi-culturalism', of telling stories from the point of view of 'the Other' (women, the underdog, the marginalised) rather than only the victors of history, reveals itself in the end to be extraordinarily a-political: one can hardly take up cudgels on behalf of a cause or an interpretation which is as good or as bad, as true or as mythical, as any other. It is also, ultimately, intellectually self-contradictory: when criteria for adjudicating between better and worse accounts, adequate and less adequate interpretations,

dissolve, then why should one prioritise a postmodernist version over any other? Why should those who dispute the very notion of truth be deemed themselves to be uttering the truth on the nature of knowledge? Again, political and moral affinities appear to be the only arbiter.

These are complex issues, and there have been many attempts to engage with the multiple challenges to notions of history posed by postmodernism. Scholars across Europe, North America and Australia (and probably elsewhere in literatures of which I am unaware) have provided responses either expanding on or reacting to a multiplicity of points.[24] Some have been openly combative, as in Gertrude Himmelfarb's spirited defence of 'the proposition that there are such things as truth and reality and that there is a connection between them'.[25] Some have sought to deal in detail with particular philosophical points taken separately, as in specialised debates over issues of epistemology, narrative and evidence.[26] Some have tried to incorporate at least an account of postmodernism into their characterisation of approaches to history, as in a number of new or recently reissued revised editions of textbooks on the nature of history.[27] Without trying to summarise what is now a large literature, it is worth making a few general points about some of the key protagonists and the general thrust of recent debates. In particular, it is worth attempting, perhaps, to characterise the often merely implicit empiricism of many of those who feel most under attack by postmodernists.

The empiricist target

The empiricist view of most practising historians is not always naïve, and is certainly a little more differentiated than the widespread lay faith in the truth of professional historical representations.[28] Very often, as we shall see for example with respect to sources and narrative, postmodernists are tilting at windmills; occasionally, however, their targets strike back with explicit defences of empiricist or pragmatic approaches. As useful straw men for postmodernists, Arthur Marwick and Geoffrey Elton represent rather combative spokespersons for a 'just-get-on-with-the-job' view of history.[29] While the ebullient tone (and on occasion near libellous comments) of some of Elton's and Marwick's writings may not be widely appreciated, many practising historians probably broadly agree with the general thrust of this pragmatic, empiricist approach. Even those who do believe in the importance of explicit theoretical debate, and whose sympathies arguably lie closer to E. H. Carr than to Elton, still share certain fundamental premises about the possibility of an empirically based history.[30]

Roughly, the view in this very wide camp (which encompasses an extremely broad range of methodological approaches and fields of research) runs as follows. The past can, it is freely admitted, never be 'really known': what we know of it is a reconstruction based on its traces, on evidence which has survived to the present. And that evidence is not imaginary, not merely a figment of a discourse: it is real. We have a sense of a past that really happened, and we have a simple desire

to know more about it; so we look for appropriate traces to piece together a fuller picture, a more rounded story. Of course nothing is simply given: specific questions have to be explicitly formulated by the historian and posed to the sources; archives have to be exhaustively and honestly scoured, sources interpreted with a critical eye, compared with other sources, evaluated in the light of the contexts of production, intended effect and audience, and so on. But, to repeat: the sources are real traces, they constitute real evidence of a real past. New evidence will shed new light, and better, 'revisionist' accounts can be developed. History is thus cumulative: we get to know more and more about the past. The professional task for this group is in one sense simple: we get into the archives and libraries, and get on with the job. In another sense, however, this group recognises that historical research requires considerable skills, which can be taught and learnt, as well as acquired with experience; history is thus a professional discipline which requires appropriate training in skills and methods. And it is also a discipline which requires imagination, creativity, engagement. Geoffrey Elton often serves as a straw man to be castigated without re-reading; nevertheless, even Elton makes quite sensible remarks on the active character of historical writing, the ways in which the historian shapes the material, and the need for empathy and engagement rather than impersonality. In this area, Elton does not provide a good example for critiques of history as an intrinsically flawed attempt at mimetic representation.[31]

Cumulatively this sort of approach generally amounts to the view which Hayden White has dubbed the 'craft notion of historical studies . . . [held by those] who view narrative as a perfectly respectable way of "doing" history . . . or "practising" it'. Hayden White comments that 'this group does not so much represent a theoretical position as incarnate a traditional attitude of eclecticism in historical studies – an eclecticism that is a manifestation of a certain suspicion of theory itself as an impediment to the proper practice of historical inquiry, conceived as empirical inquiry'.[32] It does seem to be the case that many – but far from all – adherents of this general approach dislike 'theory' in the grand sense. Many, though far from all, tend to be explicitly anti-Marxist, and also somewhat hostile to the writings of other explicitly theoretical approaches, particularly the work of those who do not appear to have dirtied their hands in the archives. Quite apart from their political standpoint, Marxists are accused of trying to constrain all of reality into a predetermined procrustean bed, irrespective of mountains of evidence to the contrary. Not only Marxists come in for criticism: Marwick manages to conflate Marxism, structuralism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism, with a few swipes at other manifestations of 'metaphysical' approaches along the way; Windschuttle includes a range of social theorists as well as literary critics in his sights; Elton is particularly irritated by what he castigates as 'sociological' approaches. 'Theory' is generally seen as an extraneous impediment to real work, and certainly 'not what Real Historians do'. Additionally, for many of this sort of a- or anti-theoretical empiricist, the values of the historian can and should only enter into the picture in so far as individuals have

particular personal viewpoints, which they would be well advised to declare, and thus supposedly neutralise, at the outset.

Not all non-postmodernist historians can be bracketed under the rather oversimplified ideal type postulated by postmodernist critiques. Hayden White himself, in the essay just cited, in fact distinguishes five different groups with respect to views on narrative: in addition to the 'craft' protagonists, he lists the 'Anglo-American analytical philosophers', the 'social-scientifically oriented historians', the 'semiologically oriented literary theorists', and 'certain hermeneutically oriented philosophers'; by no stretch of the imagination could any of the latter four be accused of theoretical naïvety.[33] The straw man version of naïve empiricism critiqued by postmodernists fails entirely, for example, to cope with a Lawrence Stone or a Richard J. Evans, both of whom combine belief in the possibility of investigating a real past, and evaluating real evidence, with an explicit, theoretically informed conceptual apparatus.[34]

There are many historical approaches which do *not* proceed by the narrative mode of 'telling the story'. Part of the problem with postmodernist attacks on their particular construction of 'naïve empiricism' is that they have tended to focus on just one particular version of 'doing history', that of the allegedly theoretically innocent narrative form, at the expense of a wider engagement with alternative, often theoretically far more sophisticated, approaches. However, in terms of current debates there does tend to be an undue polarisation and what might be called (to readapt a famous term of Hexter deriving from earlier debates on the English gentry) a 'lumping' of positions which are not intrinsically, logically, connected to one another. Hence narrative history has often slipped forward to a position of standing in for all of a-theoretical empiricist history. In fact, however, as we shall see, by no means all non-postmodernist history adopts the narrative mode of representation; and, more importantly, not even the most dogged empiricist of any persuasion can evade theoretical issues.

There are also unresolved problems to do with the political character or otherwise of history. Most historians lying on what one might roughly call the 'empiricist' side of the divide broadly hold to some notion of 'value-freedom', if only in the unexamined sense that they believe in history as an honest attempt to find out 'what really happened', whether one likes the answer or not. Postmodernists of various shades have – to different degrees – fundamentally challenged such a notion of truth, asserting that it is simply a situated truth for those who hold positions of dominance and influence, and that, at the level of 'discourse', there is an intrinsic link between power and what is characterised as a 'knowledge'. Thus, Foucault's linking of knowledge and power is central for postmodernists who focus on the political situatedness of a (collective) 'discourse' rather than on the work of individual scholars; by contrast, most 'traditional' historians hold to some notion of value neutrality or 'objectivity' in a more individualist sense.[35] When Marwick talks of 'society's need to understand particular aspects of the human past', a need which is to be met by its 'professionals', he easily lays himself open to the charge of failing even to see, let alone

seriously address, the questions of what is 'society', who defines the 'need', who identifies which 'particular aspects' are worthy of exploration – to which the answer of a Keith Jenkins is, of course, those in a position of economic and political power to determine whose stories get told and whose get marginalised or suppressed.[36] Yet even those who, like Appleby, Hunt and Jacobs, or more recently Jordanova, wish to rescue some more sophisticated notion of 'telling the truth', have not developed adequate principles for adjudicating among a multiplicity of competing accounts of the same phenomenon. Unlike Ankersmit, they do believe in an appeal to the past; but their own accounts provide so many alternative pasts, from multiple perspectives, that they appear to leave no space for any neutral court of arbitration where these accounts conflict.

Not all historians or those interested in their products have paid much, if any, explicit attention to the philosophical challenges of the postmodernists, preferring to dismiss them as 'fashionable nonsense'.[37] It would probably be fair to say that by far the most widespread response has been that of sheer lack of interest in postmodernist scepticism. Probably most practising historians – whatever their specific, substantive area of study – adopt a rather pragmatic approach to digging up and re-presenting the past. They either take for granted, or bracket out, the questions raised by the sheer diversity of approaches and philosophical doubts about the nature of history. They assume that attention is most profitably focussed on analysis of substantive problems with respect to particular periods or topics in the past. There is widespread faith among practising historians in the possibility of progress: in providing ever more adequate answers to historical questions through the discovery of new evidence and/or the application of new techniques. But it seems to me that there is a wider need to be more explicit about theoretical issues in history: that repeated appeals to 'reality' and 'the facts' are not sufficient to deal either with the radical doubts of the philosophical sceptics, or with the challenges posed by the diversity of historical approaches outlined above.

Partial history: the issues and the argument

My purpose here has not been to summarise the development of these debates in detail, but merely to introduce some of the key themes and issues prevalent in the current theoretical malaise of many western historians.[38] We shall deal in detail with some of these as they arise in the chapters which follow. I do not want the structure of the argument that follows to be determined by the ways in which the debates over postmodernism (or indeed any particular 'isms') have developed. I want rather to focus on key issues which I think all historians must face. In addressing these central issues, I believe a way can be found both to circumnavigate some of the real naïveties of those empiricists who deny the postmodernist case any credibility, and at the same time to salvage a view of history which does accord it a degree of truth value, a status apart from fantasy and myth.[39]

Let me then briefly disentangle some of the key points or questions which it seems to me are at issue in these debates, and which underlie the chapters which follow.

1. History as a window on, or substitute for, the past

Is history deemed to be a transparent or reflective means (metaphors vary – window, mirror and magnifying glass have all been popular) through which one can glimpse at least some elements of the 'real' past, however imperfectly; or is history rather an opaque product purely of the present, to 'substitute for' or 'replace' a past which can only be 'constructed', not 'reconstructed'? Put fundamentally: Is past reality – which by definition has gone forever – in principle in some way 'accessible' through surviving traces, or not?

2. Historical pictures: trues stories or fictive constructs?

Is there an imposition or invention of a narrative in the present, or do historians genuinely reconstruct stories which are clearly rooted, if not actually 'already existent', in the traces of the past, and which can be rationally revised in the light of new traces? What are the implications of the difference between individual 'statements' – which may be true or false – and the pictures of wholes which are constructed by historians (White's 'emplotments', Ankersmit's 'narrative substances')? In short: how do tales told in the present relate to the complex realities of the past?

3. The role of political and moral values

What roles do political and moral sympathies and standpoints play in the production, evaluation and reception of historical accounts? If they are not recognised as legitimate arbiters among competing accounts of the same historical phenomenon, what theoretical arguments can be deployed to sustain some notion of objectivity or value-freedom – or should this concept be jettisoned?

Let me briefly preview my own argument in the light of these questions. Most current postmodernist and empiricist positions would now have in common the premise that historical research is no longer (if it ever was) about the pursuit of one single true master narrative. Despite major differences among both postmodernists and many of those seeking to resist their challenge (for example, Himmelfarb, or rather differently, Appleby, Jacobs and Hunt in the United States; Windschuttle in Australia; Ludmilla Jordanova, Richard J. Evans, and Arthur Marwick in Great Britain), they also have in common a difficulty with addressing the problem of multiple competing narratives, to which they then provide different answers. For most postmodernists, all historical narratives are equally plausible, or equally untrue, or characterised by what Hayden White

rather inelegantly but usefully terms 'nondisconfirmability'; the criteria for choice among competing historical accounts then rest not so much on some measure of verisimilitude or measurement against an (inaccessible) past, but rather on contemporary aesthetic, moral or political grounds. Those historians who have sought to critique postmodernism have generally dealt quite well with certain difficulties and inconsistencies in the postmodernist position (as in Richard Evans' lampooning), and have then simply reiterated an essentially empiricist, if theoretically sophisticated, belief in the accessibility of traces of the past, or empirical evidence, which will allow for a source-based reconstruction of the past. They have on the whole failed adequately to address the more difficult question of adjudication among competing accounts, often retreating to essentially rather fuzzy notions of 'historical multi-culturalism' or 'let a thousand flowers bloom'. They have tended to conceive the issues as related to the perspectives and values of individual historians, rather than as one of competing collective historical traditions (or what I shall define in the next chapter as paradigms or paradigm candidates). The current state of the debate is overly polarised, often premised on false dichotomies, and unduly focussed on the background and values of the individual historian rather than on the language communities of groups of historians working in particular traditions.

This book seeks to shift attention rather to the more collective level of competing paradigms of historical inquiry. I intend to argue (first in partial agreement and then in partial disagreement with the various positions outlined above) that:

1. Along with postmodernists, we can now agree that there is no single true master narrative or overarching metanarrative.
2. We can also agree that there can in principle be an infinite number of 'partial narratives', constructed as answers to particular questions phrased in specific ways about selected aspects of the past.
3. However, against the postmodernist view, I shall argue that not all candidates for 'partial narratives' are equally acceptable, illuminating or true; it is therefore not merely a matter of the personal, aesthetic, moral or political preferences of an individual historian, nor of the dominant politics and/or 'discourses' of the day, as to which accounts are prioritised and which marginalised.
4. In partial agreement with the empiricist view, I shall agree that we can in principle develop and apply mutually agreed criteria for 'disconfirming' particular partial accounts (or parts thereof), using appropriately interpreted empirical evidence of a variety of sorts.
5. However, against naïve empiricism I shall argue that we cannot do without a degree of theoretical sophistication and debate. 'Empirical evidence' can only be captured through certain conceptual nets which must themselves be the object of analysis and critique.
6. We can in principle – at least, within the very broad compass of 'western'

notions of scholarship – develop and apply mutually agreed criteria for evaluating different accounts against each other, in terms of, for example:
– range, comprehensiveness and interpretation of sources, netted within an appropriate conceptual framework which must itself be open in principle to critique and revision;
– capacity to account for (= satisfy curiosity about) a particular *explanandum* in the light of our existing contextual knowledge and particular interests;
– presentation and accessibility of historical accounts for a range of purposes to different audiences in the present.

7 Where there are discrepancies and incompatibilities between competing partial accounts, we can be explicit about criteria for exploring further the extent to which differences can be mutually resolved, or for identifying the metatheoretical, metahistorical (and possibly metaphysical) assumptions in which bedrock disagreements will persist.

In other words, I shall seek to show, against certain postmodernist positions, that historical accounts are not simply narratives which are more or less arbitrarily imposed on (rather than found in or constructed from) selected traces of the past (whether this is deemed to be knowable or not), and are then presented in a form and style designed to achieve some sort of 'reality effect'. Against some empiricist positions, I shall argue that there are theoretical and conceptual choices which filter what historians working within different traditions of inquiry will look for by way of 'empirical evidence', which is not such a simple matter as many discussions of 'source criticism' might suggest. I shall also suggest some of the other ways in which historical consciousness and knowledge is informed not only by the traces of the past but also by the concerns of the present.

In this way it is possible to attain greater clarity about the bases for disagreements between different historical accounts; to clarify ways in which different theoretical and conceptual frameworks and associated substantive accounts can be operationalised, tested, amended, or discarded; and/or to identify the respects in which they are rooted in essentially untestable propositions on which they may be accepted or rejected for metatheoretical, rather than substantive historical reasons. Thus, rather than wafting into vague notions of multiple, simultaneous, competing perspectives among which one can only choose on grounds of personal preferences of one sort or another, or (worse) arguing the impossibility of any real sort of historical knowledge at all, it may be possible to develop a theoretically grounded notion of 'progress' in historical understanding.

3

HISTORICAL PARADIGMS AND THEORETICAL TRADITIONS

In 1962, Thomas Kuhn caused quite a stir with the publication of his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.[1] This overturned the previously held and very widespread view that the natural sciences were simple, cumulative enterprises, success stories of straightforward advance in which each generation of scientists built on the achievements of the previous one. Instead, Kuhn argued, key scientific breakthroughs took place when one world view – one way of seeing, describing and explaining the world – was radically rejected and replaced by a completely different world view, or, in a more specific sense, a 'paradigm'. Thus, the flat earth was replaced by a round earth; the sun circling the earth was replaced by the earth circling the sun; Newton was replaced by Einstein.

Each world view, or paradigm, entailed a particular set of assumptions about the nature of the world, a corresponding set of analytical concepts for describing the world, and a number of hypotheses purporting to explain how the world worked. With the institutionalisation of western science, one specific paradigm would become dominant: the one taught and researched within the establishment. 'Mature science' – in the sense of the western natural sciences – was supposedly distinguishable from would-be sciences, or intellectual candidates for scientific status (such as the social sciences) by the predominance of one specific paradigm at any given time.

Within any given paradigm, there would be features which remained unexplained: 'puzzles'. 'Normal' scientific activity within the paradigm was thus one of 'puzzle-solving': filling in the gaps, completing the circle, nibbling away at the edges. All of this was 'cumulative' within the specific paradigm, and constituted in some sense 'advances in scientific knowledge'. But major advances took place not through 'the discovery of new facts' facilitated by this puzzle-solving activity, but rather when a revolutionary change in world view took place: when the dominant paradigm was challenged, and ultimately overthrown, by an alternative, completely different and mutually contradictory, way of seeing things – a *Gestalt* switch. The classic example of this was the replacement of Newtonian physics with Einstein's theory of relativity.

Kuhn's controversial thesis was by no means universally accepted, even as an account of the recent history of western science, let alone in its implications for

6

LOOKING FOR CLUES

The question of evidence

In Salem, New England, in 1692, nineteen individuals were hanged and one was pressed to death for witchcraft; over one hundred others were tried and imprisoned for suspected witchcraft. According to Increase Mather, the then President of Harvard College, that renowned seat of learning in the New World, the 'preternatural' actions of the Devil were clearly to be seen in the evidence of the bite marks, pinching, bruising, fits, twisting, bodily contortions and strange half-closed eyes of the victims, as well as the clear evidence of the existence of the witches' Familiars and Black Men.[1] Some three centuries later, a medical framework of interpretation appears more plausible: far from being evidence, as Increase Mather argued, of the 'preternatural' work of the Devil, the fits, pinching and pricking sensations, swollen throats, hallucinations and other afflictions of the alleged victims of witchcraft are interpreted by one late twentieth-century scholar as the symptoms of *encephelitis lethargica*, an epidemic of which also had swept Europe in the period 1916–30 with patients displaying very similar symptoms.[2] Similarly, while in seventeenth-century England there were earnest discussions of precisely what physical 'proofs' there might be of having entered a pact with the Devil, by the mid-nineteenth century such 'proofs' were no longer as convincing, and rather more 'naturalistic' explanations appeared more plausible in accounting for precisely the same 'evidence'. As Charles Upham put it in 1867:

> It was believed that the Devil affixed his mark to the bodies of those in alliance with him, and that the point where his mark was made became callous and dead . . . [I]f, as might have been expected, particularly in aged persons, any spot could be found insensible to torture [usually pricking with a pin by a member of the jury – MF], or any excrescence, induration or fixed discoloration, it was looked upon as visible evidence and demonstration of guilt.[3]

There is obviously enormous scope for interpreting the 'same' evidence very differently, depending on one's broader framework of interpretation.

One might think from this example that paradigms are extremely broad, covering a wide spectrum of background assumptions characteristic of a particular

time and place. In some respects of course this is true, although at least two qualifications are needed. First, such agreement on background assumptions varies with the subject matter of investigation. Most – probably all – late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century western (Anglo-American?) historians are highly unlikely to believe in the reality of witchcraft or magic. They will thus more or less all treat participants' perceptions (witchcraft accusations and so on) as requiring explanation in terms of something other than those of contemporaries. However, if the topic were to do with persisting religious traditions rather than discredited magical beliefs, the reality or otherwise of the existence of God, for example, might simply be bracketed out of a historical account, such that historians of various religious faiths or none could in principle agree on an explanation of, say, the role of Puritanism in early seventeenth-century England. However, here enters the second qualification. Even within a broad paradigm 'of the age', as in the case of witchcraft, there are specific paradigms which (often only implicitly) introduce enormous scope for looking at the 'evidence' very differently, depending on one's theoretical framework – functionalist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and so on.

The question of evidence as intermediary between past facts and present understandings is thus not as simple as it may sometimes appear; and the difficulties are not all related to methodological problems of 'source criticism', on the one hand, or theoretical problems premised on the assumption of indeterminate multiple readings of a 'discourse', on the other. It seems to me that the real question hinges on the extent to which conceptually netted (and hence theoretically contaminated) evidence can be used not merely to 'fill in gaps' within any one body of knowledge, but also to mediate between, qualify and amend a range of different conceptual and theoretical frameworks or paradigms of inquiry. This is a question which is inadequately addressed in the existing theoretical literature on the nature of history.

There are a number of issues to be addressed in this chapter. First we need to cast a look at the nature of 'sources' and at debates over their evaluation and interpretation. We will then turn to questions concerning the relations between sources, concepts, theories, and more general images of the past. While many practising historians develop great expertise in the relevant sources for any given field, and lay great emphasis on the discovery of new sources as a means of advancement of historical understanding, postmodernist philosophers of history often argue that there is some form of illicit leap from the individual sources, mined for factual evidence, to the wider images of a historical totality presented by the historian. Despite the fact that, as we have seen, there can be no 'theory-neutral data language', and that 'evidence' can be gathered only within the context of wider sets of assumptions and associated conceptual frameworks, I shall argue that the latter are not completely 'water-tight', impermeable, totally resistant to refinement and change in principle (although the personal commitments of some historians associated with certain approaches may be so in practice). Analysis of key historical controversies reveals that there are good

reasons for thinking we can develop enhanced, wider and more detailed knowledge of certain areas of investigation, and produce explanatory and interpretive accounts which are more congruent with the available evidence than previous approaches may have been. Thus, while cautioning against any naïve inductive empiricism (and one would be hard put to find many practising historians willing to admit to being guilty of this), I argue against the postmodernist temptation, following Roland Barthes, to see the sources as primarily serving the purpose of lending an air of verisimilitude to a would-be realist piece of historical fiction.[4]

The source of all wisdom?

'Source criticism' plays a major role in most accounts of 'historical method', or even 'theory' in historical research. Among German academics, indeed, *Quellenkritik* holds an almost sacred place. It is of course part of the most basic historical training in secondary and higher education (even ensconced in the British secondary school National Curriculum for history for 11- to 14-year-olds, who may in practice end up with more 'skill' in source criticism than factual knowledge about any given period or topic). A primary focus on the sources is summarised by Dominick LaCapra in what he calls 'the documentary model', in which 'the historical imagination is limited to plausibly filling gaps in the record, and "throwing new light" on a phenomenon requires the discovery of hitherto unknown information . . . Indeed, all sources tend to be treated in narrowly documentary terms, that is, in terms of factual or referential propositions that may be derived from them to provide information about specific times and places'.[5] Another rather denigratory term for this kind of approach is what is often called 'archive positivism'. Before focussing on criticisms, we need to be aware that not all practising historians are quite as naïve in their practice as may be made out by postmodernist critics.

First of all, it has to be said that there is extraordinarily widespread agreement that sources are the crucial bedrock of historical research. Many works on the 'nature of history' pay a great deal of attention to the question of sources. In Geoffrey Elton's view, 'what matters are the sources, that is to say the physical survivals from the events to be studied. And here the first demand of sound historical scholarship must be stressed: it must rest on a broad-fronted attack upon all the relevant material.'[6] Or as John Tosh puts it, embarking on his own account of methodological issues relating to sources: 'Whether the historian's main concern is with re-creation or explanation, with the past for its own sake or for the light it can shed on the present, what he or she can actually achieve is determined in the first instance by the extent and character of the surviving sources. Accordingly, it is with the sources that any account of the historian's work must begin.'[7] Ludmilla Jordanova's work on *History in Practice* similarly provides thoughtful short discussions on points to be aware of in evaluating both sources and historians' uses of sources.[8] For all that he goes on to say in subsequent chapters about the imposition of narrative, even the generally sceptical Neville Morley, in his

highly readable book on *Writing Ancient History*, includes a lucid and intelligent exposition of 'the use and abuse of sources' (particularly when there is a serious paucity of material, as in his example of C. Vibius Postumous).[9] And, despite his wide theoretical reading, Richard J. Evans' characteristically pugnacious encounter with postmodernism essentially comes to rest on the simple assertion that 'The past does speak through the sources, and is recoverable through them.'[10]

But, from whatever quarter they come, such historians are scarcely what could be caricatured as naïve empiricists. There is a quite remarkable degree of 'craft' agreement among most practising historians, whatever their varied theoretical orientations, that certain searching questions must be put to and about the sources. In view of extensive discussions elsewhere, such questions may be summarised fairly briefly here.

Clearly, the first set of issues must relate to the nature of the topic for investigation, the questions being asked, and thus the overall research design. One of the reasons for the proliferation of new areas of historical inquiry in the later twentieth century was that historians became more imaginative about potential sources for topics for which it was previously thought there was insufficient source material, such as the beliefs and culture of the vast masses of the illiterate in the middle ages and early modern period. Once a wider range of sources were addressed (and not merely state papers, the letters of the literate, or published works on religion and philosophy) it became possible – as for example in the pioneering works of Keith Thomas and Peter Burke – to explore in more depth aspects of popular culture and social history which had previously been ignored or deemed inaccessible.[11] Similarly, the lives, beliefs and practices of medieval and early modern women, so long written out of history, could be retrieved by imaginative use of a wide range of sources, as illustrated in the survey by Henrietta Leyser.[12] General accounts or 'national histories' need no longer be limited to the kinds of 'traditional' narratives of kings, queens, and battles lampooned in *1066 and All That*, but could seek, with greater or lesser degrees of success, to evoke the experiences of the poor and dispossessed, to give a sense of place, of fashion and customs, and to insert more into the historical imagination than merely the imputed motives and actions of great historical figures.[13] Family structures, sex, emotions, attitudes towards death, changes in habits and manners, all became the subject of legitimate historical inquiry.[14] Modern and contemporary history was opened up with the use of visual sources such as film and photographic records, and through the active 'production' of sources through oral history techniques – all of which was accompanied by quite sophisticated discussion of the potential, limits and pitfalls of such 'evidence'.[15]

Professional historians are not (always) fools. Anyone interested in exploring some lost aspect of the past will inevitably first pose questions about the general character and availability of relevant sources. What sorts of potential sources were produced at the time – not only written sources such as state papers, court records, memoirs, correspondence, diaries, but also material artefacts, art and

visual culture, architecture, music, field patterns, and so on?[16] What intended and unintended processes of destruction, differential survival and preservation (not least the selective actions of contemporaries and later archivists with respect to potential paper sources, and of 'modernisers' of one sort or another across the ages with respect to material remains) have led to the destruction, neglect, or continued existence of different sorts of evidence? Thus, documents and other pieces of evidence from previous eras have to be evaluated in the light of 'external' considerations, such as the variable 'sedimentation' in some surviving material form of different types of social experience and human activity. Then more 'internal' questions need to be asked. For example, with respect to written sources: who wrote this document, when, for what purpose, with what audience and intended effects in mind? What other contemporary or later sources can be brought to bear in assessing the reliability and validity of any given source? Is it, indeed, of much use in trying to answer the question put? Or does it perhaps lead to further and hitherto unsuspected questions?

Far from uncritical use of the sources as an accurate record of aspects of the past, practising historians are highly aware of at least certain issues concerning what is actively done with the sources, depending on their range, scope and sufficiency. How, in the light of wider knowledge and assumptions, should any given source be 'read'? In what ways are we justified in bridging gaps in the evidence by means of plausible surmise, imaginative re-enactment, intelligent argument on the basis of contextual evidence or 'triangulation'? What is the extent of the gap between what we feel we can reliably 'know' on the basis of the sources available, and the broader arguments we want to explore? How do our background assumptions (whether or not these are justified) and our pre-existing 'knowledge' affect the ways in which we 'read' the sources? When the source base is apparently too vast, what sensible and intelligent sampling procedures can be devised? What, in short, is added by the historian's active manipulation and interpretation of surviving material? If the facts do not actually 'speak for themselves', how much is added by the role of the historian, and what does this imply for the degree of plausibility or provisional character of the resulting account?

The treatment of the sources is very often a major criterion for evaluating a given historian's work. All manner of 'fallacies' in selection, treatment and evaluation of sources are covered in David Hackett Fischer's book on *Historians' Fallacies* (which is revealing subtitled *Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, on the assumption that showing where historians have gone wrong can somehow begin to reveal the contours of how to do it right).[17] In his highly imaginative but somewhat controversial interpretation of the 'Great Cat Massacre', Robert Darnton seeks to explain the story of some Paris apprentices who, in the late 1730s, slaughtered and held a ritual trial and execution on the gallows of several sack-loads of cats, including the favourite cat of their mistress, and not content with the initial hilarity of this escapade, re-enacted it in mime on many subsequent occasions.[18] On some views, Darnton's essay exemplifies the illuminating use of very diverse sources to make intelligible to modern readers an apparently

inexplicable and indeed rebarbative 'practical joke'; on other views, it stretches the imagination beyond permissible bounds, deploying sources from too far afield to sustain the interpretation. In the context of his attempted rebuttal of postmodernist scepticism, Richard J. Evans deploys the example of David Abraham's controversial use of sources, including many self-confessed 'errors' in transcribing or translating or selectively quoting from sources, to sustain a schematic Marxist interpretation of the collapse of the Weimar Republic.[19] In all these cases, critiques are premised on the underlying assumption that there are correct or appropriate procedures for using sources, and that while each particular case must be viewed on its own merits, sometimes the limits of historical practice have been transgressed. In Evans' summary, whatever the differences between historians' methods, 'the vast majority of the historian's efforts are devoted to ascertaining [the facts] and establishing them as firmly as possible in the light of the historical evidence . . . [Footnotes] are not mere rhetorical devices designed to produce a spurious "reality effect".'[20]

Western historical practice is thus not merely remarkably focussed on the sources, to which much explicit methodological discussion is devoted; it is also, through the social processes of education, apprenticeship and professional critiques, remarkably sophisticated in actively sustaining a set of assumptions about appropriate questions and procedures in the comprehensive and critical use of relevant sources. Systems of examination, the award of degrees, the professional peer review of books and articles, the building (or destruction) of reputations, ensure that there is a great deal more sophistication in the critical use of sources than might be assumed from those theorists who critique 'archive positivism'.

The trouble, however, is that a reiteration of the importance of a critical and intelligent evaluation of the sources – and a reminder about the possibility of getting things *wrong* – does not really meet some of the points being made by at least certain postmodernists. There are two points in particular which are often raised, which are not necessarily intrinsically related to each other, and which need to be dealt with in turn. One has to do with post-structuralist notions of indeterminacy of meaning, and a related scepticism about the possibility in principle of any one 'reading' being better than another. The other has to do, not so much with the interpretation or truth value of individual statements made about the past (which may be accepted as possible), but rather with the way they are placed in wider historical pictures or stories (whether narratives in the conventional sense of story-telling, or in the extended sense of placing selected evidence within a larger synthesis, even if presented in, for example, a structural, non-event-orientated style of historical writing). This is rooted in a view that there is no 'past as such', no stories waiting out there to be found rather than constructed. It seems to me that these points can relatively readily be addressed, but not simply by a return to the bald assertion that the truth lies in (properly and sensitively evaluated) sources. Sources may not be the source of all wisdom; but this does not mean that there is no means of constructing any real knowledge about the past that is more than a random collection of individually true facts.

Extra-textual realities? Or, sources do not speak for themselves

Those historians influenced by literary and particularly post-structuralist theory tend to focus not so much (or not only, or not at all) on the 'contextual' types of questions generally addressed by practising historians, but also more directly on alternative 'readings' of a given text itself, paying attention to 'ruptures', 'absences', multiple possible readings. By seeking to 'destabilise' the perspective of viewer/object of perception, they seek to shed new light on 'illusions' and 'reality effects'.[21] Although perhaps taken to extremes in some cases, this insistence on re-evaluating and reinterpreting written and visual sources, being attentive to issues of language or 'discourse' as well as 'factual information', is perhaps not as far from at least some historians' practice as might on occasion be supposed (although it may well be more or less irrelevant to the practices of historians interested in topics such as trade figures or death rates). Many 'traditional' historians would probably concede at least some mileage to the point about openness to a variety of interpretations of utterances, artefacts, and other remains of the past. Although some postmodernists seem to have great difficulty in realising that (probably the vast majority of) practising historians do not simply think the sources 'speak for themselves' or provide an unmediated window on some past reality, in fact historians spend a great deal of time worrying about how to interpret or 'read' particular sources.

The question really is what conclusion one should draw from the fact that humans inhabit webs of signification and significance, and that to enter into past webs of significance requires some 'reading' of what is a 'pre-interpreted reality'. This is scarcely a new problem or insight (depending on the way one looks at it): It was central to the hermeneutic tradition which prioritised interpretation of meanings, and reconstructions of the rules guiding social action. Nor is this sort of inquiry at all incompatible with attempts at causal explanation. The possibility of 'interpretive understanding', which seems to be an essential and intrinsic feature of being a human, social animal capable of highly sophisticated levels of inter-subjective communication should, as Max Weber pointed out, make for easier, not more difficult, explanation of past human actions and events – and by extension, of historical sources. To raise issues about 'discourse analysis' could thus be seen as merely adding a dimension (and some not always very helpful vocabulary) to controversies over specific stages in some forms of historical practice. Perhaps the major question here is whether or not one can see criteria for preferring one interpretation over another, or whether – as post-structuralists would prefer – meaning has to be 'endlessly deferred', with no absolute fixity. Yet even postmodernists tend to write as though what they say is 'right' (and even buttress their arguments with appropriate scholarly footnotes). And while extreme postmodernists such as Keith Jenkins draw the conclusion that all historical knowledge of any 'real' past is therefore impossible – premised on a confused notion of what is 'real' in the human past as being in some way not implicated in

webs of signification? – most postmodernists probably live their lives on the basis of assumptions about the possibility of rational adjudication between competing interpretations of salient aspects of the recent past.

Even inter-subjective communication in the present relies on 'readings' of what others have told us, evaluated in the light of a wide range of criteria beyond the immediate 'source' at hand. Humans simply do not (for the most part) live in an entirely immediate and instantaneous present: they generally act in the light of what they did yesterday, what they plan to do tomorrow, what others around them are doing and thinking – and in the light of their own shifting interpretations of all these things. All 'reality', present or past, entails 'pre-interpreted texts' (as well as a lot more than texts, whatever the discourse used to describe them – such as physical illness, death, severe weather conditions, plane crashes) which are enshrined in wider webs of signification. These may sometimes be difficult to evaluate; but such evaluation is an essential part of human social existence on an everyday basis.

Let me illustrate this with an example from everyday life. Take for example a simple incident: children coming home from school. Even the brief moment of 'present' will – if there is any kind of communication between parent and child on being reunited at the end of the day – involve wider reference to past and future, or 'extended present' (= the 'present as such'?). It will also involve what one might grandiosely want to call the skills of deconstruction. Any parent will instantly concede that an account of the day at school – incidents with teachers, other pupils – can only be 'pre-interpreted' (in the light not least of how their child feels about the others in the story, or about the parent to whom the account is given). The parent's response to this account is 'pre-interpreted' (in the light of how the parent feels about the child, his or her own state of mind at the time, general knowledge of protagonists at school, views on whether any particular incident should be explored further, as might be the case with bullying, or whether the point of the conversation is to 'unwind' and then turn to other pursuits, and so on). 'Texts' about the same day produced at school will have other purposes and formats: for example, incident sheets ready for school reports, disciplinary procedures, even exclusions. A school inspector might have yet another version of the events on this particular day, as might – in quite other words – the teachers on their return to their respective homes. In short: human beings are social, communicative creatures, who daily exercise their capacity to interpret particular 'texts' in the light of wider frameworks of knowledge and purposes. And there is no more any given 'reality as such' for the present than there is for the past. But this does not prevent us from, for example, having fairly rational views on whose account to trust in the case of an accusation of bullying, in the light of other relevant evidence and 'knowledge' (previous behaviour, 'character', the coherence or otherwise of independent witness reports, the existence of bruises or more serious injuries, other physical evidence). And when it matters – say, as a parent of a bullied child – it seems unlikely that postmodernist scruples about the 'pre-interpreted nature of the texts' or the allegedly illicit construction

of a putative 'present as such' would prevent intervention in the light of what is taken as the most adequate or plausible among competing interpretations of events.

There are of course important differences between this example, in which we assume we have particular insider knowledge and personal interests at stake, and the problems involved in investigating a more disembodied or distant past in which we were not (usually) in any real sense active participants – although very often there may indeed be strong personal, political or moral interests at stake. But the problems do not lie in the supposed lack of unmediated access to 'reality', and lack of a 'past as such' against which to assess such 'non-unmediated' interpretations. Rather, they lie in the processes of historical thinking, research, and interpretation – which is precisely why practising historians need to develop highly aware theoretical antennae.

There are, however, some rather different problems involved, which have to do, not with the interpretation of any given 'text' taken on its own, but rather with the ways in which these texts are inserted into a wider framework of interpretation. Take for example a case concerning the relations between the East German Protestant Church and the GDR State Security Police, the Stasi. We know from large numbers of reports by the Stasi that Manfred Stolpe, a senior figure in the East German Protestant Church hierarchy, informed regularly on confidential church matters to the hated secret police.[22] The 'fact' that Stolpe was a Stasi informer or IM (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*) is beyond question; and Stolpe himself has admitted it. This, however, does not tell us very much. Interpretation of individual documents is not the major problem; interpretation in the context of a wider framework of knowledge is what actually proves to be far more contentious.

Any one of these Stasi documents, as such, can be 'read' with more or less sophistication; for example, the regular Stasi language of 'hostile-negative forces' (*feindlich-negative Kräfte*) and the like has to be translated into what I would like for the moment, naïvely, to call 'our own' terminology. (This of course begs a number of questions.) The crucial issue, however, does not so much concern the interpretation or 'translation' of these 'pre-interpreted texts', but rather how the now undoubted fact of Stolpe's activities as an informant to the Stasi should be interpreted in relation to the role of the church in the destabilisation of the GDR in the 1980s. In the context of these wider controversies, should one interpret the significance of a whole stream of such documents as showing that Stolpe was but part of the larger story of relatively successful state and secret police infiltration of the church? Or that Stolpe – as he himself claimed – was actually serving the interests of the church, and protecting individual dissidents from worse fates at the hands of the state authorities by ensuring, by complicity with the Stasi, that dissident pastors would be subjected only to internal church disciplinary procedures? Or should this latter claim be dismissed as purely a post-1989 self-justification? Quite separately from the issue of motives and short-term consequences, how should this be woven into the longer story of the

'gentle revolution'? Did Stolpe's complicity essentially serve to sustain the state, or rather to 'buy time' for oppositional groups in the GDR, such that, when the opportunity came in 1989, they were sufficiently well organised to make an effective protest? How, in short, should individual Stasi documents recording Stolpe's discussions and revelations of confidential internal church affairs to the East German secret police be written in to the larger story of the stabilisation or decline and collapse of the GDR? The answers, of course, lie not only in the documents, but also (*not* rather) in the organising and inquiring mind of the historian.

Here we come perhaps to the key issue raised by postmodernists, which is not successfully answered by an appeal to the sources: the question about the ways in which the stories told by historians relate to individually true facts about the past; or, to use the Hayden White term, the question of emplotment. Far more problematic than the question of indeterminacy of meaning is the question of what is done with sources: the question of their relation to the wider images of the past, and alleged notions of a 'past as such' which is presented by historians.

Sources and the 'past as such': the particles and the whole

We need now to pick up again some of the themes about emplotment and metanarrative introduced in Chapter 4. Hans Kellner provides a nice summary of what is at stake. For traditional historians, the sources are 'those particles of reality from which an image of the past is made':

> While few historians object to the idea that histories are produced, most will assert that the guarantee of adequacy in the historical account is found in the sources. If the sources are available, scrupulously and comprehensively examined according to the rules of evidence, and compiled in good faith by a reasonably mature professional, the resulting work will more or less 'image' reality.[23]

In Kellner's view, however (as we have seen above), 'history is not "about" the past as such, but rather about our ways of creating meanings from the scattered, and profoundly meaning*less* debris we find around us.'[24] Thus bits may be true, but Kellner concurs with Hayden White that the stories are not simply out there, waiting to be found, but rather are products of our cultural conventions. In a slightly different vein but reaching comparable conclusions about the status of history, Ankersmit argues that there is simply no means to access a 'past as such' which could be used as an independent arbiter of any given interpretation. There are simply texts and more texts, with no 'past as a complex referent of the historical text as a whole'.[25]

This argument hinges on a lack of any necessary relationship between the individual facts about aspects of the past, and the coherent narratives formed out of those discrete facts. What is at stake here is the question of where the coherence

of the latter comes from. For Kellner, it is a coherence derived from rhetoric rather than representation:

> There is no story *there* to be gotten straight; any story must arise from the act of contemplation. To understand history in this way is not to reject those works which make claims to realistic representation based upon the authenticity of documentary sources; it is rather to read them in a way that their authenticity is a creation effected with other sources, essentially rhetorical in character.[26]

By contrast, Kellner suggests, 'traditional' historians are mistakenly committed to a set of five assumptions and associated anxieties, relating to: the existence of a 'totality'; of a 'fundamental unity' in written texts; the possibility of coherence rather than simply collation of the 'scattered relics of the past'; the possibility in principle of reaching ever better accounts of 'what actually happened'; and an alleged 'anxiety about closure'.[27]

This contrast is premised on a mistake. Kellner is committing a classic case of a false dichotomy. I need not hold the views imputed to 'traditional' historians as the sole alternative to insistence on rhetoric as the only means of giving (spurious, aesthetically produced) coherence to a historical account. If we accept the argument developed in Chapter 4, about history as puzzle-solving, and about many possible 'end-points' of history depending on questions in the present, we can say that even without any notion of unity, totality, coherence, and so on, we can explore real relationships among elements in the past and give an account of them in the present which is based on more than rhetorical coherence. Conceding that there is no single, unified 'past as such', and that many stories are possible, does not logically entail accepting that there is no way of saying whether or not some stories are more plausible than others, or that all 'readings' may be equally valid.

Clearly there are issues of indeterminacy here; the historian plays an active role in shaping, interpreting, contextualising, and even ultimately 'emplotting' the story: but this story is developed as a series of answers to specific questions, for which there may be better or worse means of testing ideas (or hypotheses, to use a more formal term), discarding those which do not seem to work and rigorously exploring those which seem to fit the evidence better. It is this process of investigation – of looking for and rationally using 'clues' – which allows the development of bridges between lost aspects of the past and diverse accounts in the present. The ultimate 'emplotment' may be presented in a wide variety of ways (on which more in Chapter 8); but it is crucial that the form of eventual representation includes some guide as to how the bridges were constructed, and the types of material from which they were built, so that others can retrace the steps, check for adequacy, and look at alternative routes over the chasm separating the present from the non-revisitable past.

The really crucial issue has to do with what, for want of a better way of

describing it, I shall call the operations of the intermediate layer between the sources, on the one hand, and the historians' account, on the other. This is a layer which is often missed both by postmodernists and by their 'traditional' opponents. While the former seem largely to see some form of almost random emplotment, the latter tend simply to divide historical work into 'research' and 'writing'. I mean, however, something slightly different here. I mean the processes by which the kinds of concepts and categories we have looked at in Chapter 5 are deployed (or, to use social science terminology, 'operationalised'); and the ways in which, if at all, empirical evidence netted in this way can be used to amend and revise both conceptual categories and more general interpretive or explanatory frameworks or specific theories. It seems to me that this intermediate level provides the crucial basis for being able to argue that historians' accounts are neither simple write-ups of 'what the sources say', nor invented images of the past constructed out of 'random debris'.

Simply appealing to the 'facts', as we have seen, is not sufficient. The really crucial question revolves around the ways in which, or the extent to which, narratives and theories (which implicitly underlie any kind of narrative) are open to amendment and revision in the light of empirical evidence; or, to put it slightly differently, the extent to which 'emplotment' is not merely some arbitrary, essentially stylistic choice of an individual historian, but is rather a collective endeavour, rooted in a determination to test imputed relationships among elements.

We can never escape from paradigms, and from some form of conceptual framework though which the evidence is netted. But a brief survey of any given area of historical controversy will reveal that some (not all) aspects of some (not all) paradigms are indeed open to amendment and revision in the light of empirical evidence. If we look at the way in which historical interpretations and controversies actually develop (rather than positing some lone scholar plucking a few titbits from the archives almost at random and stringing them together into a neat story line), this will soon become apparent.

The interplay between theories, concepts and evidence can be illustrated by way of some substantive examples covering a range of historical approaches and interests: first, the development of the historiography of the French Revolution; secondly, Ian Kershaw's biography of Hitler in relation to wider debates about the Holocaust; and thirdly, some wider comparative historical investigations into the formation of the modern world. These examples – however briefly each area will necessarily have to be treated – serve to demonstrate the use of conceptually netted evidence in the context of wider debates, allowing for amendments and revisions to the theoretical approaches and substantive explanations which are offered. They illustrate the ways in which historical practice is not a matter of lonely scholars plucking at remnants from the historical debris, interpreting them more or less as they please, and weaving them into individualised plots; rather, they demonstrate the ways in which the collective endeavours of historians over time serve to move forward both the terms and the contents of rational (if

sometimes emotionally highly charged) collective conversations about specific questions to do with the past.

The French Revolution

The French Revolution, as indicated previously, provides an excellent example of competing explanatory frameworks applied to a highly complex, and potentially emotive, cataclysmic historical event. Even a very brief survey of selected aspects of its historiography reveals clearly the interplay of theory and evidence.

The French Revolution was one of the major events of modern history, with an impact across Europe and the world. Opinions of contemporaries and of later historians were polarised by this dramatic and violent upheaval. In the classic Marxist interpretation (Soboul, Lefebvre, Hobsbawm – and in an updated version, Gwynne Lewis), the French Revolution was interpreted largely in class terms. It was seen as the revolt of a rising bourgeoisie against the rule of the old feudal nobility, bringing about the abolition of feudalism and the conditions for the development of modern capitalism. On this view, while in the early stages of the revolution the bourgeoisie relied on the popular support of the *sans-culottes* and the peasantry to topple the old order, once the common goal had been achieved the bourgeoisie then suppressed the popular classes. This interpretation is no longer widely accepted, at least in the simple form in which classes appear to act almost automatically in terms of presumed long-term class interests. It spawned a major reaction and a much more complex picture has now emerged.[28]

The Marxist view was initially challenged by revisionists such as Alfred Cobban, who argued first, that by 1789, 'feudalism' in its pure form no longer existed; and secondly, that the class system was much more complex, the 'nobility' and 'bourgeoisie' were internally far more differentiated and had much more in common than had previously been supposed.[29] Cobban unpacked each Marxist concept in turn, and showed that it did not exist as such, or play the role allotted to it by Marxist historians. Revisionist historians then went out to find all sorts of evidence of complexities in class structure (on which more in a moment). While effectively demolishing any simplistic Marxist interpretation in terms of clearly definable class actors, revisionists did not replace the Marxist view with any new overall explanatory framework.

Historians who might loosely be called 'post-revisionists' have paid much more attention to culture and 'discourse'. They emphasise the importance of the Enlightenment context, the emergence of a 'public sphere', and the development of revolutionary consciousness through political processes, events, symbols, as for example in the work of Lynn Hunt.[30] So, for example, they might emphasise the differences between the collapse of the *ancien régime* and the emergence of revolutionary processes as a separate and subsequent set of developments: hence, revolutionary consciousness was not so much a cause of the collapse of the *ancien régime*, but rather more an effect of it. Others emphasise structural questions, particularly the importance of the international state system and the impact of warfare

on the finances and hence the internal politics of the state. Skocpol, for example, emphasises the strains imposed on the French state by involvement in the American War of Independence; Blanning emphasises the importance of warfare on the European continent, and dates the origins of the 'French revolutionary wars' (or the impact of warfare on French domestic politics) from 1787, with the Dutch Civil War and the invasion of Holland by Prussian troops, posing a threat to France's northern border.[31] Although there are major differences between these two (not least that Theda Skocpol is influenced by neo-Marxism), both have in common that they do not seek purely for *domestic* factors in explaining the outbreak of revolution. That is, neither is content with an explanation purely in terms of domestic class conflict (as in the classic Marxist account) or Enlightenment thinking (as in one version of the cultural story) but both stress that such factors must be combined with analysis of external 'structural' factors – location of the state in a wider international context.

The question thus arises as to whether more detailed research and investigation of the evidence has led to any kind of new consensus. There remain major differences on specific questions, such as whether terror was an integral feature of the revolution from the outset, or emerged as a response to extraordinary circumstance in 1792–4; or how one should evaluate the roles of Louis XVI or Robespierre.[32] Analysis of either of these questions depends on an interplay between evidence and wider presuppositions about the role of the individual in history which we shall consider further in the following chapter. But at a broader level, there is now a general consensus that there were at least two separate processes which cannot be subsumed under a common explanatory framework (as in the original Marxist account): on the one hand, the collapse of the *ancien régime*; and on the other hand, the emergence of a revolutionary chain of events. Both have to be examined in some detail to tease out the relative importance of different factors at different times, including aspects of socio-economic and political structure, the impact of certain events, and the roles of individuals, in a given international and cultural context.

Thus we can see an interesting interplay between theories, concepts and evidence, leading to the movement of specific controversies onto new terrain. If we take, for example, the Marxist concept of class as one element in this set of controversies, the arguments of historians have revolved around issues of which contemporaries themselves were somewhat aware (and which indeed played a key role in the unfolding of events in 1788–9). Should the concept of class relate to 'notables' as an emerging social group defined by wealth and privilege, or rather to the older notion of the three 'estates' defined by functions (clerical, noble and commoner – those who pray, those who fight and those who work)? While many revisionist historians initially devoted much effort to showing that the revolution did not correlate neatly with class in any Marxist sense, such studies (which were often primarily local in focus) often had difficulty in suggesting any plausible new general framework of interpretation. Perhaps the most important point to make here is that, unless one is committed for irrelevant

extraneous reasons to trying to preserve one or another kind of theoretical approach, one can examine both simultaneously. Both sets of concepts are empirically open; one can simultaneously count under both headings, and explore the fluidity of change in eighteenth-century French society. In this light, one can explore the intertwining of two 'stories' about social change and concepts of stratification in French society: namely that, until the fiscal crises of the 1780s, the sense of belonging to a class of 'notables' may have become increasingly salient; but the calling of the Estates General in 1789 (which had not met since 1614) highlighted the formal continuance of the older notion of estates, which was now felt by many of the more privileged and well-to-do members of the Third Estate of commoners to be quite inappropriate, and which constituted a major precipitant of the revolutionary events in the early summer of 1789. Thus a historian can operate with several sets of conceptual categories, and can look at both objective and subjective criteria and changes over time (for example, Tim Blanning points out that 25 per cent of the French nobility in the eighteenth century were newly ennobled *noblesse de robe*, with certain consequences); it is possible to count heads and see what consequences there are for looking at the material under different headings and from different angles. Similarly, one can analyse cross-cutting loyalties and the effects these may have had on political sympathies at the time of the Tennis Court Oath. Revisionist critiques thus served to reveal that eighteenth-century French society could not appropriately be conceived simply in terms of classes as composite actors with common material interests driving their collective actions. Research spawned by such critiques produced a wealth of empirical detail and possibilities for enhanced understanding of the historical dynamics of the collapse of the *ancien régime* and the emergence of a revolutionary process.

There is a slightly deeper issue here, however, which has to do with underlying assumptions about connections between different factors. Paradigms tend to entail deeper assumptions about inter-connections between different factors and the relative importance of any given area. One of the key issues on which different paradigms differ, for example, is the question of whether what groups of people have in common (such as common material interests as a class) is deemed to be more important in explanatory analysis than are the respects in which people differ and hence make unique historical contributions. For example, does one prioritise the motives of the bourgeoisie, as excluded from their proper place in political discussions, or of the *sans-culottes* as an underprivileged class serving to radicalise revolution; or does one play up the actions of unique individuals within these circumstances (the personality and roles of Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Lafayette, Robespierre)? Does one prioritise some notion of, for example, the allegedly intrinsic violence of all revolution; or is terror rather a contingent factor which is largely explicable in terms of seeking to achieve difficult ends in problematic circumstances; or in terms of a conjunction of the latter and the roles of key individuals, paying due regard to their unique motives and possibly ideology (Robespierre being influenced both by Rousseau's ideas and by

the momentum of popular terror)?[33] Underlying assumptions on such questions arguably make a quite major difference in the ways in which historians choose to write about the French Revolution (contrast Albert Soboul with Simon Schama, for example), even if, in principle, many differences of emphasis could be empirically resolved through close argument. It is important to be clear about where the residue of differences rests; it appears to me to have to do in part with underlying philosophical assumptions, and the question of what satisfies curiosity, questions to which we shall return in the next chapter.

Without going into any further substantive detail on this example (where the debates are by no means resolved), there is an important general point to be made with respect to the relationships between sources and stories. Historians do not proceed by making more or less arbitrary decisions, based purely on aesthetic grounds, political sympathies or the 'language community' in which they have been trained, as to what concepts to employ; whatever conceptual or theoretical approach they choose to take, they necessarily now have to take account of the empirical findings of other bodies of research. And while such findings may have been netted under certain conceptual categories, the latter too are (to a greater or lesser extent, as we have seen in Chapter 5) open to critique and revision. There is a reasoned interplay of arguments at a level mediating between the sources and the stories which means that our constructed pictures of the 'past as such' are neither merely the product of personal presuppositions nor more or less arbitrarily plucked out of the ether.

Hitler and the Holocaust

The debates over the French Revolution have been treated, however cursorily, as a collective endeavour reaching over a relatively long period of time. The same point can as readily be made if we consider, for a second example, the work of a single historian, Ian Kershaw. Kershaw's work is situated, quite explicitly, within the wider context of the 'intentionalist/ functionalist' controversy about the origins of genocide in Nazi Germany. For all the arcane academic prose to which this debate initially gave rise, it circled fundamentally around the question of blame. Put very simply: on the basis of the evidence, is the transition from racism to genocide better explained by reference to Hitler's morbid intentions, or as a product of the chaotic functioning and cumulative radicalisation of the regime? Where should explanatory weight be laid? And which broader interpretive framework better accounts for the evidence?

Clearly we have to be careful in respect of speaking about 'the evidence', a term which, as we have seen, is fraught with conceptual shoals. However, I am here presupposing that even postmodernists who dispute the accessibility of the past 'as it really was' will accept the possibility of more or less accurate, if isolated, individual statements about, for example, the numbers of civilian women, children, old people murdered in any one massacre carried out by one of the Einsatzgruppen who followed the German Army into the Soviet Union in the

summer of 1941; or patterns of functioning of the gas chambers at Auschwitz over a more extended period of time. If we now consider the details of the way in which the intentionalist/functionalist debate developed over the past two decades of the twentieth century, we find that the weight of research tended to shift away from the search for a definitive moment of decision from above, or written 'Hitler order', to a focus on initiatives on the ground and a focus on the perpetrators of murder. With growing knowledge of the details of the chaotic, relatively uncoordinated mass killings, with a massive escalation in scale and momentum from late June to early September 1941, came new ways of groping with how to describe – and in the process, 'explain' – this escalation. Narratives which laid major explanatory emphasis on Hitler's intentions (positing a straight line from *Mein Kampf* to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, delayed only by Hitler's opportunism and capacity to wait for the appropriate conditions to carry out his murderous plans) seemed to many no longer – if ever – sufficient to account for the haphazard way in which relatively uncoordinated acts of violence developed apparently without a guiding hand on high into what became eventually known as the 'final solution of the Jewish question'. Equally, the curiously disembodied language of the 'functionalist' approach, which almost seemed to anthropomorphise the 'functioning of structures' or to reify the process of 'cumulative radicalisation', as if redescription in these terms amounted to explanation, seemed to cry out for real agents, human beings to populate the structural positions. Puzzling over what was known (and not known), Kershaw's reconceptualisation in terms of 'working towards the Führer' managed to present an account which fitted the accumulating evidence better.

Of interest here is not so much the detail and outcome of the historical controversy (which is of a scale and importance to which justice cannot be done here), but rather the way in which this particular controversy illustrates the possibility of interplay between competing approaches, the search for 'new evidence', and ways in which a sudden flash of reconceptualisation can serve to move a debate forwards.

Kershaw is not concerned to exemplify a particular paradigm or defend a particular entrenched theoretical position; nor is he concerned to 'emplot' from on high, stringing together a plausible narrative on the basis of historical titbits selected almost arbitrarily from the records. Rather, Kershaw's concern is to solve a historical puzzle: to make better sense of the evidence. Thus, for example, he reasons:

> Some Einsatzgruppen claimed after the war that Heydrich had conveyed to them in his briefings the Führer's order to exterminate the Jews in the Soviet Union. But the actual variation in the scale of the killing operations in the first weeks, and the sharp escalation from around August onwards, strongly suggests that, in fact, no general mandate to exterminate Soviet Jewry in its entirety had been issued before 'Barbarossa' began.[34]

In his exploration of the events of the autumn of 1941, both deploying his wider knowledge and understanding of Hitler's personality and habits, as well as piecing together specific findings from exhaustive research into the course of events during these 'fateful months', Kershaw is able both to emphasise Hitler's own fanatical hatred of the Jews, and to take due account of the structural dynamism rooted in the internal rivalries and tensions within the Nazi state. Hitler's role had, in Kershaw's interpretation, 'consisted more of authorising than directing'; and the transition from what could still be considered as primarily military killings, to massacres of civilians, to a notion of a 'final solution' as the efficiently organised murder of millions, was one which was faltering, relatively unplanned in advance, lurching from one ghastly stage to an even more ghastly one, which in turn provided, as in a ratchet, the step up to the next and yet more unthinkable stage in an irreversible process of ever-escalating violence and brutality. Kershaw's notion of 'working towards the Führer' thus nicely provides a means of resolving the intentionalist/functionalist controversy – or at least shifting the fronts and moving research and debate into new waters.

It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves just how far our understanding of Hitler's role in the Holocaust has come. The treatment of this topic in Kershaw's biography is a far cry indeed from the inadequate few sentences (cumulatively totalling all of two paragraphs) devoted to it in Bullock's biography of Hitler, first published in 1952:

> It has been widely denied in Germany since the war that any but a handful of Germans at the head of the SS knew of the scope or savagery of these measures against the Jews. One man certainly knew. For one man they were the logical realisation of views which he had held since his twenties, the necessary preliminary to the plans he had formed for the resettlement of Europe on solid racial foundations. That man was Adolf Hitler . . . There are few more ghastly pages in history than this attempt to eliminate a whole race, the consequence of the 'discovery' made by a young down-and-out in a Vienna slum in the 1900s that the Jews were the authors of everything he most hated in the world.[35]

The state of play on interpretations of the Holocaust at the start of the twenty-first century is dramatically different even from that of a mere ten or twenty years earlier.[36]

In the case of the intentionalist/functionalist debate, we have two competing paradigms, one of which emphasises individual agency and the other structural dynamics; we have the search for new evidence which would help to resolve the issues; we have an accumulation of studies; and we have a new framework of interpretation, combining both agency and structure, and appearing better to account for the evidence. The postmodernist presumption of almost arbitrary emplotment or imposition of narrative by an individual historian does not adequately capture the processes of puzzle-solving in the context of broader

controversies exemplified by this set of debates. Although one can argue that, by virtue of its almost unimaginable nature, entailing as it does the transgression of almost every norm of humanity (if for once such a phrase can be used in a more absolute sense, without the kinds of qualifications attached in other contexts), we can never have a completely satisfactory explanation of the origins of the Holocaust, it would at the same time be hard to argue sensibly that our understanding has not been immeasurably enlarged by the debates and research of the past half century.

Comparative history

The same kinds of questions with respect to concepts and frameworks of inquiry arise when the focus is on comparative historical investigations, which we may take as a final set of examples.

Why did a uniquely dynamic form of capitalism, associated with scientific, technological and industrial revolutions, arise in western Europe and not elsewhere, not earlier? Why did some countries experience major, dramatic, revolutionary political and social upheavals, while others appear to have had slower, more evolutionary patterns of political change in the course of 'modernisation'? Why did some twentieth-century states fall prey to dictatorships of left and right while others retained some form of democracy? Are there general patterns which explain the rise and fall of empires, or does each case need to be looked at as a unique set of specific, unrepeatable historical events? What explains different patterns of 'nation-building', different assumptions about entitlement to citizenship? As soon as one begins to wonder about 'large questions' such as these, major issues of conceptual categories that are fruitful for exploring more than one case arise.

What one needs, clearly, are concepts which are at a sufficient level of abstraction to allow for comparison across historically different cases; and a reasoned set of principles for selecting cases for comparison and contrast, in order to set up rigorous tests of any general hypotheses about possible explanations. Both the conceptual framework and the specific hypotheses will to a considerable extent depend on underlying assumptions about the ways in which societies work, the essential causes of change (or 'motors of history'), and what it might be worth looking at or for in greater detail.

For example, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, in his classic comparative studies of the world religions Max Weber set up a conceptual grid of contrasting concepts – this-worldly versus other-worldly, priest versus prophet, mysticism versus asceticism – in the light of which he contrasted the religions of China, India, ancient Judaism and Christianity, and, within the latter, the contrasts between Catholicism and varieties of modern Protestantism. This allowed Weber to identify what he thought were uniquely activist, this-worldly aspects of western civilisation in contrast to the mystic, other-worldly orientations of eastern world views; and to highlight in great detail what he held to be the 'elective

affinities' between the peculiarly ascetic, this-worldly activism of Calvinism, on the one hand, and the 'spirit of modern capitalism', with its focus on hard work and the reinvestment of profit in pursuit of forever renewed profit, creating the modern 'iron cage', on the other. Far from writing an idealist account of world history, Weber took great care to examine the social roots of the different types of religiosity, and to explore the unique combinations of historical circumstances – economic, political, social – in which particular religious orientations were able to take root and achieve certain secular effects.[37] While much of the substantive detail of Weber's work has been open to debate and challenge, this extraordinarily wide-ranging oeuvre illustrates a remarkable clarity of thought and mastery of material, consistently controlled by guiding questions and concepts.

Where do such concepts come from, and what are their implications for the way in which a particular investigation is carried out and the kinds of answers which are produced? There is clearly an active role here for the organising mind of the historian, proceeding on the basis of hunches, hypotheses, assumptions about 'things to look for'. These assumptions depend in part on the kind of background paradigm or theoretical tradition within which the historian is working. For example, both Barrington Moore and his erstwhile pupil Theda Skocpol worked within the loose penumbra of a neo-Marxist theoretical tradition emphasising the importance of social classes and class conflict, rather than the roles of different belief systems, as key factors in historical change. Thus Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* is set up to examine 'the varied political roles played by the landed upper classes and the peasantry in the transformation from agrarian societies . . . to modern industrial ones'.[38] His wide-ranging historical comparisons allow him to develop historically grounded generalisations about different patterns, or 'routes' to modernity, depending on factors such as the interactions between historically constituted agrarian classes in the context of social structures with different degrees of segmentation, bureaucratisation or political centralisation. Skocpol (as indicated above) sets up a comparison drawing attention not only to the inter-relations of specific social classes (in Marxist vein), but also (in Tocquevillian and Leninist traditions) to the relative degrees of strength or weakness of the central state apparatus, the state's location within a wider international system, and the character of revolutionary leadership.[39] Her comparative analysis of the successful social revolutions in France, Russia and China, in contrast to unsuccessful revolutions at other times (Russia in 1905) or in other places (for example, Germany in 1848), allows her to identify what appear to be key factors explaining revolutionary eruptions and outcomes. There are other ways too of doing comparative history, with different implications for the kinds of answers which are offered.[40]

Not all comparative history operates on the grand world-historical scale of the examples just given. Comparisons may be quite local and delimited in both geographical and temporal scope, as, for example, in Marcel Faucheux's comparison of the counter-revolutionary uprisings in the Vendée and neighbouring Brittany during the French Revolution, or Marc Bloch's very detailed analysis of changes

in agrarian conditions in different parts of France in the eighteenth century.[41] Comparisons may be achieved by juxtaposing the works of more than one historian, each analysing cases with which they are familiar under the rubric of common questions and headings, as in the various works on Enlightenment and absolutism, or the peasantry and the nobility, in eighteenth-century Europe.[42] Comparisons may be designed, not to develop or test hypotheses which are to have the status of abstract generalisations, but rather to identify what is unique, distinctive, new, as in contrasts between the Italian and the 'northern' Renaissance. There may be many more 'cases' of a particular historical phenomenon under investigation – popular festivals, *rites de passage*, youth rebellions, terrorist attacks, marriage and divorce rates, crimes against property and persons – which may be more readily susceptible to comparative analysis and correlation with other factors under certain conditions. And, at the other extreme, even the most stridently apparently anti-comparative history (as in the case of those historians emphasising the absolute uniqueness of the Holocaust) is implicitly comparative, in selecting and highlighting certain features of a particular case which supposedly render it distinctive from all other possibly comparable cases (other instances of atrocities and mass murders, such as those perpetrated by the Stalin and Pol Pot regimes).

These works illustrate the influence of theoretical assumptions about what kinds of factors it might be important to be attentive to, among the possible myriad ways of looking at highly complex unique historical developments. Some investigations are premised on a quasi-experimental view of historical method: since no artificial laboratory experiments can be set up (which would ideally hold certain factors constant and make comparisons among other variables within a carefully controlled environment), the best that historians can do is try to be as open and attentive as possible to the range of factors which might be of significance, and as rigorous as possible in choosing useful cases against which to test (not merely to exemplify) their hypotheses. As C. Behan McCullagh points out, to some extent the conceptual apparatus which is deployed to analyse selected cases depends on prior assumptions: in Skocpol's case, for example, 'the analysis is plausible because it is based upon theories which are already accepted as probably true, and because the cases which Skocpol has examined support and do not invalidate those theories'.[43] Given the very large number of possible variables in individual historical cases (including both contingent events and the motives and actions of unique individual personalities), as well as the relative paucity of multiple instances of certain major historical developments (such as 'successful modern revolutions'), such methods can hardly aspire to attain scientific levels of exactitude. Nevertheless, they can prove extraordinarily fruitful and stimulating ways of making sense of historical patterns and variations over long stretches of time.

In principle, the two ends of the spectrum – from those explicitly looking at large historical comparisons to those emphasising the uniqueness of individual historical cases – are operating from different poles within a field which still

requires the organising mind of the historian to marshal and deploy the evidence which is held to be relevant to the question being asked. For all that has been said about the slipperiness of social concepts in contrast to those of the natural sciences, issues to do with research design – the clear framing of questions, rigorous thought about ways in which to test hypotheses, look for evidence, rethink hunches in the light of new findings – are as important in historical investigation as in any of the natural sciences. Sources do not 'speak for themselves'. They stand as clues, as proxies for wider issues and questions. And this is true whatever type of historical investigation is being undertaken, irrespective of whether the historian is setting about writing a single historical narrative, or more explicitly setting up frameworks or strategies for testing hypotheses or investigating hunches (depending on how formal the historian wants to sound about what he or she is doing). It cannot be emphasised too strongly that the key issues have to do, not only with the character and interpretation of the sources, but also with the purposes of investigation. Clear strategic thinking is really crucial to any inquiry, whether the goal is the reconstruction of a unique set of developments, a single case, or a larger comparative investigation of similarities and differences.

Between the sources and the stories

The evidence can answer back; but only up to a point. There remain major issues with respect to the ways in which we choose to look for the evidence. Any historical investigation into the past selects aspects relevant to the question posed, and gathers evidence under conceptual categories which derive in part from paradigms or theoretical traditions which suggest hunches about the way the world works, and what sorts of evidence should be looked for.

The big question then arises: if interpretation of the sources is to some extent rooted in wider frameworks and assumptions, to what extent can the sources be used to critique these? Are we trapped in self-confirming circles, or can theories be genuinely tested, historical interpretations 'disconfirmed'?

I would suggest that, as we have seen above, in certain cases both the concepts used to investigate the past, and the specific substantive explanations offered with respect to parts of the reconstructed past, can be tested, found wanting, qualified, discarded, replaced. There can be some degree of translation across paradigms, some advance in both knowledge and understanding of certain questions. Even granted that sources do not provide translucent 'windows on' a 'real' past, and that there is no unitary, coherent 'past as such'; even granted that it is possible to engage in debates over interpretation of particular sources, which may be difficult or even impossible to resolve in any definitive way; even granted that we bring prior assumptions and associated theoretical frameworks to the inquiry; we can nevertheless seek to test our assumptions, to provide evidence and grounded reasons for rejecting certain views and developing others. These processes of inquiry and debate are not premised on any absurd notion of

mimesis; nor on the simplistic assumption that all we need is commitment to the 'agreed rules of historical method' and an honest, comprehensive approach to 'the sources'. Rather, they entail awareness of a theoretical level *between* the sources and the story.

Not everything can necessarily be easily resolved, for a whole variety of reasons. Some conceptual frameworks may be, as indicated in previous chapters, far less open to empirical qualification and amendment, or translatability, than others. 'Large concepts' which are made up of multiple disparate elements, for example, may actually be more in the way of theories, although they are used as a means of labelling rather than in an attempt at explaining interconnections. Notions such as 'feudalism', 'transitions to democracy', 'civil war', 'revolution' and so on often provoke major disagreements among scholars about both definitions and explanations. 'Smaller' and arguably less loaded concepts (such as 'landed classes', peasantry, nobility and so on) may be easier to define and look for variations. But even at this level it is possible to assume widely varying contents to the 'same' concept, as in different understandings of the term 'popular culture'. Other reasons might include too little evidence and too overpowering a commitment to particular paradigms of interpretation. A very nice – spoof – example of this is to be found in Leszek Kolakowski's essay on the 'Emperor Kennedy Legend: A New Anthropological Debate', parodying and showing how badly we can get a few snippets wrong from the perspective of different paradigms proper.[44] In this case, the imagined example was based on extremely little evidence, which was then woven up into quite different frameworks of interpretation. In the 'real world', it would be likely that at some stage further evidence would be sought in order to try to resolve the differences; but this might not necessarily be achievable where there is a mismatch between what is known and what interpretive edifices are constructed upon it. The point here is that such an example is possible; not that it is what always happens.

Sources are important; and there is the possibility of advancement of understanding, not only within given frameworks of interpretation, but indeed even across these. Some commentators have suggested the possibility of a purely sociological reading of Kuhn's notion of paradigms, where paradigm shifts come about primarily for reasons to do with changing language communities. Others have pointed out that there are also – or instead – rational, logical, and evidential reasons for paradigm shifts, and that the sociological interpretation is merely one element in any comprehensive history of classical science. Kuhn himself lays emphasis on the accumulation of 'anomalies', findings which cannot be accounted for within any given paradigm. There are also technical and practical aspects to some paradigm shifts: at least with respect to the application of certain scientific theories, there is the key requirement that they *work*. Whether or not we know why (and apparently we do not), aspirin is widely recognised as an effective means of pain relief; whatever a feminist may think of 'male dominated medical discourse', she is likely to accept a diagnostic mammography, a recommendation of invasive surgery or course of chemotherapy for the treatment of

breast cancer; and most people embarking on a plane journey are prepared to believe, whether or not they understand the underlying science, that properly designed and equipped aircraft are capable of effective flight under the appropriate conditions. It is clear that this notion of practical efficacy is less helpful (if it helps at all) with respect to historical interpretations and explanations. Nevertheless, there are grounds for thinking that there is more to paradigm shifts in historical interpretation than purely sociological, political or aesthetic criteria; in other words, there are grounds for suggesting that the evidence can, with certain qualifications, 'answer back' and render some interpretations more plausible than others.

There are, to put it slightly differently, definite constraints on the kinds of interpretations or explanations which historians can offer; and there are reasons rooted in empirical evidence for putting forward new concepts and interpretations, or preferring one explanation to another. Yet, while empirical evidence does have an important role to play, there remain certain indeterminacies, and preferences for one type of explanatory or interpretive 'landing place' rather than another which are rooted in metatheoretical assumptions about the nature of being human and the character of social worlds. Hence there are what might be called paradigmatic restrictions on the ways in which sources are or can be used as evidence.

Thus we find ourselves in an interesting situation. I have argued above against both postmodernist attempts to rupture (if I may for a moment borrow a favourite postmodernist word) all sensible or necessary links between the sources we find and the stories we tell; and also against the generally implicit assumption attributed to traditional empiricist historians that the sources, if treated sensitively, will more or less 'speak for themselves'. I have suggested that we need to be highly aware of the intermediate processes, the intervening conceptual and investigative strategies which allow us to build explanatory bridges whose structure and constituent materials can be re-examined and amended by others, within the context of certain traditions of inquiry and debate. Nevertheless, despite all that has been said in this chapter about the intelligent use of the sources in resolving or transforming conceptual and explanatory debates, there do sometimes remain bedrocks of fundamental difference as to where the balance of explanatory or interpretive weight should be laid. It is to the question of what serves to satisfy curiosity that we now turn.