

The Nature of History Reader

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INTRODUCTION

Positionings

In the 1960s a whole series of theoretical developments emerged out of what has since been called European 'continental' philosophy. Some of the particular names that these developments first travelled under have fallen into obscurity, but today, some forty years on, many have become familiar to us: the linguistic turn, deconstructionism, post-structuralism, post-feminism, post-colonialism, post-Marxism, postmodernism, etc. And although these 'postist' phenomena differ from each other in their detail, nevertheless, taken singly or in some form of combination, their effect upon the old modernist 'discipline' of history in its professional, academic forms (let alone its metanarrative forms) has arguably been, and is, devastating. For what these various developments did – and do – was to provide an enormously critical challenge to, and indeed denial of, the still influential but essentially nineteenth-century belief that some sort of empiricism was the only proper basis for the practice of professional historians, and that the result of these practices, the embodiment of the historian's labour – books, chapters, articles, etc. – had the status of an *epistemology*. That is to say, professional historians thought (and generally still think) that they possessed certain empirical methods by which they could have objective and demonstrable *knowledge* of 'the past' both in its generalities and in its particulars. And it is this belief, this epistemological claim, that the coming of the 'postmodern' has rendered problematic.

Accordingly, it is the problematisation of this type of history – the type of history which has long dominated and in certain variants still dominates academic understandings of what history is and ought to be – that this Reader principally considers, responds to and possibly begins to move beyond. For we think that students who are coming to the study of 'the nature of history' possibly for the first time *ought* to understand – if they are to try to comprehend their 'discourse' (*not* discipline) reflexively and critically – something about this dramatic (and for some historians) traumatic state of affairs. Consequently, it is this that this text tries to accomplish, for, from our perspective, it seems clear that we are living at a moment when the

power of 'postist' challenges to professional/academic historians has not only undercut its more 'conservative' and revisionist approaches (what we shall call its 'reconstructionist' and 'constructionist' genres), but has also helped to raise for consideration – not least by the installation of a radical 'deconstructionist' history that has taken the impact of the 'posts' very seriously into account – the possibility that not only have we to rethink 'history as we have known it' along deconstructionist, postmodern lines, but that we may have come to the end of history in all of its current manifestations; that our 'postmodern condition' can perhaps produce its own, non-historical acts of the imagination for us to live by which do not figure in its number any sort of recognisable history at all.

Consequently, what we have tried to do in this text is to provide a collection of readings that we hope is sufficient to allow students of history to reflect upon the way histories are written, taught and thought about today, and possibly how they might be considered tomorrow. The picture which emerges in the following pages reveals history's up-dating from the hardcore, late nineteenth-century Rankean documentarist/'reconstructionist' style of historiography to a more pluralist, perspectival, 'constructionist' genre, its challenge by 'deconstructionist' approaches and, as stated, reflections on the possible demise of this interesting experiment of 'historicising of the past' in both modernist and postmodernist ways. This transitional perspective – the general position held by the editors of this Reader, despite their sometime differences on this or that detail – thus calls into question, at most, the very idea of history and, at least, makes highly problematic some of the dominant ongoing practices we still think are being encouraged in many history departments in many contemporary institutions of higher education.

One of the many consequences of the above problematisation (not only within the discourse of history but in many other areas of contemporary life as well) has been that the mainstream (reconstructionist and constructionist) makers of history have had to come out of their lairs, wherein they have long cherished the opinion that the histories they have produced have effectively been written by the past itself as they shyly but insistently pledge their allegiance to the 'sovereignty of the past' while denying the full power of their own interpretive bulk, and talk much more about their theoretical positions and their idiosyncratic methods (for there is no single, definitive, historical method). At which point they have become sometime participants in that culture of confession in which we live, a culture in which it has become the norm for writers to explain that intellectual/ideological place 'they have come from'. Of course, this professing of a position can be invasive or sensationalist, as well as ritualistic, formulaic, empty and thus actually obfuscatory. Nevertheless, while the readings offered here are intended to give a general overview, we expect that it is clear already that this text is itself self-consciously positioned; that it has no pretence of being – this is what we are confessing – some sort of disinterested or neutral 'view from nowhere'. Any text, including this one, stakes out a claim, is inevitably intertextual and partial/partisan, and thus an engagement which is unavoidably *polemical*, for it is impossible today – in fact, strictly speaking it may always have been 'logically' impossible – to write in any other way. And this is because there just is a condition of *polemos* whenever (and this seems to have always been the case) there is no metalanguage or locus of truth or absolute criteria or universal method or transcendental viewpoint (a god's-eye view) *outside* of the discursive field to act as arbiter between positions, the consequent radical historicising and relativising of the field necessarily 'guaranteeing' multiplicity and heterogeneity for ever. And so we ourselves perhaps ought to say just a little about what we see as our own 'polemical' position in this text so that readers can, if they wish to, and relative to their own lights, take it into account.

Basic to our position(s), then, and informing this text throughout are, on the one hand, certain anti-post-empiricist and anti-post-epistemological assumptions and, on the other,

certain pro-deconstructionist and pro-aesthetic perspectives. We are anti-post-empiricists because we think that the historicising of the past (the turning of what seems to have happened 'before now' into something the 'before now' never actually was – an article, a film, a book, a conference paper – a history), is as much a linguistic undertaking (and especially a narrativisation, an aestheticising and thus a figurative undertaking) as it is an empirical one. To turn (to trope) something that isn't in the form of a narrative – all that has gone on before everywhere – into a narrative (that is, into a linguistic convention, a literary mode of structuration, a genre) is just an act of the imagination. And this imaginative, constitutive element gives history qua history the unavoidable status of being *fictive*. Not, let us note immediately, the status of being a piece of *fiction* – for in fiction the imagined goes 'all the way down' – but fictive in the sense of *fictio*; that is to say, made up, fashioned, created, fabricated, figured. We thus take it as read that histories as such are aesthetic, figurative productions which, while they contain what can be called facts (and which indeed refer, indirectly, via the mediations of a performative language use, to the traces of aspects of a once actuality) are, nevertheless, always more than the sum of their factual/cognitive parts: a sum total that can never actually be total. And this 'fact' – the fact that histories are irreducible to 'the facts' and thus knowledge closures; the fact that histories always contain acts of the creative imagination – means that histories are impossible to close down, because it is impossible to close down the imagination. This openness of the 'before now' to interminable appropriation is further guaranteed on two counts. First, because the 'before now' doesn't have in it a shape of its own, because the 'before now' doesn't have in it 'events' that have, as it were, the shape of narratives, there is nothing against which we can check out our imagined narrative orderings to see if they 'correspond', for there is literally nothing for them to correspond to. Consequently, although objectivity and truth might well operate at the level of the statement in so far as it demonstrably corresponds to a singular piece of 'evidence', no such correspondence can ever be achieved at the level of the text, at the level of a history (and histories are always 'at the level of the text'). Second, all (further) attempts to effect some kind of closure by reference to *context* – historians are always talking about 'putting things into context' – is also impossible epistemologically because no 'context' is ever exhaustive: you can always get another context, always get another (arbitrary) set of circumstances. Consequently, because new contexts are always – in principle and in practice – open to future recontextualisation ad infinitum, so the 'before now' is too. In that sense, while the past is literally behind us, histories are always 'to come'; in other words, the before now is always unstable 'historically' because history cannot, in that sense, die. (This is not to say, incidentally, that we cannot come to the end of history in the sense that the whole discourse of history could become obsolete, forgotten; rather, it is to say that, in so far as the 'before now' remains as something that is 'historically' considered, then *logically* what that consideration results in is never final, never definitive.)

For us this inability ever to secure what are effectively interpretive closures – the continuing *raison d'être* of the vast bulk of the historical profession in even these pluralist days – is not only logically *impossible*, but politically and ethically/morally *desirable*. The fact that the 'before now', both as a whole and in its parts, is so very obviously underdetermining vis-à-vis its innumerable appropriations (one past, an infinity of histories) is to be both celebrated and worked. It is to be celebrated because we think it is a positive democratic value when everybody can (at least potentially) author their own lives reflexively and so create their own intellectual and moral genealogies and thus identities, that there is no credible authoritative or authoritarian historicised past that one has to defer to over one's own personal 'memory', or indeed even to register and/or acknowledge. And it is to be worked because it offers the logically impossible-to-prevent opportunity for those who still have the desire to articulate

past-tensed fictive productions under (or beyond) the old name or history, to do so in radical disobedience to what we consider to be the stultifying orthodoxies of mainstream academic histories as epistemologies. And so our anti-post-epistemological position pushes us towards the view that it is wonderful news that historians can never get things right; that histories qua histories are always representational failures. This opens up the 'before now' to endless acts of the creative imagination unshackled by epistemology narrowly construed.

In his essay 'Deconstructions: The Im-possible', Jacques Derrida addresses the question – which he had been asked to address – of estimating the significance of, the impact of, Derridean deconstruction in American academic life over the previous twenty years. Derrida replied that, while to reconstruct that impact could not actually be done, nevertheless, he can offer a certain *emphasis*, an emphasis which, as he puts it,

would concern a past periodization I don't quite believe in, that lacks rigour in my opinion, but is not totally insignificant. In other words it would possess, without being either rigorously true or rigorously false, a certain appearance in its favour.

'A certain appearance in its favour': here, in just six words is a brilliant encapsulation of the shortfall of the attempted empirical, the attempted epistemological; 'historically speaking', *this is as good as it gets*. Yet whether – especially when yoked to other considerations – it is good enough to keep even historical *emphases* of this kind (that is, of a postmodern, deconstructionist kind) in business is debatable today, a debate that is considered in the Part Four of this Reader.

The reference to Part Four, without having yet strictly mentioned Parts One to Three, obviously needs an immediate explanation, an explanation we will turn to now and which allows us to leave any further comments about our position(s) as we move on to say – relative to our positional assumptions – how we have organised and structured this text.

Structurings

It is not unusual for writers who are about to explain what a text contains and the way that such contents are structured, to begin by saying what has been left out and what sort of organisational structure has not been adopted; what context has *not* been chosen. And it may be useful to do this briefly ourselves.

We could have organised the readings which follow by grouping them under types of histories – social, economic, political, cultural, theoretical, feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist, etc. – or by schools; or by methods; or by ideological positions; or clustered around events; or around concepts, etc. And if we had, then 'the nature of history today' would have been different relative to each of the above ways of carving up histories and to the way we ourselves have done so. For we have not used any of the above possibilities. Rather, keeping faith with our view that histories are aesthetic, figurative, positioned, imaginary artefacts – and especially *literary artefacts* – we have adopted the idea of literary genre as our organising principle. That is, we think that it is possible to characterise *all* historical writings as one of three basic types, basic genres. For us, no matter if history texts are written by economic or social or cultural historians; no matter what the period or specialisation; no matter if the writers are Marxist or liberals, feminists or reactionaries; no matter if they are overtly positioned or not, the most insightful and productive way of organising them all is to locate them as belonging to – having an orientation to – one of the following three genres: reconstructionist, constructionist or deconstructionist. Accordingly, it is by this characterisation of the historian's writings

that we think we might be able to establish our claim – to make you think it may have 'something in its favour' – that histories get their power to give significant meanings to areas of the 'before now' through their narrative figurings as much as through their empirical content. This is one of the best ways we can think of to express our view that historians today can best be understood as having turned away – whether they know it or not, or like it or not – from privileging the empirical and the epistemological towards the linguistic and the aesthetic and thus the figure: towards *figural realism*. And this reference to figural realism – incidentally, the title of the latest book by the American theorist of history, Hayden White – allows us to line ourselves up alongside White's (in)famous definition of history as being best understood as a *narrative prose discourse the content of which is as much imagined* (the modes of troping, emplotting, arguing) as *found* (the 'facts', etc.).

What we have just outlined thus helps to provide us with a rationale for the organisation of the Reader into three Parts. But, as we have already stated, there are four Parts to the book. So what – to develop a little further what has been merely hinted at thus far – constitutes Part Four?

The answer is that while we think it is useful to locate the *writers of history* examined into the three genres indicated, there are those – historians and others – who think that it is unnecessary to have histories 'as we have known them' or, maybe, even histories at all; that, one way or another, we can look forward to, or be conscious we may be coming to, 'the end of history'. Therefore, the writers who make up Part Four are examined not because they are concerned to write about the 'before now' in a particular kind of way, but rather because they are reflecting much more theoretically, much more philosophically, on the status, the point, the condition and the 'possible possibilities' of history today. So that is why, in a Reader that goes under the title of *The Nature of History Reader*, they are included. For us, they are a crucial dimension in a text that wishes to present a certain kind of picture of what is going on around, about and under the name of 'history today'. This is why this Reader has four Parts.

The three genres and endism

We are arguing that every historian, then, occupies a particular genre position, one that is clearly reflected in the nature of his or her historical narratives. The attitude that historians have towards empiricism, how they perceive the nature and status of facts and their description, how they deploy the explanatory strategies of emplotment, tropology and ideology, and how they view language as the vehicle for their thinking, will lead to their particular genre choice. In effectively blurring the distinction between historian and history that occurs through the act of narrative construction, we are reminded that historians can choose their own genre. It should be clear by now that we believe that this choice is determined by attitudes towards the significance of empiricism in the overall process of creating and writing the history narrative.

It is to accommodate our view that history in general is constituted by the compulsions of empirical data and language that allows us to distinguish our three main orientations to the organisation of knowledge about the past. These three history genres share many of the characteristics we would normally associate with literary genres, rather than, as we have suggested, conventionally recognised 'schools', 'varieties' or 'approaches' to history. While the notion of genre categories as the way of describing major orientations towards historical thinking and practice is probably unfamiliar to you, steeped as you may be in conventional epistemological definitions of history, such a redefinition is required in order to acknowledge that history is indeed a narrative, aesthetic and thus fictive creation.

History, conceived on the model of genres, as broad classificatory types of historical composition, is thus an innovative method of evaluating the types or classes of history. Of course, in suggesting our three categories as the main generic history divisions, we are not claiming any originality for thinking about history as a literary genre. While our insistence on defining history as a narrative space may be novel, it has to be acknowledged that historians and philosophers of history have long examined the connections between the historical narrative and genre. But this has tended to be done within the specialist field of biography and life histories, and it now needs to be put to the profession as a whole. We are making the claim that all kinds or forms of written history fall within these genre categories. The question, therefore, is not what mode or specific form of history do you write, but what genre do you choose to work within? It is the answer to that question which determines the meanings it is possible to generate. This recognition of history's composition as a narrative form leads us to acknowledge the typologies of its texts. Yet while we are saying that almost all historians work within one of these three epistemological categories, we are aware that they may not do so all the time. We do not believe it is possible (nor desirable) to attempt to be absolutist here. There are historians whose work will not readily conform to this model. Genre boundaries can be transgressed. However, we believe that such historians are relatively rare and that they do not seriously invalidate our broad conceptions of how historians think and organise their work. As literature has poetry, drama and the novel, so history has 'reconstructionism', 'constructionism' and 'deconstructionism'.

Histories written from a particular 'way of knowing', then, have much in common in spite of surface appearances of different themes and sources, and should be grouped together under broad headings. The benefit of being attentive to these divisions is that they tell us what kind of history text it is we have before us without straying into too rigid a taxonomy. Much of the critical evaluation provided by us through the extracts we shall be using will be directed to providing information about how 'author-historians' elect to compose and configure/prefigure the past in the narrative form. Hence, we have introduced each extract with a short explanation of how the reading fits into the bigger 'doing history' picture, as well as how it fits in with the other works of the historians being considered. As a general rule, then, the historian domesticates 'the past as history' by offering her/his own particular narrative form of explanation – i.e. their preferred notion of what constitutes the 'proper' way to gain historical knowledge and, most importantly, generate historical meaning. So it is our hope that genre categories will demystify the fundamental nature of the overall 'history project'.

In literary studies we are used to thinking of 'content' as what is said, and 'form' the way it is said. For the most part, in literature content and form are indivisible – i.e. how the content is presented/represented cannot be separated into two 'things': there can be no represented (content) without its representation (form). This applies to all realist literature and, of course, includes history. In the case of history, the historian-author chooses a broad conceptual framework as the preferred way of gaining knowledge about the past. Learning about the past is not only to be done according to an empirical-analytical strategy; it is not merely an epistemological matter of 'looking at the evidence' or 'reading the sources'. The kind of history we make depends on what kind of approach to knowledge creation we take – reconstructionist, constructionist or deconstructionist.

What we need to do now is explain the nature of our three genre categories. Before doing that, however, we offer a disclaimer. Instead of trying to replace definitively one canon with another (our genres for schools or varieties of history, for example), we intend only to direct you to the historiographical nature of history and the three major choices within which a variety of approaches or modalities can be deemed to exist. How we describe these thematic

modes for the reconstructionist, constructionist or deconstructionist genres is thus very much the function of how we imagine them (and history) to be. Hence, we are happy that the modalities we isolate are far from exhaustive. And, as you will also note shortly, one of the key features of deconstructionist historians is their attempt to challenge the modalities of history writing in the reconstructionist and constructionist genres. You will also note that the writings we call 'endist' are a challenge not only to the other three genre categories, but also a forthright provocation to the very idea of history, to history books and, certainly, to books like this.

Part One: Reconstructionism

We stipulate our definition for this genre as being characterised by an undiluted belief in the power of empiricism to access the past (defined according to its individual events) as it actually was. It is distinguished by its appeal to those historians who endorse what they like to call their 'common-sense', 'realist', 'the-past-as-knowable history' belief; that the 'truth' of the past can somehow be found. It can be discovered in the sources and, hence, *the* true story of the event can be rediscovered and cannot only be, but must be, narrated accurately. Referentiality, inference, the truthful statement, and adequate and accurate representation of people's actions and intentions, along with the primacy of events over social processes and structures, are the touchstones of this epistemological position. In effect, the truth of the past event will emerge when the historian's ontological existence is detached from her/his epistemology. In other words, the past can be 'known' truthfully under the careful and responsible tutelage of the knowledgeable and scrupulous historian who 'stands outside' her/his own existence or situation. This, the conventional view of history writing in the West, has thus been anchored in the correspondence and coherence theories of knowledge which are the foundations of the belief in a realist epistemology.

Reconstructionist history's insistence on dispassionately finding *the* truthful interpretation and *the* story in the sources was once described by the British Tudor historian, Geoffrey Elton, as the '... rational, independent and impartial investigation ... of the evidence by the distanced historian observer' (Elton 1991: 6, 77–98). This investigation and the inferences drawn from it (i.e. conclusions inferred about its meaning) could then be written up in a realist and, *by definition*, objective historical narrative. In other words, *the* story can not only be 'found' in the evidence thanks to painstaking archival research and the correspondence and coherence theories of knowledge, but it can be accurately represented in the narrative. What this means, as historians like Geoffrey Roberts, Arthur Marwick and Gertrude Himmelfarb have argued, is that their narrative form is merely a link between description and analysis, rather than the medium through which *both* are created. Reconstructionists tend to see the narrative as simply the vehicle for the truth of the past because the image in the narrative refers (corresponds) to the reality of the past. In so doing, they endorse the idea that *the* story of the past can (with a high degree of probability) be located.

Geoffrey Roberts, in his pursuit of the story of *the* past, has argued in favour of the characteristically reconstructionist principle that what happened can be accurately represented in the narrative. He maintains that historians can tell what the *intentions* of people in the past were because they were basically like us. So, telling *the* story of what they did is largely unproblematic. As he says (our italics):

telling *the* story, explaining *the* action, and reconstructing *the* experience of people in *the* past is not more difficult than dealing with human happenings from yesterday

— excluding, that is, problems of evidence, temporality, and cultural context — which, of course, is where the special skills, experience, and scholarship of historians come into use.

(Roberts 1997: 251)

In what appears to us to be an impossible position to maintain — because history is a *narrative about the past* — Roberts believes 'the past lives on'. Moreover, Roberts insists that in the normal course of their job, historians come into contact with that past 'as a real object' which is found in the action of a past human subject or subjects (ibid.: 254). He concludes that action '... has outcomes ('events') and that it occurs in descriptive settings (the 'facts') but these do not constitute or define the stories told by narrative historians. The action itself is *the story*' (ibid.: 256). The action as found in the data is thus presumed to provide the real story to which the historian's narrative can correspond. This is the essence of reconstructionist historical analysis. Roberts's conclusion is plain: because stories can be lived, with appropriate attention to the sources, they can be accurately retold.

Arthur Marwick, another card-carrying reconstructionist writer and legitimist, seems less interested than Roberts in the idea that it is possible to discover the intention behind the action of the historical agent which can then be retold in the narrative. Indeed, he seems to regard narrative as inferior to the other aspects of what it is that historians do. As he says '... straight narrative is the easiest form of historical writing save that it is not very historical' (Marwick [1970] 1989: 144). It is not very historical, apparently, because it does not permit either the distinguishing of the relative importance of events, nor the determination of the underlying structures of change. Although he does not consider (as Roberts does) action as the primary agent of historical change, like Roberts he seems to accept that *the story* is back there.

Empiricism, rather than being viewed as just one way among many that is open to historians to address the past, is thus assumed by its supporters to be *the* methodology of that 'proper history' that reconstructionism takes itself to be (Davies 2003). It is 'The Great Story'! Empiricism is further vindicated as being the only defence against the worst mistake that historians can apparently make — the fall from objectivity into relativism. Of course, as Geoffrey Elton and other reconstructionists like Deborah A. Symonds and the realist philosopher Martin Bunzl have recently argued, objectivity is hard to attain because history is only as good as its sources. Thus, Symonds claims that

history, whatever it may become, begins from the materials of history, and that it is in confronting these materials that questions of belief, intention, falsification, and truth have to be confronted and resolved. Theory comes later, after one has decided what one is, in fact, at the most empirical and scientific level, theorising about, and how one's own biases dance at the edge of every apparently objective pool of light.

(Symonds 1999: 166)

Not dissimilarly, Bunzl has tried to defend the reconstruction of the past — in terms of the event — by dropping correspondence and arguing that although descriptions of events can change, the events don't. It does not matter that you have to narrate events and facts — they still have a knowable reality beyond their description. As he concludes, if information is missing, it does not mean that it never existed (Bunzl 1997: 111).

As Symonds's comment reveals, by the late 1990s a more temperate reconstructionist tone, if not 'position', had emerged in an attempt to combat the broad assault on the genre

of reconstructionist history. While still defending the strong possibility of knowing the truth back there through the facts, there is at least some acknowledgement that it is a flawed exercise, albeit because of problems with the sources rather than with any more significant problem of 'knowing'. For us, however, this clearly misses the point, which is that reconstructionist history is founded on the belief that historical method is about empiricism first, last and always. Of course, historical 'facts' are constrained by the compulsion of 'reality'. But it is undeniable that they are also narrated in order to create *an* explanation with *an* emplotment. They are also always laden with concepts, theories and ideologies and, ultimately, exist only under the sway of various types of representation. Once we ratchet up from the single factual statement about the event, we enter the universe of judgements, encodings, descriptions, depictions, ethics, values, images, metaphors, decisions, verdicts and interpretations of 'texts'. None of these at this level (that of the creation of meaning) can be verified, validated or confirmed epistemologically relative to a putative 'reality'. This is the fundamental flaw in reconstructionist histories.

In spite of the common reconstructionist notion that historians don't like theory, at the beginning of the twenty-first century it is not a matter of 'to theorise or not to theorise', but which theory to use (Goodman, in Bentley 1997: 795). This is the crux of the epistemological difference between the reconstructionist and constructionist genres. It is the recognition that empiricism without concept, argument and ideology is blind, deaf and dumb. Accordingly, with its anti-theory stance and its belief in 'truth' and accurate representation, the reconstructionist genre is the epistemological point of departure for the other two genres we are using here.

Part Two: Constructionism

It would be wrong to suggest that what we shall characterise as the constructionist genre emerged in response to the problems with reconstructionist approaches to 'knowing things about the past'. In fact, the forerunner to the new 'practical realism' that we associate with the constructionist genre that emerged in the US and Western Europe in the 1960s and which dominates up to the present, had its antecedents in nineteenth-century positivism — itself the first actual intellectual extension of empiricism. As a 'way of knowing' in its own right, positivism was a theory of knowledge developed by the French sociologist Auguste Comte. Essentially, Comte argued a 'stagist' theory of historical development, the final stage of which (in the mid- to late-nineteenth century) is represented by the ability of 'social scientists' to discover and measure the nature of modern industrial society. As such, Comte is credited with inventing what he called 'social physics' or what we call 'sociology'. Based on objective, distanced empirical observation, positivism suggested that it was possible to explain human society in a fashion similar to that of science through the discovery of society's mechanics and the laws of human behaviour.

The implication for history was that it seemed possible to account for human experience by discovering regular patterns of human behaviour which, in the mid-twentieth century, the philosopher of history, Carl Hempel, called 'covering laws'. The identification of such laws of human behaviour allowed historians more accurately to describe and explain the past. This was a very attractive proposition for many historians and, although it was moderated and indeed rejected as too simplistic by many since the high tide of social history in the 1960s and 1970s, it has remained popular. The reason for this is because of its empirical basis (the 'discovery of the facts'), its maintenance of the epistemological gap between observer and observed, and the possibilities of seeking the determining social, political and economic

structures beneath the 'surface' of the social. In that sense, then, positivism reinforced some basic reconstructionist principles – namely, that the past was once real and remains so through its traces; that inference is the mechanism for 'discovering' the meaning of the evidence; that it is possible to 'tell the truth' by finding *the* story; that fact and fiction are quite different, and that history and historian occupy different universes.

On the other hand, positivism pushed beyond the description and evaluation of the single event or decision of the historical actor/agent that so preoccupied nineteenth-century reconstructionists. Consequently, the debate among historians moved increasingly (as the constructionist philosopher of history, Patrick Gardiner, said in the early 1950s and reconstructionists like Elton recognised) towards the study of the actions of people in groups. As Gardiner argued, 'The historian is concerned with human activities, and he is principally interested in those activities in so far as they have been found related to one another in social groups' (Gardiner [1952] 1961: 60). Gardiner was influential in maintaining the distinction between science and history, but accepted the key constructionist idea that historians deploy concepts and arguments in order to make generalisations, but not ones that are absolute.

Gardiner thus essayed the theoretical foundations for constructionist history, and it is this constructionist 'empiricism plus concepts' which constitutes the mainstream of historical thinking today. Gardiner concluded that 'The fact that the historian's interest is directed upon particular events rather than upon universal laws is a fact about the purpose of history and not a fact about the type of event with which history deals' (ibid.: 64). As we read Gardiner, what he was saying is that while events may be unique, they can be represented as belonging to categories of events that share certain basic similarities. In other words, Gardiner was arguing that historical explanation is somewhat more complex than reconstructionists imagine if they only concentrate on the unique character of all events and human decisions. This is important because it leads into the debate about the distinction between human agency and structure which came to dominate historical thinking in the second half of the last century, and which has been at the heart of the development of constructionist history.

It is also important to note that the challenge to the legacy of nineteenth-century 'event history' (the modes of which tended to be nationalist, political and diplomatic) came not least with the rise of a new socially conscious, positivist-inspired British leftist history. Initiated by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, J.L. and Barbara Hammond, G.D.H. Cole, Raymond Postgate and R.H. Tawney, it was a tradition that continued from the 1950s to the 1990s, led by Victor Kiernan, E.P. and Dorothy Thompson and several US historians like Phillip Foner and Harvey Kaye. History leaving the politics out (or putting the economics in) marked the shift towards what would later be called 'history from the bottom up'. At least, this was the case according to its major early British practitioner, George Trevelyan, in his path-breaking and appropriately entitled book *English Social History* (1944). Apart from what was seen as undeniable evidence that progress was not the keynote of modern historical development, many early twentieth-century constructionists thus sought out the structural reasons in society for the failure of social justice. This continued as a major theme throughout the rest of the century with the dominance of social history, although it metamorphosed into a much more complex and sophisticated cultural history in the last thirty years or so.

Parallel to these developments in social history in Britain and the US, in France in 1929 Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch established the *Annales* School as an alternative orientation for the historicisation of the past (they established a journal bearing that title). Although not an alternative genre, it nevertheless stressed a different method in empirically based and structural history. Borrowing from the emergent social sciences (especially sociology, anthropology and geography), the *Annalistes* stressed large-scale thematic and comparative structural change (as opposed to smaller event scale historical change) in an effort to understand the

'totality' of history. The leading successor to the founders of the movement was Fernand Braudel who vigorously pursued the notion of total history in his famous book *The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, published in 1949.

As this little narrative of our own suggests, then, the last century witnessed a mixed reaction to the genre of reconstructionism in the emergence of a great variety of, not least, social histories. And this multiplication of the modes of constructionist history became ever greater in the second half of the century as the discipline became open to a wider range of practitioners, especially women and historians in the developing world. There was also a number of parallel methodological developments by the 1970s. The last thirty years or so have thus witnessed the growth of cliometrics (the use of statistics in history) and a vast diversity of cultural histories (micro-history, local and regional history, *Alltagsgeschichte* (the study of everyday life)), subaltern studies (history from below, with particular reference to the ex-British colonies), social memory, public history, etc.

Constructionism is thus, as suggested, empiricism married to varying levels of social theory and to more or less complex forms of explanatory conceptualisation. Historians writing within this genre accept that the correspondence theory of knowledge is flawed. However, they still maintain their due respect for empiricism, accurately rendered in the historical narrative. Ultimately, what distinguishes the constructionist from the reconstructionist is the belief that history can be 'objective', not simply through source analysis, etc., but when the understanding of them is fostered by appropriate theorisation and through the deployment of various helpful concepts. Constructionists recognise that their historical narratives cannot easily reflect the experience of past reality and that distanced objectivity is a position that is difficult to sustain.

Nevertheless, there is still a parallel with reconstructionist attitudes towards the referentiality of the sources. Constructionists claim that, in using concepts and theories such as race, class, gender, imperialism, nationalism, psychohistory, ethnography, etc., they encompass what are, in effect, non-narrative or narrative-free conceptual or topic organising categories. It is this belief that allows constructionists, such as the social historian John Tosh, to relegate narrative in importance as a mechanism for analysing and understanding the past, while subscribing to the opinion that *the* story in the past can still be found (Tosh [1984] 2000: 96). Unlike reconstructionists, constructionists accept that getting at *the* story is not simply assured by a detailed knowledge of the sources. However, for constructionists, knowing the truth of the past is still feasible in principle precisely because history is constructed through using the tools of sophisticated conceptualisation and social theory; on the other hand, for reconstructionists, empiricism alone is enough.

Hence, the prudent use of concepts and theories of explanation borrowed and adapted from other humanities and social science disciplines is an essential prerequisite to understanding the structures that shaped abstract social processes, as well as the political lives, human intentions and actions of people in the past. For constructionists, conceptual interventionism does not generate false knowledge about the reality of the past because it is regarded as being of a provisional kind; that is, the theory or utility of the concept is tested in the evidence. The constructionist way of approaching history is animated by a complex and self-reflexive, yet still a basically objective, empirical methodology. No matter what ontological assumptions are made about the nature of the past or the historians' experience of the present, constructionist historians share with reconstructionists the desire to maintain the distance between themselves and the past. But, unlike reconstructionists, they do this by viewing the concepts and tools of analysis as serving the evidence rather than as impositions upon it.

In spite of their scepticism about what we can know through the sources, constructionists are realists – in fact, practical realists, as Appleby, Hunt and Jacob describe it (Appleby, et al.: 1994). They continue to believe in correspondence, referentiality and the possibilities

of accurate representation in language. For a growing minority of post-constructionists (aka deconstructionists), however, history is not a construction in pursuit of the truth of the past; for these historians the 'epistemological gap' does not exist because we exist in a non-epistemological world. History is primarily the figural, narrative creation of the historian in the present. In an ironic echo of reconstructionist thinking, such post-constructionists argue that every social theory, or a concept used in the pursuit of the past, is an unfixing, a destabilisation of it. Each and every concept and every operation of presumed laws of human behaviour are impositions of an artificial order on the past by the historian. But there is something more which acts to undermine conventional reconstructionist and constructionist thinking. This is that language is a poor conductor of meaning because of its arbitrary and historicist nature. What this means is that we can only 'know' the past through our concepts which, rather than being constituted out of the evidence, are created through our language use – rhetorical constructionism. It was the incursion of post-structuralist thought into the mainstream of history that heralded this move: the revolution of the linguistic and aesthetic 'turn' from the belief in empiricist epistemology (i.e. *the* epistemology) to the narrativist, and from the reconstructionist and constructionist genres to the deconstructionist.

Part Three: Deconstructionism

From a perspective that assumes that history is as much a narrative-linguistic aesthetic as it is an empirical-analytical activity, deconstructionist historians tackle and go beyond what they believe to be the limited possibilities of reconstructionism and constructionism. Among the assumptions of epistemology they question are: the epistemological principle of empiricism whereby content (the past) must always determine its narrative shape (form); the existence of a discoverable emplotment (that the story exists in the action/intentions of historical agents), and that the ontological separation of knower (historian/being) and known (the past/history) leads to objectivity. Deconstructionists also critique correspondence and coherence theories of knowledge (referentiality); the notion of inference and the truthful statement (explanation to the best fit); the clear distinction between fact and fiction; the subject-object division (objectivity); representationalism (accurate representation), and the idea that the appropriate use of social theory (concept and argument) can generate truth-statements.

On the other hand, deconstructionists do not deny in any way whatsoever the 'actuality' of the past or the existence of its sources, i.e. the 'data-stream' or the factual statement. Deconstructionist historians are not anti-realists. However, being anti-representationalist and anti-epistemological, as the pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty points out, means not swallowing all the epistemological and methodological baggage of an unthinking empiricism that associates the existence of data with ultimately being able to know what it means with a high degree of certainty. Again, as the Dutch theorist Frank Ankersmit argues, not only are facts essentially events under a description (how else can we know them except when we describe them?), but all the historical interpretations built on them exist only in relation to other interpretations. One of the foundations of the deconstructionist genre is that there is no original or given meaning that history can *discover*; that there is *no* story, *no* narrative, *no* emplotment or argument *in* the past per se and that the past has in it neither rhyme nor reason. Nor is the past per se internally 'historical'; the past has to be made into history by the work(s) of historians. Deconstructionists ask all historians to consider their answer to the question: if historical interpretations can only exist in language, what does this mean for historical understanding? The fact that something happened does not mean that we know or can adequately describe what it *means* – there is *no* entailment from fact(s) to value(s).

While for reconstructionist and constructionist historians the problem is about how we can objectively know the past (i.e. make truthful statements about it), for deconstructionists 'doing history' is the exercise of a literary activity that doubts that empiricism and language are adequate to the task of representation of 'reality' at a fundamentally truthful level when the aim is the recovery of what it *actually* means. Deconstructionists do not share their reconstructionist and constructionist colleagues' belief that the past can be faithfully translated into a truthful historical description. Rather, they choose to follow the anti-representationalist argument that the distinction between appearance and reality cannot be overcome by the traditional methods of empirical research (contextualisation, comparison, verification of evidence, inference and the correspondence theory of knowledge). Deconstructionists do not accept that the constructionist view that the categories we use in our historical narrative necessarily (by dint of the study of the empirical evidence) correspond to the 'meaning' of any past reality.

For deconstructionist historians, then, the idea that objectivity is hard to attain (because history is only as good as its sources and the honesty and ability of its practitioners who will, if they are any good, infer properly what the past means) misses the point of the debate. It is not that objectivity is possible or impossible, but rather how we cope with the fact that, given that the past no longer exists, how can we infer 'true' propositional statements (i.e. facts) from events and then 'truly' narrate them? While the traces of the past remain (documents, newsreels, buildings, paintings, oral testimony), they no longer contain the reproducible functionality of original cause and effect. Most historians work on the remains of the past in the belief that they can mine them for their veins of meaning. But all we end up with are the inferences they draw as to the fixity of meaning they assumed must have once existed. The point at issue for deconstructionists is how can we know the historicised past if we assume there is no knowable truth back there because our only access to it is when we speak it or write it 'historically'? As Ankersmit argues, we can only know the meaning of the represented through its representation – a circular, self-referencing position to be in.

But what of truth? Taking up a similar position to Ankersmit, the American pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty, suggests that only our descriptions of the world can be true or false – i.e. we make prepositional constitutive statements about 'the real'. The world itself – past events – do not possess this characteristic. Most historians (working in both the reconstructionist and constructionist genres) would respond not so, for what makes a statement 'true' is the nature of the reality it describes (correspondence). Unfortunately, say deconstructionists, 'the world' of the past no longer exists in the sense that 'the word' refers to an observable reality. How can you accurately describe, let alone confidently infer, the meaning of something that is literally no longer real? Arguably, history is an inferential activity that cannot get back to any original meaning. You can only assume original meaning if you choose to believe that the data-stream of the past contains a true meaning. For deconstructionists who want to 'do history', this is the problem. So how do deconstructionists 'do history'?

For deconstructionist historians, 'doing history' means engaging with the past in ways that are far from traditional because of their anti-epistemological assumptions. Thus, deconstructionists might choose, for example, to explore the consequences of reversing the priority of content over form and thus experimenting with representation. Or by exploring the subjectivity of the historian as an author. Or by addressing the possible consequences of reading the past as one would a text, specifically a text that has no author but is culturally provided and that the literal is only ever accessed through the figurative. Or by recognising that because we know through narrative, we cannot know the past as it once was (facts = events under a description). Or by acknowledging that history is ideological through and through. Or by deconstructing the arguments and theories that deconstructionist historians deploy as they 'do history' (how their creation of history affects the past). Or by asking what

are the possible results of the collapse of the distinction between being and knowing in a post-epistemological world.

For Frank Ankersmit and Hayden White, the realist principle that there is a distinction (endorsed by both reconstructionists and constructionists) between language and reality, forfeits its meaning. Language cannot be the mirror of nature as Richard Rorty puts it. The reason is straightforward. Our language is part of the reality being depicted. This means that whenever we think about the past we should start by deconstructing our basic assumptions about it. Take, again, the historical fact. As we have already suggested, facts are not bits of reality lying around in the past waiting to be picked up, polished and displayed. They are propositional statements about the nature of reality (past events under a description): to argue that facts exist in the ontic 'world' is nonsensical. Moreover, is it really good enough, deconstructionists argue, for reconstructionists and constructionists to claim (as they sometimes do) that recognising history as a narrative construction might somehow trivialise the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust or allow its deniers the freedom to peddle their lies? Holocaust deniers, of course, are not deconstructionists; they are reconstructionists and constructionists who choose to be highly selective in selecting their data (usually for fascist ideological reasons).

So while reconstructionist/constructionist historians appear to describe empirical reality by standing apart from it, distanced and detached, they are, of course, directly implicated in it. To use the language, for example, of women's history or the 'post-feminist' is to organise the facts of the past into a preferred reality. There is no actual 'post-feminist' corpus of data. There is no 'post-feminist fact' back there. There is no 'post-feminist' employment. The existence of, say, a data-stream is no insurance against historians avoiding the error of the referential illusion that allows them (if they are so inclined) to equate description with reality.

Thinking about the implications of the links between language (the word) and reality (the world) is clearly at the forefront of deconstructionist history. Those working within the deconstructionist genre hold that history is always written from the need (which is prior to the empirical) to engage critically with those languages or discourses through which we set to work with the real world. The deconstructionist objective is to establish how such discourses – like the reconstructionist and constructionist genres – can achieve or fail to achieve their objective of truthful knowing. Deconstructionist history is thus self-reflexive at the basic level of the connection between knowing and telling, and thus very different in its emphasis from the scepticism about 'the sources' of reconstructionists or the social theory experimentation of constructionists. The reconstructionist and constructionist preoccupations with the sources and debates between competing interpretations, or trying to avoid ideology and bias, or understanding the conflicts between agency and structure, or even being aware of the tensions between description, analysis and narrative, is never enough for deconstructionist historians.

In a recent book on 'what is history?' and 'how to do it', two constructionist historians argue that postmodernism threatens the foundations – the epistemological roots – of the discipline (Black and MacRaid [1997] 2000: 161). But it may do more than that. For there is today a group of theorists for whom postmodernism calls into question the very discourse of history as such, including the deconstructionist genre. For today there are those who would move well beyond 'epistemological questions' that reflect upon the need for and utility of empiricism, referentiality, representation and narrative. From what we have said so far, for reconstructionists historical knowledge is referential – i.e. found in the evidence. This suggests that the past can be accurately represented and it can, therefore, be faithfully reconstructed in the historical narrative. For the self-conscious and conceptually sophisticated constructionist historian, history is at a foundational level still made out of the traces of the past. For deconstructionist historians the link between the real and its narration remains so tenuous that they question whether the past can be turned into truthful history, or that any story can be retold,

or is, maybe, worth the effort. The fourth position – the endist position – questions and discusses whether there can be any useful historical knowing in the sense of understanding the meaning of a somehow connected series of events and, moreover, mistrusts our cultural need for it. This position can be understood, perhaps, through a long and complicated 'story' of its own, but it is a story that has now been essayed many times so that, here, the following shortened version can hopefully suffice. It goes as follows.

Part Four: Endisms

Not so long ago in the West, there existed an essentially religious but, in the last two hundred years, a thoroughly secularised belief that the past, history, had in it its own intrinsic value, its own purposeful meaning, an essence which, made manifest in its material effects could, if it were read carefully (hermeneutically), bring history's underlying *raison d'être* to the surface. Almost invariably this perceived history, this unfolding of meaning, was cast in a form of a progressive teleology – i.e. that right from the start history had a direction and destiny in it which, fully realised, would bring it to an end. Like all teleologies, this particular teleology culminated in *closure*, the substance(s) of which, in this instance, was expressed in the idea that the point of history was to bring about emancipated human rights communities in one or two basic forms (with internal inflections): a bourgeois, liberal, capitalist form or a proletarian socialist/communist one.

Rooted in, and thus expressive as these aspirational beliefs were of sectional interests within social formations riven with inequalities and class conflicts, it was these respective legitimations of very different ideas of progress that helped lead towards, to help cause the way that those particular antagonisms, conflicts, revolutions, wars and attempted 'rational means-ends' totalitarianisms that came to plague the twentieth century – turning it into the bloodiest and most genocidal century on record – were played out. It is arguably one of the greatest ironies, arguably one of the greatest tragedies, that the empowering belief in such human rights communities which wished to see the harmonious end of the very conflictive conditions that gave it birth was unable to escape these self-same clutches and that this great fable of emancipation was destined to play itself out in the form of the (basically) 'Western' nation state, the most effective killing machine that has ever existed on the face of the earth.

Within those nation states that resisted the drive towards human rights communities proletarian style – within those states that have today become 'our' Western democracies, our bourgeois, liberal, capitalist social formations – then 'our' current condition has been reached as a result of a whole series of transformations that have required, to be the transformations they were, their own specific cultural logics of 'social relations'. Fredric Jameson characterised the logic of the present-day as 'postmodern'. Although one may not agree in every detail with the kind of analysis implied by the tautologous title of Jameson's now classic text, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) (i.e. that postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism, that late capitalism's cultural logic is postmodernism), the point we want to make is that the need for contemporary social formations in general for past/postmodern modes and relations of production (flexible accumulation, flexible labour, flexible production and distribution; for short-term contracts and relationships; for mobile, migratory finance capital and migrant workers; for niche-marketing and venture capitals that spin around the globe), has, by the sheer force of everyday necessity, generated a ubiquitous *relativism* that 'absolutely' nothing has the power to escape from.

Thus, we can see very clearly that *relativism* is inevitable and unavoidable today, for if you get rid of, empty out, every idea that anything has an intrinsic value; if 'goods' – including

men, women, ideas, concepts – have only got a market value, an exchange value (as they must have if nothing transcendental has credibility; if no 'use value' escapes exchange), then it is inconceivable that the saturation of the socio-economic with relativism should exclude from its sodden state any other area of life. And so this obviously includes – and the implications of this is what is crucial to note – ethics, morality and the discourse of history *per se*. Consequently, the only attitude we can have towards any form of absolute ethics, morality and history, is one of incredulity.

Of course, there are some who still think that it is possible to have an ethics, morality and maybe, in some form, a history that stands above and beyond the 'ravages' of relativism. But it is a thought that cannot now be substantiated and, therefore, sustained. And, again, it is easy to isolate what causes relativism to be 'the only game in town', for what the relativising market has done in its everyday divorce of fact and value, in its everyday logical divorce between commodities and their market price/value, is to raise to consciousness as never before the problematic nature of the 'facts of the matter' and what value should be *given*, extrinsically, to them. And it is to raise to the level of consciousness with regard to all historical accounts 'the fact' that, from the facts of the past, the syntax of the past, no value, no semantics are entailed: you can read the past, in its parts or its putative whole, *any way you like*. No necessary meaning, no necessary significance, no necessary emplotment follows; or, to put it this way, 'nothing (necessarily) follows'. In this 'context', it is pertinent to note that Jacques Derrida always talks of the 'non-ethical opening of ethics'; the way in which, although you are always called upon to make a decision about something that *is*, the facts of the matter of what *is* the case *cannot* tell you what you *ought* to do; cannot tell you how you must decide. Consequently, freed up for choice but with no guarantee that you will ever make the 'right choice', Derrida talks about the 'undecidability of the decision'. Although you are always called on to make a decision (for to refuse to make a decision is still yet a decision), the status of the decision is always problematic, interminably open – this is the condition of aporia, of radical undecidability. And so, although it may be foolish to offer to define postmodernism, for us postmodernism might be best considered here as the era of the raising to consciousness of the aporia... of the undecidability of the decision and of incredulity towards metanarrative, towards metaphysics.

And we think that this definition applies also to professional, academic histories which, although they have no time for metanarratives, nevertheless find it difficult to radically problematise – as postmodernism so defined radically problematises – the very idea, the very act of the imagination that is – all the way down – the intellectual experiment of historicising the past, the 'before now'. For if petite narratives as well as metanarratives are undercut by their incredible status and relativised out of any notion of *immanence* (of intrinsicality), then they can no longer make claims – at the level of the text – to truth, objectivity, disinterest, neutrality, non-present-centredness, science or whatever – i.e. they can make no claims to being *epistemological*. And, let us note, deconstructionist historians are not, unfortunately, immune from harbouring at least part of those delusions, for deconstructionist historians are still, at the end of the day, historians. Of course, their histories are often wondrously different, radical and problematising; their histories are multi-levelled, multi-perspectival and highly reflexive as they draw attention to the way *their* words on *their* page create *their* intervention in the discourses of historicisation. These are histories that are reflexively and thus self-consciously troped, spoken, emplotted, argued for in overtly positioned ways and thus inevitably metaphorical/allegorical; bespoke histories, cut and made to measure to suit. *But they are still histories*.

There are some people, though – some of whom appear in Part Four – who have variously given up on history and thus occasioned/contributed to, 'endist' debates. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth's radical rethinking of not just history but the idea of time(s) is perhaps fundamental

here in catching a certain mood; there is a certain unconcerned everydayness about her indifference to whether history continues or not: there are better things to think about. For just as, say, the nineteenth century witnessed the announcement (by F.W. Nietzsche, for example) of the death of God, that announcement pointed to a particular kind of dying. For Nietzsche, it wasn't as if there had once been a God and that that God had died, but that God (and gods) were the products of a particular belief system which, when that belief system had become thoroughly secularised, just dropped out of the (secular) conversation. The very idea of God/gods now looked irrelevant, such that 'His' death was caused by our unconcern; by our neglect; we had other things on our minds. And so, while the working out of the death of God/gods was, for Nietzsche, destined to take place through at least the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, although His shadow would hang over us, the substance of God/gods, had gone. Similarly, Ermarth takes it for granted that, sired and born within modernity, histories as we have come to know them – in metanarrative and professional, academic forms – are now, in postmodernity, also slipping out of our conversations. Although still invoked and still talked about in universities and among academics – just as God is still talked about among, say, Christians – nevertheless, the seminar rooms and the churches are 'empty in their history talk', are 'empty in their God talk'. And so Ermarth doesn't bother to argue for the end of history or pencil in some new historical timing of time befitting time(s) beyond modernity. She is not concerned to apply, say, her idea of rhythmic time to aspects of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Rather, she just forgets histories to talk about things more interesting and urgent, acts of the imagination that rethink time and the 'time of our lives' in ways that are not contaminated by (what she calls) the radioactivity of the old idea(s) of history, ways of producing postmodern acts of the imagination as yet to come. Here, postmodernity gives rise to new births.

Not all those who appear alongside Ermarth in Part Four think as she does. The way that considerations on the 'idea of the end of history' vary widely in the writings of, say, J.F. Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Rita Felski, Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, David Harlan and Joan Scott. And this is to be expected – it's fine, because Part Four is not composed of readings that all agree on the details of the death of – or the moribund condition of – history. Nor are all the extracts in favour of history coming to an end, however construed. No. What all the readings of Part Four do is *address*, from a series of positions taken up relative to modernity/postmodernity, the question of whether postmodernism signals the end of history in some way or not: this is a discussion *about* the idea of, and the practices of, Endism. Accordingly, it is this *engagement* which is considered in Part Four to help bring, when allied to Parts One to Three, the question of 'the nature of history today' into as wide a view as possible.

Concluding thoughts

We think – we hope – that we have now justified the organisation of this Reader on the nature of history today, and that, if you leaf back to the Contents page, you will see the range of historians we have drawn on and who has been categorised as belonging to this or that genre and why; how they have 'been put in their place'. We think we need to make only one final point. You will see from the Contents page that the genre section(s) and the 'endist' section have different numbers of readings in them and that individually, the readings vary in length and 'style' (e.g. some provide footnotes or endnotes, while others do not). These differences can be explained by our saying that we think that, on the whole, the reconstructionist and constructionist extracts will be more familiar to readers than those in the deconstructionist and 'endist' sections. The readings in the latter two categories are thus longer than those in

the first two; correspondingly, overall there are fewer of them. The differences in number and length, then, seem justified to us with regard to our intention of producing a useful, workable and hopefully thoughtful text about the nature of this thing called history. Whether we have achieved our intentions we cannot be sure, but we hope – once again *après* Derrida – that you might find in the following pages 'something in their favour'.

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PART ONE

Reconstructionism

Texts in the genre of reconstructionism reflect the author's foundational belief in the knowability of the past; that it can be turned into history through the mechanism of the correspondence of sources and their data to meaning – to 'tell the truth about history', as it were, by recovering its 'true narrative'. The meaning or, as it is more usually described, the historian's interpretation, entails engaging with the referential. But, for reconstructionists, the idea that the past might be 'storyless' seems as nonsensical as the constructionists' nomothetic orientation. In other words, the form or shape we 'find' in the past must be the result of its inner or given meaning. If we choose not to believe that the past has an intrinsic shape, then it ceases to be something with which we can meaningfully engage. This is the major preoccupation of the authors of our first extracts.

agitation in a fitful kind of way, but between 1830 and 1850 both the middle and working classes achieved a new sense of identity through separate and conflicting radical organizations: the Anti-Corn Law League was the essence of a middle-class pressure group; Chartism was the voice of the working class, excluded from political and economic power. It was not differences in immediate aims which divided the two organizations: most Chartists wanted the cheap bread and more plentiful employment which repeal of the Corn Laws promised; and the leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League wanted to destroy the aristocratic system and to extend the franchise. The difference between them was one of class. To the *Charter* newspaper (not an extreme publication) in 1839, the League was 'a party comprised of avaricious, grasping, money-mongers, great capitalists, and rich manufacturers'. To the *Leeds Mercury* the Chartist leadership of the great strike against manufacturers in the summer of 1842 comprised 'wicked and designing men' who were 'deplorably ignorant' of sound political economy.

CHAPTER 4

George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi

AMERICA: A NARRATIVE HISTORY

([1984] 1999)*

George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi provide the next extract. They are two of America's most distinguished historians. Individually they have published widely in the areas of cultural and regional history of the US. Their textbook *America: A Narrative History* ([1984] 1999) has now run to several editions and is one of the leading textbooks of US history used at the college level. Taking one short extract from a book that runs to almost 1,700 pages – which makes this a monumental example of the survey text genre – is, at one level, unfair. But the extracts chosen from early on in the book and entitled 'The Great Biological Exchange' and 'Professional Explorers', reveal the same response to the needs of reconstructionist surveys as we saw in the Royle example (Chapter 3). Once again, the tenor and literary technique is authoritative and full of examples of events and happenings, and deliberately makes few demands on the reading abilities of the audience. The title of the full text – *A Narrative History* – is presumably chosen because of the popular and common association between the concept of a narrative and the telling of a story. The extract reveals the authors' epistemological assumptions that the past has a clearer and more immediate meaning when cast in terms that

have a resonance today, as well as also through rational action theory – that is, the tracing of the intentions and work of historical agents. The reference to the 'green revolution' exported from the Americas and how these now make up a third of the world's plants indicates the effort to promote the relevance of the past today. The short yet vivid narrative about the professional explorers emphasises their expertise and specialised skills through the most well-known examples: Columbus, Cabot, de Balboa, da Gama and Magellan. Another important feature of survey texts pervades the extract, which is the sense of inevitability in the veracity of the story being retold. This is how it was and what it means.

The great biological exchange

THE FIRST EUROPEAN contacts with the New World began a diffusion of cultures, an exchange of such magnitude and pace as humanity had never known before. It was in fact more than a diffusion of cultures: it was a diffusion of distinctive biological systems. If anything, the plants and animals of the two worlds were more different than the people and their ways of life. Europeans, for instance, had never seen such creatures as the fearsome (if harmless) iguana, flying squirrels, fish with whiskers like cats, snakes that rattled "castanets," or anything quite like several other species: bison, cougars, armadillos, opossums, sloths, tapirs, anacondas, electric eels, vampire bats, toucans, Andean condors, and hummingbirds. Among the few domesticated animals, they could recognize the dog and the duck, but turkeys, guinea pigs, llamas, and alpacas were all new. Nor did the Native Americans know of horses, cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, and (maybe) chickens, which soon arrived from Europe in abundance. Yet, within a half century, whole islands of the Caribbean would be overrun by pigs, whose ancestors were bred in Spain.

The exchange of plant life worked an even greater change, a revolution in the diets of both hemispheres. Before the Great Discovery three main staples of the modern diet were unknown in the Old World: maize, potatoes (sweet and white), and many kinds of beans (snap, kidney, lima, and others). The white potato, although commonly called "Irish," actually migrated from South America to Europe and only reached North America with the Scotch-Irish immigrants of the 1700s. Other New World food plants included peanuts, squash, peppers, tomatoes, pumpkins, pineapples, sassafras, papayas, guavas, avocados, cacao (the source of chocolate), and chicle (for chewing gum). Europeans in turn soon introduced rice, wheat, barley, oats, wine grapes, melons, coffee, olives, bananas, "Kentucky" bluegrass, daisies, and dandelions to the New World.

The beauty of the exchange was that the food plants were more complementary than competitive. They grew in different soils and climates, or on different schedules. Indian corn, it turned out, could flourish almost anywhere—high or low, hot or cold, wet or dry. It spread quickly throughout the world. Before the end of the 1500s, American maize and sweet potatoes were staple crops in China. The green revolution exported from the Americas thus helped nourish a worldwide population explosion probably greater than any since the invention of agriculture. Plants domesticated by Native Americans now make up about a third of the world's food plants.

Europeans, moreover, adopted many Native American devices: canoes, snowshoes, moccasins, hammocks, kayaks, ponchos, dogsleds, and toboggans. The rubber ball and the game of lacrosse had Indian origins. New words entered the languages of Europeans:

* George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi ([1984] 1999) *America: A Narrative History*, 5th edition, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., pp. 21–6.

wigwam, teepee, papoose, succotash, hominy, tobacco, moose, skunk, opossum, woodchuck, chipmunk, tomahawk, hickory, pecan, raccoon, and hundreds of others—and new terms in translation: warpath, warpaint, paleface, medicine man, firewater. And the natives left the map dotted with place names of Indian origin long after they were gone, from Miami to Yakima, from Penobscot to Yuma.

There were still other New World contributions: tobacco and a number of other drugs, including coca (for cocaine and novocaine), curare (a muscle relaxant), and cinchona bark (for quinine), and one common medical device, the enema tube. But Europeans also exposed the New World inhabitants to exotic new illnesses they could not handle. Even minor European diseases such as measles turned killer in the bodies of Indians who had never encountered them and thus had built up no immunity. Major diseases such as smallpox and typhus killed all the more speedily. According to an account from the first English colony, sent by Sir Walter Raleigh on Roanoke Island, within a few days after Englishmen visited the Indian villages of the neighborhood “people began to die very fast, and many in short space. . . . The disease also was so strange that they neither knew what it was, nor how to cure it.” Epidemics ravaged the native population. In central Mexico alone, some 8 million people, perhaps a third of the entire population, died of disease within a decade after the Spaniards arrived. In what is now Texas, one Spanish explorer noted, “half the natives died from a disease of the bowels and blamed us.”

Professional explorers

Undeterred by new diseases and encouraged by Columbus's discoveries, professional explorers, mostly Italians, hired themselves out to the highest bidder to look for a western passage to Asia. They probed the shorelines of America during the early sixteenth century in the vain search for an opening, and thus increased by leaps and bounds European knowledge of the New World. The first to sight the North American continent was John Cabot, a Venetian whom Henry VII of England sponsored. Acting on the theory that China was opposite England, Cabot sailed across the North Atlantic in 1497. His landfall at what the king called “the new Founde lande” gave England the basis for a later claim to all of North America. During the early sixteenth century, however, the English grew so preoccupied with internal divisions and conflicts with France that they failed to capitalize on Cabot's discoveries. Only fishermen exploited the teeming waters of the Grand Banks. In 1513 the Spaniard Vasco Núñez de Balboa became the first European to sight the Pacific Ocean, but only after he had crossed the Isthmus of Panama on foot.

The Portuguese, meanwhile, went the other way. In 1498, while Columbus prowled the Caribbean, Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa and soon set up the trading posts of a commercial empire stretching from India to the Moluccas (or Spice Islands) of Indonesia. The Spaniards, however, reasoned that the line of demarcation established by the Treaty of Tordesillas ran around the other side of the earth as well. Hoping to show that the Moluccas lay near South America within the Spanish sphere, Ferdinand Magellan, a haughty Portuguese seaman in the employ of Spain, set out to find a passage through or around South America. Departing Spain in 1519, he found his way through the dangerous strait that now bears his name, then moved far to the north. On a journey far longer than he had anticipated, he touched upon Guam and eventually made a landfall in the Philippines, where he lost his life in a fight with the natives.

Magellan's remaining crew members made their way to the Moluccas, picked up a cargo of spices, and returned to Spain in 1522. This first voyage around the globe quickened Spanish ambitions for empire in the East, but after some abortive attempts at establishing themselves there, the Spaniards, beset by war with France, sold Portugal their claims to the Moluccas. From 1565, however, Spaniards would begin to penetrate the Philippines, discovered by Magellan and named for the Spanish prince who became Philip II. In the seventeenth century, the English and the Dutch would oust Portugal from most of its empire, but for a century, the East Indies were Portuguese.

CHAPTER 5

David Hackett Fischer

PAUL REVERE'S RIDE (1995)*

Another popular reconstructionist form is ‘myth debunking’. This has a particular appeal to those historians who choose to believe that detailed factualism is the antidote to all historical fables. Such fables are, of course, normally the interpretations of previous generations of historians. The celebrated US historian, David Hackett Fischer, is Warren Professor of History at Brandeis University and in his book, *Paul Revere's Ride* (1995), he aims to describe the true story of the ride of Paul Revere, the American Revolutionary patriot, on the night of 18 April 1775. Revere was asked to spread the word that British troops were about to capture a store of the colonist's gunpowder at Concord, just outside Boston. An otherwise unexceptional crossing of the Charles River and ride by horseback from Charlestown to Medford was transformed in the American popular imagination through the patriotic, but factually inaccurate poem ‘Paul Revere's Ride’ by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1861). As Fischer says, the legendary image is a romantic idea, ‘but it is not what actually happened’. As a sophisticated reconstructionist, the point that Fischer does not miss, but fails to expand upon, is the way in which the various Revere narratives are told and constructed. Fischer points out (in a historiographical appendix) how the event has been used to create myths for various political and ancestor-worshipping reasons. But Fischer, of course, has his own agenda. His epistemological preference is revealed (in an echo of Brown Tindall and Shi) when he portrays Revere (and the several other similar riders who were abroad that night) as warning ‘town leaders and military commanders of their region’. With this description Fischer argues that, in awakening political institutions (as represented by these people), ‘human will’ and ‘individual action’ are central to historical explanation. That this is Fischer's epistemological choice is as likely to do with his view of the world (where reality is about choice, accident and human agency and, who knows, individuals ‘choosing’ the path of destiny), as it is with the historical evidence of the ride. For Fischer it seems that, despite the legendary character of Revere, the essential

* David Hackett Fischer (1995) *Paul Revere's Ride*, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., pp. 138–41.

PART TWO

Constructionism

As we know, the genre of constructionism constitutes the large middle ground of historical thinking and practice today. Characterised by its distinctive epistemological position that places agency within larger social, political, economic and cultural structures and groups, constructionism displays a rich variety of conceptual and theoretical approaches, problems and topics. As a description of this epistemological orientation, constructionism encompasses a vast range of histories, but the most significant mode has been that of social history. While reconstructionist history celebrates its idiographic tradition, with the rise of the social sciences with their nomothetic conventions aimed at developing theories and finding empirical support for them (or not, as the case may be), a new fundamental form of history emerged in the early twentieth century, that of social history. Social history rapidly became the dominant form of constructionist history because of the appeal of its key organising concepts – class, feminism, gender and race. Constructionism is keynoted, therefore, by its concept and theory turn.

were performing the song 'Wake Up, Mose', in which the racial identity of the black-faced hero changed from verse to verse. Tunes like 'De Darkey Fireman's Song' continued the confusion. The minstrel show's 'end men', coming into prominence during the last antebellum years, were, as Alexander Saxton has shown, part Zip Coon but also part Mose. 'White Mose enjoyed a striking, but relatively brief, popularity. Scholars have blamed the steam engine and the professionalization of fire fighting for his demise. But Mose in blackface proved quite durable, incarnated as both an urban dandy and as a fatherly Southern Black. He became Aunt Jemima's husband in the ragdoll and salt-and-pepper shaker families of the twentieth century.

Such words as *coon*, *buck* and *Mose* had more than ambiguous or multiple meanings: they had trajectories that led from white to black. More than that, each of them went from describing particular kinds of whites who had not internalized capitalist work discipline and whose places in the new world of wage labor were problematic to stereotyping Blacks. Rustics and con-men, fops and 'fascinators of women', brawlers and 'sentinels of the new army of the unemployed' – all of these proved easier to discuss when blacked up. Such an evolution of language suggests that some use of the concept of projection is necessary to understand the growth of a sense of whiteness among antebellum workers, who profited from racism in part because it enabled them to displace anxieties within the white population onto Blacks. But the process of projection was not abstract. It took place largely within the context of, working class formation and addressed the specific anxieties of those caught up in that process.

CHAPTER 17

John M. MacKenzie

*ORIENTALISM: HISTORY, THEORY AND THE ARTS (1995)**

One of the most popular and mature forms of constructionist history is the body of work that deals with the nature of imperialism. As one of the central concepts used in history today, there are as many definitions of imperialism as one could wish for. Consequently, the next extract has been chosen because it addresses one of the central debates around the meaning of just one of imperialism's most intriguing features, Orientalism. John M. MacKenzie is Professor of Imperial History at the University of Lancaster and author of several books on the social, cultural and environmental history of the British Empire. In this extract from his *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (1995), MacKenzie describes how the Palestinian critic Edward Said redefined Orientalism by combining and adapting 'two influential

theoretical constructs of the twentieth century' (in Said's books called *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*). The first theoretical construct Said used to produce his new definition of Orientalism was the French historian Michel Foucault's notion of discourse. This was Foucault's idea of the linguistic form through which the 'articulation of knowledge becomes an expression of power'. The second construct linked occidental imperialism to the concept of cultural hegemony by the early twentieth-century Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. Said connected the concept not to the power of intellectuals and economic class as Gramsci did, but to race. Said's construction transformed Orientalism into a set of myths about the Orient that he claims was deliberately engineered by the West. MacKenzie is highly critical of Said's work, seeing it as essentially a repackaging of what most historians of imperialism know and, at worst, the product of anti-Zionist rage. MacKenzie concludes in this extract by declaring Said as being 'situated at the watershed of the modernist-postmodernist debate'. He is, however, unable to determine exactly where he is in relation to postmodernism's antagonism to master narratives. What this extract reveals is the constructionist's self-consciousness about other constructionists and the multiple levels of concept and theory that characterises this genre of historical practice. This is perhaps why so much mainstream history today is concerned with historians critiquing each other. The question is whether the method has got in the way of the message.

THE VALUATION OF THE words 'Orientalism' and 'Orientalist' and the activities which they described came, of course, from within the cultures that had spawned them. The transformation in their meaning and use came from outside, from the world of comparative literature in a post-colonial and post-nationalist context. Edward Said combined and adapted two influential theoretical constructs of the twentieth century to produce his major revaluation of Orientalism. He took Michel Foucault's concept of the discourse, the linguistic apparatus through which the articulation of knowledge becomes an expression of power, and linked it to Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony through which elite control is maintained over the masses. But whereas Foucault was often more interested in the internal topography of his apparatus, Said was concerned to apply it to a large body of heterogeneous texts. And where Gramsci dealt with class in a European context, Said transferred his hegemonic principles to racial representation and control in an imperial frame. Said's work is thus strikingly eclectic, both in philosophical and theoretical terms as well as in his use of a mixture of literary and non-canonical sources. It transformed 'Orientalism', in which the Orient is appropriated by the Occident by being turned into a structure of myth prefabricated for western use, into one of the most ideologically charged words in modern scholarship. Moreover, its seemingly wide-ranging character and the power and freshness of its message prompted responses from a number of disciplines in both the humanities and the social sciences.

Indeed, few books have at the same time stimulated so much controversy or influenced so many studies. Colonial literary theory, anthropology, women's studies, art history, theatre history, media and communications studies, the history of philology, historical geography, even the modish study of 'heritage' and tourism have all come under its sway. Not only has it become almost impossible to consider the relationship between West and East without grappling with its insights, but its method has also been applied to Europe's relationship with other parts of the globe. Yet, with a few rare exceptions, the conventional study of history, even that concerned with the highly relevant examination

* John M. MacKenzie (1995) *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 3–7.

of travel in the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Levant has been notably absent from this list. Moreover, historians of imperialism, for whom Said seems to have the clearest messages, have paid it relatively little attention. It is one of the purposes of this chapter and the next to consider why this should be so.

Like most books that acquire 'epochal' status, *Orientalism* has been seen, both as merely enshrining a great truth and as constituting a major polemic. While Said has castigated the literary-cultural establishment in both *Orientalism* and his more recent *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) for having 'declared the serious study of imperialism and culture' as being 'off limits', imperial historians have been concerned with the culture of imperialism for more than twenty years. Indeed, since the early 1980s it has become a major historical preoccupation. Most historians have little difficulty in seeing texts as 'worldly', as 'to some degree events' in their own right, as 'a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted'. For them 'rubbing culture's nose in the mud of politics' is a perfectly conventional rather than iconoclastic activity. Yet, as we shall see, historians continue to have problems both with *Orientalism* and, more particularly, with some of the work inspired by it, for, like Marx and Freud, Said has spawned followers (Saidians or Saidists), producing work both subtle and crude, some of which the master might wish to disown. However, if *Orientalism* at times conveyed the seductive ring of the codification of the obvious, *Culture and Imperialism* [. . .] presents far greater problems for historians as well as literary critics.

But if Said's intellectual influence on a number of related disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences has been considerable, his work has also been seen as both highly polemical and distinctly schizophrenic. A large proportion of Said's examples are drawn from the Middle East and he is concerned, as he has insisted in a later commentary on *Orientalism*, not to defend Arabs or Islam, but to show that these terms exist as

'communities of interpretation' which gave them existence, and that, like the Orient itself, each designation represented interests, claims, projects, ambitions and rhetorics that were not only in violent disagreement, but were in a situation of open warfare. So saturated with meanings, so overdetermined by history, religion and politics are labels like 'Arab' or 'Muslim' as subdivisions of 'the Orient' that no one today can use them without some attention to the formidable polemical mediations that screen the objects, if they exist at all, that the labels designate.

Given that this is indeed his starting-point, it is not surprising that his work has been seen as a product of rage, the anti-western and by extension anti-Zionist tract of a dispossessed Palestinian. It might reasonably be objected that other religious and ethnic designations are equally overdetermined and saturated with meanings, not only in the Orient, but also in other continents and the West itself. Indeed, it may be that Said himself contributes to this saturation by occidentalising the West, by 'essentialising' (describing by means of essences or stereotypes) the characteristics of European powers no less than they 'essentialised' the East. Moreover, 'Jew' and 'Zionist' are clearly overburdened terms, and it is, perhaps, inevitable that some of the most powerful critiques of Said have come from scholars of Jewish heritage. One proclaimed himself as 'tired of the Said phenomenon'. Another became embroiled in a bitter correspondence in the *Times Literary Supplement* after a particularly hostile review of *Culture and Imperialism*. Yet another, writing within Israel,

has used the viewpoint of women's studies to deliver a powerful, if largely implicit critique of *Orientalism*. For conventional literary critics, Said has had the audacity to attempt to implicate the literature of sensibility, the Leavisite great tradition, in the squalor and brutality of imperialism, while scholars imbued in western liberal humanism, have seen the Enlightenment-tradition, the scholarly explorations celebrated by the writers of the British Council pamphlets, arraigned as the accomplices of colonialism.

Yet herein lies the schizophrenia. Said has declared himself to react to the word 'humanist' with 'contradictory feelings of affection and revulsion'. He seeks to expose the humanistic tradition, while essentially writing within it himself. His works are a collective plea for a new kind of liberal humanity, which Ernest Gellner, in a magisterial review, found an unexceptionable truism. He is steeped in the western musical tradition, but finds it compromised by its political context. He admires the art of Kipling, valuing it above that of the more ambivalent Forster, for example, while loathing its imperialist assumptions. Thus, though he has toyed with the language of base and superstructure, while he has been a member of the Palestine National Council, he writes outside Marxist or revolutionary traditions. Indeed, it is a characteristic of his work that neither economics nor class plays a particularly central role if indeed any role at all. He has said that he finds Marxism 'more limiting than enabling' and that he is more interested in an ethic of individualism than class-consciousness. He is atheistic in religion, agnostic in politics and has no general intellectual attachment beyond a respect for an anarcho-syndicalism. Thus, influenced though he is by Gramsci and Foucault, he stands beyond any scholarly collective, his political objectives (except perhaps Palestinian freedom – though not through partition, which he decries – and wider global understanding) largely undefined.

Further, Said is situated at the watershed of the modernist-postmodernist debate. In *Orientalism* he identifies an imperial totalising project, a 'master narrative' of western power. But his is of course a Whiggism in reverse. He exposes these constant leitmotifs of intercultural relations to condemn rather than to celebrate. Instead of 'progress' or an ineluctable historical dialectic, his master narrative is regressive, a tool of dominance which survives the end of formal imperialism to continue its destructive role in the world of today. As he has put it, decolonisation is an unfinished project. Thus he totalises for the purpose of demolition. But his trade mark is continuity: his Orientalist programme has had continuous showings from at least the eighteenth century to the present day. It prepared the way for full-blown imperial rule and survives as the cultural and ideological superstructure of neo-colonialism, particularly America's self-satisfied and culturally blinkered role (as he sees it) as imperial world policeman in the late twentieth century.

Yet he profoundly distrusts all other 'metanarratives' as interpretative tools. Instead of the 'theorization of the whole', he prefers a 'more unbuttoned, unfixed, and mobile mode' which he has dubbed (in a direct allusion to his own exiled status) nomadic and unhoused. He is also disturbed by the cultural guerrillas which beset the fringes of the master narrative. These he has identified as 'nativism' (which extols the virtues of and seeks to resurrect individual indigenous cultures), 'nationalism' (which asserts the political creed of contesting nations) and 'fundamentalism' (which seeks to restore religious purity as a rallying cry of resistance). Each is concerned to subdivide and separate, by cultural, political or religious means, in order to escape the western coils, and in doing so contributes to a reorientalisation by appearing to confirm the irrational, the divisive, the aberrant character of the West's Orient.

This chapter develops this parallel. For although English national and local government never enforced its plague policy with regard to humans with quite the sanguinary enthusiasm that they displayed towards wayward canines, considerable force was required to sustain the deeply unpopular policies of household isolation and segregation which were the keystone of their response to the plague. It is to this overall context of the coercive exercise of authority and of social differentiation that we should look when we try to understand these dog massacres. They were not based upon simple ignorance, nor were they the febrile panic reactions of a terrified generation unable to control their environment. Rather, they articulated a variety of fears about human relationships with each other, with the bestial aspects of humankind and with the wider world.

PART THREE

Deconstructionism

Texts in the genre of deconstruction are texts which undercut the idea of the narrator as nobody and stress the author's creative role. Dispensing with linear narratives in favour of multi-voiced, multi-perspectival, multi-levelled, fragmented arrangements, such writing plays with the possibility of creating new ways of representing and figuring 'the before now'. This writing is thus often experimental and stylistically innovative, the negative aspects of deconstruction opening up the possibility of positive re-articulations often informed by overtly expressed positions.

something of the cycle of life and death, of dance and ceremony, of worship and government. These fourteen days are enough to pepper his story with reality effects, made the more real as a writer in his brother's Nassau St. office where he can go back to Langsdorff and even David Porter.

His memory of his beach is like the line drawings of a coloring book. His reading to write gives him the brush to color them in.

Melville has had important experiences of otherness, nonetheless. One was that difference is a translation. The hospitality, care, and comfort he receives from these savages is civilization in another dress. It isn't an entry into other people's metaphors — not by a long way — but it is a first step in a sense of the relativity of things.

Another realization for Melville is that if there is civilization on both sides of the beach, there is also savagery on both sides. He sees the savagery in the French. He will see it later in missionaries. He sees it in himself. Here is how he describes his escape from the Taipi.

Even at the moment I felt horror at the act I was about to commit [Melville was escaping in a whale-boat; Mow-Mow, his perceived captor, was swimming after him] but it was no time for pity or compunction, and with a true aim, and exerting all my strength, I dashed the boat-hook at him. It struck him just below the throat, and forced him downwards. I had no time to repeat my blow, but I saw him rise to the surface in the wake of the boat, and never shall I forget the ferocious expression of his countenance.

It was the sort of violence, I have to say, that was a daily occurrence on these beaches. It is Melville's surprise that he looks at the otherness of his beach and sees his own violence mirrored in the reflection.

That's my short true story. Since the purpose of our relationship is didactic — here we are meant to learn from one another — let me play Everyman to my theater. Let me pull aside the curtains, step out onto the proscenium, and in an Epilogue tell you what I think you have just read.

Representing the past — re-presenting the past — is always a challenge to perform cross-culturally. It always means crossing a beach. It means seeing otherness, hearing silences with the same generosity and fluency of spirit, and the same fullness of experience, that we have in our reading dances. Our performance will always be reflective. We always will be mirrored in the otherness, but it will always be an enlarged self that is reflected, and the more authoritative because there will be no reflection at all if we have not given something of ourselves to see and hear otherness. Our performance will always be artful, something other than the past that we present. Our creativity will always be obliged by the ideals of truthfulness. Why that should be so, I cannot say. Perhaps I should end with that declaration and witness. The ultimate performance for a historian is truthfulness.

CHAPTER 27

Walter Benjamin

THE ARCADES PROJECT (1999)*

Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* — a translation of his *Das Passagen-Werk* which first appeared in 1982 (published by Suhrkamp Verlag as Volume 5 of his *Gesammelte Schriften*) — occupied Benjamin at regular intervals for the thirteen years between 1927 and his early death in 1940. He considered it to be his masterpiece. Benjamin hoped that he would be able to express in the work 'the materialist philosophy of the nineteenth century'. In his excellent essay that appears between pages 929 and 945 of *The Arcades Project*, the translator from the German, Rolf Tiedemann, explains the aims that Benjamin had for his 'project' — its method of construction and its legacy. Readers of this volume should start here for a fuller and extremely insightful understanding of the work. Unfinished in 1940, the work, which is made up of several parts (*Exposés*, on nineteenth-century 'Paris in Europe'; *Convolutés*, which offer details of the Parisian arcades and 'Paris'; *First Sketches*, further impressions of the arcades as a microcosm of the nature of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, and *Addenda*, containing an exposé of 1935 (early version), materials for the 1935 exposé and for the arcades), allows Benjamin to articulate, clothe and wed his (Marxist) philosophy of history through, very precisely, his collection of 'impressions' of the Parisian arcades. In the long main section of the work (*Convolutés*) — a section divided into 36 subsections with titles such as Fashion, Baudelaire, The Flâneur, Mirrors, Modes of Lighting and Social Movement — within which there are dozens of observations (generally in single paragraphs or 'fragments') that adhere to no linear sequence, Benjamin, to quote Tiedemann, attempted to 'bring together theory and materials, quotations and interpretations, in a new constellation compared to contemporary modes of representation'. This bringing together would help Benjamin to isolate — and solve through 'montage' — what he saw as the 'central problem of historical materialism' which he himself put thus:

In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness to the realization of the Marxist Method? The first stage of this understanding will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual movement the crystal of the total event.

The magic columns of these palaces
Show to the amateur on all sides,
In the objects their porticos display,
That industry is the rival of the arts.

—"Chanson nouvelle," cited in *Nouveaux Tableaux de Paris, ou Observations sur les mœurs et usages des Parisiens au commencement du XIX siècle* (Paris, 1828), vol. 1, p. 27

* Walter Benjamin (1999) *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 35–41 and 420–3.

For sale the bodies, the voices, the tremendous unquestionable wealth, what will never be sold.

—Rimbaud

“IN SPEAKING OF THE inner boulevards,” says the *Illustrated Guide to Paris*, a complete picture of the city on the Seine and its environs from the year 1852, “we have made mention again and again of the arcades which open onto them. These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury; are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature Flâneur, in which customers will find everything they need. During sudden rainshowers, the arcades are a place of refuge for the unprepared, to whom they offer a secure, if restricted, promenade—one from which the merchants also benefit.” Weather.

This passage is the locus classicus for the presentation of the arcades; for not only do the divagations on the flâneur and the weather develop out of it, but, also, what there is to be said about the construction of the arcades, in an economic and architectural vein, would have a place here.

Names of *magasins de nouveautés*: La Fille d'Honneur, La Vestale, Le Page Inconstant, Le Masque de Fer <The Iron Mask>, Le Petit Chaperon Rouge <Little Red Riding Hood>, Petite Nanette, La Chaumière allemande <The German Cottage>, Au Mamelouk, Le Coin de la Rue <On the Streetcorner>—names that mostly come from successful vaudevilles. Mythology A glover: Au Ci-Devant Jeune Homme. A confectioner: Aux Armes de Werther.

Years of reckless financial speculation under Louis XVIII. With the dramatic signage of the *magasins de nouveautés*, art enters the service of the businessman.

“After the Passage de Panoramas, which went back to the year 1800 and which had an established reputation in society, there was, by way of example, the gallery that was opened in 1826 by the butchers Véro and Dodat and that was pictured in the 1832 lithograph by Arnout. After 1800 we must go all the way to 1822 to meet with a new arcade: it is between this date and 1834 that the majority of these singular passageways are constructed. The most important of them are grouped in an area bounded by the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs to the south, the Rue de la Grange-Batelière to the north, the Boulevard de Sébastopol to the east, and the Rue Ventadour to the west.” Marcel Poëte, *Une vie de cité* (Paris, 1925), pp. 373–374.

[. . .]

The regime of specialties furnishes also—this said in passing—the historical-materialist key to the flourishing (if not the inception) of genre painting in the Forties of the previous century. With the growing interest of the bourgeoisie in matters of art, this type of painting diversified; but in conformity with the meager artistic appreciation initially displayed by this class, it did so in terms of the content, in terms of the objects represented. There appeared historical scenes, animal studies, scenes of childhood, scenes from the life of monks, the life of the family, the life of the village—all as sharply defined genres.

The influence of commercial affairs on Lautréamont and Rimbaud should be looked into!

“Another characteristic deriving chiefly from the Directory [presumably until around 1830??] would be the lightness of fabrics; on even the coldest days, one was seen only rarely in furs or warm overcoats. At the risk of losing their skin, women clothed themselves as though the harshness of winter no longer existed, as though nature had suddenly been transformed into an eternal paradise.” <John> Grand-Carteret, *Les Eléances de la toilette* (Paris), p. xxxiv.

In other respects as well, the theater in those days provided the vocabulary for articles of fashion. Hats à la Tarare, à la Théodore, à la Figaro, à la Grande-Prêtresse, à la Iphigénie, à la Calprenade, à la Victoire. The same *niaiserie* that seeks in ballet the origin of the real betrays itself when—around 1830—a newspaper takes the name *Le Sylphe*.

Alexandre Dumas at a dinner party given by Princess Mathilde. The verse is aimed at Napoleon III.

In their imperial splendor,
The uncle and nephew are equal:
The uncle seized the capitals,
The nephew seizes our capital.

Icy silence followed. Reported in *Mémoires du comte Horace de Viel-Castel sur le règne de Napoléon III*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1883), p. 185.

“The *coulisse* guaranteed the ongoing life of the Stock Exchange. Here there was never closing time; there was almost never night. When the Café Tortoni finally closed its doors, the column of stock jobbers would head across the adjacent boulevards and meander up and down there, collecting in front of the Passage de l'Opéra.” Julius Rodenberg, *Paris bei Sonnenschein und Lampenlicht* (Leipzig, 1867), p. 97.

Speculation in railroad stocks under Louis Philippe.

[. . .]

“The Passage du Caire is highly reminiscent, on a smaller scale, of the Passage du Saumon, which in the past existed on the Rue Montmartre, on the site of the present-day Rue Bachaumont.” Paul Léautaud, “Vieux Paris,” *Mercur de France* (October 15, 1927), p. 503.

“Shops on the old model, devoted to trades found nowhere else, surmounted by a small, old-fashioned mezzanine with windows that each bear a number, on an escutcheon, corresponding to a particular shop. From time to time, a doorway giving onto a corridor; at the end of the corridor, a small stairway leading to these mezzanines. Near the knob of one of these doors, this handwritten sign:

The worker next door
would be obliged if,
in closing the door,
you refrained from slamming it.

Another sign is cited in the same place (Léautaud, "Vieux Paris," *Mercur de France* [1927], pp. 502–503):

ANGELA
2nd floor, to the right

Old name for department stores: *docks à bon marché*—that is, "discount docks." <Sigfried> Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich* <Leipzig and Berlin, 1928>, p. 31.

Evolution of the department store from the shop that was housed in arcades. Principle of the department store: "The floors form a single space. They can be taken in, so to speak, 'at a glance'" Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich*, p. 34.

Giedion shows (in *Bauen in Frankreich*, p. 35) how the axiom, "Welcome the crowd and keep it seduced" (*Science et l'industrie*, 143 [1925], p. 6), leads to corrupt architectural practices in the construction of the department store Au Printemps (1881–1889). Function of commodity capital!

"Even women, who were forbidden to enter the Stock Exchange, assembled at the door in order to glean same indications of market prices and to relay their orders to brokers through the iron grating." *La Transformation de Paris sous le Second Empire* (authors Poëte, Clouzot, Henriot) <Paris, 1910>, on the occasion of the exhibition of the library and the historical works of the city of Paris, p. 66.

"We have no specialty"—this is what the well-known dealer in secondhand goods, Frémin, "the man with the head of gray," had written on the signboard advertising his wares in the Place des Abbesses. Here, in antique bric-à-brac, reemerges the old physiognomy of trade that, in the first decades of the previous century, began to be supplanted by the rule of the *spécialité*. This "superior scrap-yard" was called *Au Philosophe* by its proprietor. What a demonstration and demolition of stoicism! On his placard were the words: "Maidens, do not dally under the leaves!" And: "Purchase nothing by moonlight."

Evidently people smoked in the arcades at a time when it was not yet customary to smoke in the street. "I must say a word here about life in the arcades, favored haunt of strollers and smokers, theater of operations for every kind of small business. In each arcade there is at least one cleaning establishment. In a salon that is as elegantly furnished as its intended use permits, gentlemen sit upon high stools and comfortably peruse a newspaper while someone busily brushes time dirt off their clothing and boots." Ferdinand Von Gall, *Paris and seine Salons*, vol. 2 <Oldenburg, 1845>, pp. 22–23.

A first winter garden—a glassed-in space with flower beds, espaliers, and fountains, in part underground—on the spot where, in the garden of the Palais-Royal in 1864 (and today as well?), the reservoir was located. Laid out in 1788.

"It is at the end of the Restoration that we see the first *magasins de nouveautés*: Les Vêpres Siciliennes, Le Solitaire, La Fille Mal Gardée, Le Soldat Laboureur, Les Deux Magots, Le Petit Saint-Thomas, Le Gagne-Denier <Penny Winnings>." <Lucien> Dubech and <Pierre> d'Espezel, *Histoire de Paris* (Paris, 1926), p. 360.

"In 1820 . . . the Passage Viollet and the Passage des Deux Pavilions were opened. These arcades were among the novelties of their day. The result of private initiative, they were covered galleries housing shops that fashion made prosperous. The most famous was the Passage des Panoramas, which flourished from 1823 to 1831. 'On Sundays,' observed Musset, one went en masse 'to the Panoramas or else to the boulevards.' it was also private initiative that created, somewhat haphazardly, the housing developments known as

cités, the short streets or dead ends built at shared expense by a syndicate of property owners." Lucien Dubech and Pierre d'Espezel, *Histoire de Paris* (Paris, 1926), pp. 355–356.

[. . .]

The Flâneur

The attitude of the flâneur—epitome of the political attitude of the middle classes during the Second Empire.

With the steady increase in traffic on the streets, it was only the macadamization of the roadways that made it possible in the end to have a conversation on the terrace of a café without shouting in the other person's ear.

The *laissez-faire* of the flâneur has its counterpart even in the revolutionary philosophemes of the period. "We smile at the chimerical pretension [of a Saint-Simon] to trace all physical and moral phenomena back to the law of universal attraction. But we forget too easily that this pretension was not in itself isolated; under the influence of the revolutionizing natural laws of mechanics, there could arise a current of natural philosophy which saw in the mechanism of nature the proof of just such a mechanism of social life and of events generally." <Willy> Spuhler, *Der Saint-Simonismus* (Zurich, 1926), p. 29.

Dialectic of *flânerie*: on one side, the man who feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man. Presumably, it is this dialectic that is developed in "The Man of the Crowd?"

"Theory of the transformation of the city into countryside: this was . . . the main theme of my unfinished work on Maupassant . . . At issue was the city as hunting ground, and in general the concept of the hunter played a major role (as in the theory of the uniform: all hunters look alike)." Letter from Wiesengrund, June 5, 1935.

The principle of *flânerie* in Proust: "Then, quite apart from all those literary preoccupations, and without definite attachment to anything, suddenly a roof, a gleam of sunlight reflected from a stone, the smell of a road would make me stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing, beneath what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to approach and take from them, but which, despite all my efforts, I never managed to discover?" *Du Côté de chez Swann* <(Paris, 1939), vol. 1, p. 256.>—This passage shows very clearly how the old Romantic sentiment for landscape dissolves and a new Romantic conception of landscape emerges—of landscape that seems, rather, to be a cityscape, if it is true that the city is the properly sacred ground of *flânerie*. In this passage, at any rate, it would be presented as such for the first time since Baudelaire (whose work does not yet portray the arcades, though they were so numerous in his day).

So the flâneur goes for a walk in his room: "When Johannes sometimes asked for permission to go out, it was usually denied him. But on occasion his father proposed, as a substitute, that they walk up and down the room hand in hand. This seemed at first a poor substitute, but in fact . . . something quite novel awaited him. The proposal was accepted, and it was left entirely to Johannes to decide where they should go. Off they went, then, right out the front entrance, out to a neighboring estate or to the seashore, or simply through the streets, exactly as Johannes could have wished; for his father managed everything. While they strolled in this way up and down the floor of his room, his father told him of all they saw. They greeted other pedestrians; passing wagons made a din around them and drowned out his father's voice; the comforts in the pastry shop

were more inviting than ever." An early work by Kierkegaard, cited in Eduard Geismar, *Søren Kierkegaard* (Göttingen, 1929), pp. 12–13. Here is the key to the schema of *Voyage autour de ma chambre*.

"The manufacturer passes over the asphalt conscious of its quality; the old man searches it carefully, follows it just as long as he can, happily taps his cane so the wood resonates, and recalls with pride that he personally witnessed the laying of the first sidewalks; the poet . . . walks on it pensive and unconcerned, muttering lines of verse; the stockbroker hurries past, calculating the advantages of the last rise in wheat; and the madcap slides across." Alexis Martin, "Physiologie de l'asphalte," *Le Bohême*, 1, no. 3, (April 15, 1855)—Charles Pradier, editor in chief.

On the Parisians' technique of *inhabiting* their streets: "Returning by the Rue Saint-Honoré, we met with an eloquent example of that Parisian street industry which can make use of anything. Men were at work repairing the pavement and laying pipeline, and, as a result, in the middle of the street there was an area which was blocked off but which was embanked and covered with stones. On this spot street vendors had immediately installed themselves, and five or six were selling writing implements and notebooks, cutlery, lampshades, garters, embroidered collars, and all sorts of trinkets. Even a dealer in secondhand goods had opened a branch office here and was displaying on the stones his bric-a-brac of old cups, plates, glasses, and so forth, so that business was profiting, instead of suffering, from the brief disturbance. They are simply wizards at making a virtue of necessity." Adolf Stahr, *Nach fünf Jahren* (Oldenburg, 1857), vol. 1, p. 29.

Seventy years later, I had the same experience at the corner of the Boulevard Saint-Germain and the Boulevard Raspail. Parisians make the street an interior.

"It is wonderful that in Paris itself one can actually wander through countryside." Karl Gutzkow, *Briefe aus Paris* (Leipzig, 1842), vol. 1, p. 61. The other side of the motif is thus touched on. For if *flânerie* can transform Paris into one great interior—a house whose rooms are the *quartiers*, no less clearly demarcated by thresholds than are real rooms—then, on the other hand, the city can appear to someone walking through it to be without thresholds: a landscape in the round.

But in the final analysis, only the revolution creates an open space for the city. Fresh air doctrine of revolutions. Revolution disenchants the city. Commune in *L'Education sentimentale*. Image of the street in civil war.

Street as domestic interior. Concerning the Passage du Pont-Neuf (between the Rue Guénégaud and the Rue de Seine): "the shops resemble closets." *Nouveaux Tableaux de Paris, ou Observations sur les mœurs et usages des Parisiens au commencement du XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1828), vol. 1, p. 34.

The courtyard of the Tuileries: "immense savannah planted with lampposts instead of banana trees." Paul-Ernest de Rattier, *Paris n'existe pas* (Paris, 1857).

Passage Colbert. "The gas lamp illuminating it looks like a coconut palm in the middle of a savannah." *Le Livre des cent-et-un* (Paris, 1833), vol. 10, p. 57 (Amédée Kermel, "Les Passages de Paris").

Lighting in the Passage Colbert: "I admire the regular series of those crystal globes, which give off a light both vivid and gentle. Couldn't the same be said of comets in battle formation, awaiting the signal for departure to go vagabonding through space?" *Le Livre des cent-et-un*, vol. 10, p. 57. Compare this transformation of the city into an astral world with Grandville's *Un Autre Monde*.

In 1839 it was considered elegant to take a tortoise out walking. This gives us an idea of the tempo of *flânerie* in the arcades.

Gustave Claudin is supposed to have said: "On the day when a filet ceases to be a filet and becomes a 'chateaubriand,' when a mutton stew is called an 'Irish stew,' or when the waiter cries out, 'Moniteur, clock!' to indicate that this newspaper was requested by the customer sitting under the clock—on that day, Paris will have been truly dethroned!" Jules Clarete, *La Vie à Paris 1896* (Paris, 1897), p. 100.

"There—on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées—it has stood since 1845: the Jardin d'Hiver, a colossal greenhouse with a great many rooms for social occasions, for balls and concerts, although, since its doors are open in summer too, it hardly deserves the name of winter garden." When the sphere of planning creates such entanglements of closed room and airy nature, then it serves in this way to meet the deep human need for daydreaming—a propensity that perhaps proves the true efficacy of idleness in human affairs. Woldemar Seyffarth, *Wahrnehmungen in Paris 1853 und 1854* (Gotha, 1855), p. 130.

The menu at Les Trois Frères Provençaux: "Thirty-six pages for food, four pages for drink—but very long pages, in small folio, with closely packed text and numerous annotations in fine print." The booklet is bound in velvet. Twenty hors d'oeuvres and thirty-three soups. "Forty-six beef dishes, among which are seven different beefsteaks and eight filets?" "Thirty-four preparations of game, forty-seven dishes of vegetables, and seventy-one varieties of compote?" Julius Rodenberg, *Paris bei Sonnenschein und Lampenlicht* (Leipzig, 1867), pp. 43–44. *Flânerie* through the bill of fare.

The best way, while dreaming, to catch the afternoon in the net of evening is to make plans. The *flâneur* in planning.

"Le Corbusier's houses depend on neither spatial nor plastic articulation: the air passes through them! Air becomes a constitutive factor! What matters, therefore, is neither spatiality per se nor plasticity per se but only relation and interfusion. There is but one indivisible space. The Integuments separating inside from outside fall away." Sigfried Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich* (Berlin, 1928), p. 85.

Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being that—in the space between the building fronts—experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls. For this collective, glossy enameled shop signs are a wall decoration as good as, if not better than, an oil painting in the drawing room of a bourgeois; walls with their "Post No Bills" are its writing desk, newspaper stands its libraries, mailboxes its bronze busts, benches its bedroom furniture, and the café terrace is the balcony from which it looks down on its household. The section of railing where road workers hang their jackets is the vestibule, and the gateway which leads from the row of courtyards out into the open is the long corridor that daunts the bourgeois, being for the courtyards the entry to the chambers of the city. Among these latter, the arcade was the drawing room. More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses.

PART FOUR

Endisms

The texts in this Part are all concerned, either positively or negatively, with the question of the coming to the end of history in both metanarrative and lower case (reconstructionist, constructionist and deconstructionist) forms. By now, the plausibility of metanarratives has gone – towards them we can only have an attitude of incredulity. But the deconstruction of metanarratives has impacted upon academic history too, especially at the level of epistemology, and it is this that has problematised reconstructionist, constructionist and even deconstructionist genres. As Frank Ankersmit has recently put it, although modernist histories are epistemologically driven and deconstructionist texts are aesthetic, figurative representations, the latter are still histories. The question raised in this Part is whether this shift is enough to preserve – in the medium and longer term – the discourse of history in any form. The readings in this Part engage with this situation.

think of yourself as the latest in a long line of such thinkers—this is pretty much what people used to mean when they talked about acquiring “a sense of the past.”

That none of this gets taught in graduate school goes without saying. But that is beginning to change, if for no other reason than because the whole tired debate about the ontological status of historical narratives—a debate that has preoccupied us and bored our students for how many years now?—has finally exhausted itself. If the entire body of American historians ever gathered in one place—say, at the Whaleman's Chapel in New Bedford, Massachusetts, presided over, even unto this day by Father Mapple himself—one would hear a single anguished cry rise up from the assembled multitude: “Dear, God, please spare us yet another wearisome treatise on pragmatism and objectivity.” If God does judge it meet and right to grant that prayer, then perhaps this particular *fin de siècle* will be the moment when American history sets out to become what it once was: not one of the social sciences in historical costume, but one of our primary forms of moral reflection.

CHAPTER 42

Dipesh Chakrabarty

“THE DEATH OF HISTORY? HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE CULTURE OF LATE CAPITALISM” (1992)*

Dipesh Chakrabarty's “The Death of History: Historical Consciousness and the Culture of Late Capitalism” (1992) explores the possible death/end of history in the capitalist West but not necessarily in countries such as India. Chakrabarty's proposition is this: history is about studying social change over time. But perhaps ‘advanced’ Western societies, developing as rapidly as they are and losing those fixing coordinates that are so essential for measuring developments, can no longer be studied historically ‘for the meaning of change, is destroyed in the process’. On the other hand, a slower-paced India makes all of its internal changes far more visible such that ‘change’ can indeed be examined. Yet this situation prompts Chakrabarty to pose another question – namely, that although today practically all the governments in the world sponsor historical study – and although he thinks it has indeed become, to use a Foucauldian expression, a universal way of thinking of the self – what would be lost if ‘there were nothing called “history” as we, the professional historians, understand and practice it? Why cannot countries that, even as late as the early nineteenth century, did not have anything called “history”, do without it today?’ In other words, can India especially live (as for most of its ‘history’ it has lived) ‘outside of history’?

As might be assumed from the way that Chakrabarty poses these questions, that answer will be that, in the end, a history of some kind is needed; that his engagement with the end

* Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) “The Death of History? Historical Consciousness and the Culture of Late Capitalism”, *Public Culture*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 56–65.

of history concludes positively. But his way of arriving at this conclusion is the result of an argument that twists and turns in illuminating and thoughtful ways, ways that the final reading of this Part, by Kerwin Klein, will pick up under the name of memory. But between these readings there are two more, the first from Jean François Lyotard, the second from Jean Baudrillard.

[IN THIS PAPER] I want to take a trajectory that cuts across certain positions the Australian cultural critic Meaghan Morris traverses in her stimulating article “Metamorphoses at Sydney Tower.” I should make it clear that my invocation of “the death of history” has nothing to do with Francis Fukuyama’s well-publicised but nevertheless vulgar Hegelianism I find it more productive for my purpose to engage with the interesting way Morris raises the question of history as a problem of method in studying “popular culture,” which is where her interests intersect with those represented in *Subaltern Studies* (committed to studying the “popular” in the context of South Asia).

If I can translate Morris’s interests into mine, then the question that arises (via Morris) is something like this. History is about studying social change over time. But perhaps a slow-paced society like India makes all its internal changes far more visible to the observer than do late-capitalist, consumerist, fast-moving countries? “What do you do,” asks Lawrence Grossberg (whom Morris quotes in formulating her own problem),

when every event is potentially evidence, potentially determining, and at the same time changing too quickly to allow the comfortable leisure of academic criticism?

It is possible that “history” has died in the advanced capitalist countries in a sense quite different from Fukuyama’s. Societies running in the fast-forward mode cannot any longer be studied — this is how the argument would run — for even the evidence, the memory of change, is destroyed in the process. History exists in Third World societies precisely because it has not yet been devoured by consumerist social practices.

I should emphasise that this is not Morris’s position. The quote from Grossberg is what her essay takes off from. But her discussion helps us to renew and open up a question that many of my colleagues in university history departments usually treat as a problem long solved (by Messrs. Coingwood and Carr) and hence permanently closed: What is History?

[. . .]

Critique(s) of history

My “Indian” history tells me that writing history (in its modern, secular sense) is neither a “natural” nor an ancient activity in India. I only have to transport myself mentally back to the eighteenth century to know that there is nothing inherent in the logic of being an “educated” person (in India) that should make historical consciousness or even an encounter, somewhere in the process of schooling, with a subject called “history” an inevitability. Yet there is today something compulsive about this subject. All governments

insist on it. It is impossible to imagine a country now where history would not be part of a person's education at some point in his or her progress through educational institutions. I want to ask: What is at stake in doing History — its teaching, writing, methods, evaluative procedures, etc. — that has allowed it to become, to use a Foucauldian expression, such a universal technique of the self? What would be lost if there were nothing called "history" as we, the professional historians, understand and practice it? Why cannot countries that even as late as the early nineteenth century did not have anything called "history," do without it today?

A book like E.H. Carr's classic text *What is History?* will not answer this question; it treats "history," the discipline, as something given and, in that sense, entirely "natural." This sense of the past that we practice in the universities as "history" has, to follow Peter Burke, three foundations: a sense of anachronism (the idea that things can be out of date, something that in Europe's case Burke dates back to the Renaissance), rules of evidence, and causality as a major means of explanation. We could add a fourth element to all this: a sense of anachronism would require for its own survival a sundering of secular time from sacred time, the City of Man from the City of Gods, that is, a banishment of gods and other unworldly creatures from narratives about the world of humans. This is what is often referred to as the "humanism" of the discipline of history.

I do not need to argue in detail here the connection between nationalism and history or that between modernity and history. Suffice it to say here that "history" was absolutely central to the idea of "progress" (later "development") on which colonialism was based and to which nationalism aspired. If the capitalist mode of production and the nation-state were the two institutions that nineteenth-century Europe exported to the rest of the world, then it also exported two forms of knowledge that corresponded to the two institutions. "Economics" embodies in a distilled form the rationality of the market in its imagination of the human being as *homo economicus*; "history" speaks to the figure of the citizen. "History" is one of the most important ways in which we learn to identify ourselves with the nation and its highest representative, the state.

Once we grant this connection between positivist historical narratives (causal explanations strung together through a liberal and strategic sprinkling of "coincidences") and the social organisation of the modern (nation-)state, we realise that there is no escaping "history." Historical narratives are integral to the institutions and practices of power of the modern bureaucracies we all are subject to, particularly those of the state. Just consider how the court of law functions. It wrings positivist historical narratives out of you. Can we ever even imagine winning a case, however simple, by flouting the rules of evidence (often shared between judicial and historical discourses) by employing, say, the narrative techniques of a Nambikwara myth or those of a postmodernist Dennis Potter play? A critique of history is therefore not a sentimental plea against history. I am not talking about history as "cultural imperialism." It once surely was that for many, but to deny now, in the name of cultural relativism, any social group — peasants, aboriginals, Indians — access to the "post-Renaissance sense of the past" would be to disempower them. History could die only if these institutions of power that feed upon it were to disappear. No one, not even a Baudrillard, is yet promising that.

This is not to suggest, however, that these institutions have not changed with time. The sovereignty of the nation-state is now at least a debated topic. The nation is no longer a sacrosanct concept. It now has to contend with factors that, for a certain subject/reader of history, have indeed become global — the environment, for example, or even the idea

of a "world heritage." Nor could one deny what technology and consumerist practices have done to make us question modernist constructions of time, a questioning that is inherent in the postmodern gesture of "junking" history, in the insistence (after Heidegger) that "time has ceased to be anything other than velocity, instantaneousness and simultaneity, and [that] time as history has vanished from the lives of all peoples." Morris's quotation from Grossberg that I cited in the first part of this essay returns us to this very problem, the so-called death of history.

It is not difficult to accept the proposition that in a land of pure consumerism, if such a land could ever exist, history — perhaps even memory — would die, for the subject of pure consumption would have no use for the historical construction of temporality, i.e., for what Burke calls the (modern) sense of anachronism. This would be the kingdom of pure capital (I am following Marx's use of this term as an abstract and universal logico-philosophical category) in pursuit of its own aim of erasing difference, whether spatial or temporal. Capital, as a category, does not require history. This is how Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*:

while capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e., to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e., to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another. The more developed the capital, therefore, the more extensive the market over which it circulates, which forms the spatial orbit of its circulation, the more does it strive simultaneously for an even greater extension of the market and for greater annihilation of space with time.

It is obvious that in this passage Marx anticipates the currently fashionable statements about "the death of history," with the difference that he locates this "death" as a tendency within the pure category of "capital" itself. For the temporality with which Marx says capital strives to kill space (i.e., space as difference) is also one that aims to "reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another." This time must also kill historical time, the narrative of "progress" that deploys temporality as a marker of difference. If the world were to be entirely at the mercy of capital, then it would presumably be held together by a chain of simulacra in an eternal consumerist simultaneity. In such a Baudrillardian paradise of lotus-eaters (the starving cannot consume), history would indeed be an unwelcome distraction, for its grand narratives of the state and power would sound like a siren call, to labour, the hard toil of class, gender and other kinds of struggle without which there can only be a capitulationist acceptance of the world we find ourselves in.

But capital exists in history, i.e., in contradictory and uneven relationship with another series of structures that need the representational system we in academia call "history" (the sense of anachronism, secular time, the narrative of progress) — these structures are the nation-state and its attendant institutional formations. To quote Marx once again:

Capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. . . . But from the fact that capital posits every such limit as a barrier and hence gets *ideally* beyond it, it does not by any means follow that it has *really* overcome

it, and, since every such barrier contradicts its character, its production moves in contradictions which are constantly overcome just as constantly posited.

One of these contradictions of "capital in history" is that we are citizens and consumers at the same time, and I want to suggest that "history" survives the cultural logic of late capitalism through this tension — the sometimes hostile and sometimes collusive relationship between citizenship and consumerism. Which means that the empirical subject of consumption does not have to be a posthistorical subject. The sense of anachronism constitutive of historical time can, does, and will find interesting, albeit contradictory, accommodations with the anti-historical tendencies of consumerism. And this is where I get back to my reading of Meaghan Morris.

What I read with Morris's help is an anecdote that I have to relate in an autobiographical mode. An experience in Melbourne once brought home to me the important role our "modern" sense of anachronism plays not only in fabricating the story of "development" or "progress" (that marks both imperialist and nationalist thought) but even in our consumerist social practices. It also indirectly helped me to think about what might be at stake for the Indian ruling classes for them to want to teach peasants "history" — i.e., to give them, *à la Burke*, a sense of anachronism. The answer came to me one day in a flash when I had just started lecturing at the University of Melbourne in the middle of the 1980s. One of my second-year students, when she felt free to be friendly, said to me one day coming out of the class, "You're such a dag, Dipesh. You still wear flares!" — "dag," in Australian slang, standing for a person who is a source of amusement for others, a "character," in short. "And what's wrong with that?" I said, giving my Indian trousers a general, and somewhat embarrassed, looking over. "They're so seventies, don't you see?" was her answer.

There I was, I felt, face to face with a sense of anachronism, an extremely acute one, a hyper sense of history without which, it seemed to me, there would be no consumerism and nothing of the kind of (narratives of) prosperity and economic expansion of the First World that have now seized the imagination of the ruling classes of my country and of many others. So this, I thought, was what was at stake in doing history, in Indian peasants having a historical consciousness: it made it a lot easier for some people to make money from them!

But I caricature. Even though as a cultural artifact it is something that Indians borrowed only relatively recently from the West, I know from experience the importance that "history" had in my own Indian/Third World upbringing. If I could continue to treat myself as a "case in point" for a little longer, I should mention that I personally came to history through my involvement in Maoist political movements in Calcutta in my undergraduate years in the late sixties, when I was pursuing an honours degree in physics. While the movement failed in achieving its emancipationist aims and turned out to be both violent and tragic, it did succeed in persuading me that I was simply not brave enough to face the repression that the Indian "democratic" state was capable of unleashing on people who opposed it. I left the movement but not without a certain sense of failure that was itself rooted in a particular "historical" sensibility. By the time I left the life of an activist, I had read enough party literature to know that the likes of me belonged to the "garbage heap of history."

Setting out to go where I thought my destiny was — a "garbage heap," but I guess a nice one! — I joined one of the two business schools the government had set up in the

country. Strange though it may appear, it was during my studies in business administration that I had my first serious intellectual encounter with "history" (at school it was just one of those boring subjects). History was a compulsory subject at this business school. With hindsight, I know why the authorities at this public institution insisted that the future managers of the country should know history. The course we studied was Marxist in its orientation and was called "Historical Roots of Economic Backwardness." What it sought to transmit to us was a Marxist political-economic critique of India's colonial past and its consequent (or so the course argued) experience of underdevelopment. The lecturer was a well-known Marxist historian of the country. Obviously, this national institute had decided that such a critique of colonialism should form part of the common historical memory that the new nation and its managers should have. At a personal level, I might add parenthetically, I was delighted to discover Marxist history in a professional form. It helped to purge myself of my troubling feelings of failure and guilt. The "garbage heap," this history told me, was itself a result more of the impersonal forces of history than of individual choices. Moreover, I discovered that the particular "rubbish dump" where I found myself was inhabited by some interesting people, including the professor who had introduced me to history. So when I graduated and my professor asked me if I would be interested in pursuing a career in history rather than the one in personnel management that I had just been offered by a Scottish firm in Calcutta, I had no difficulty in making up my mind. Life, it seemed to me then, would be meaningless if I did not study "history."

I offer this story to illustrate the conclusion I draw from it: that "history" was, and has been, important to not only the process of identity-formation of an individual middle-class Indian like myself but to that of the Indian "nation" as well, which is why a government-funded MBA course insisted on the students learning some history. The contemporary universal importance of "history," the discipline, is thus tied up, as I have already argued, with another universal of our times: the nation-state and its companion institutions (run by economic and bureaucratic rationality) that dominate all our lives irrespective of where we are on this planet.

Reading Morris on the Sydney Telecommunications Tower, however, has given me a sharper appreciation of what was at issue in that cross-cultural encounter in Melbourne over my Indian flares and their status as historical objects. Meaghan Morris studied a small death that "history" died in Sydney Tower between 1981, when she first "read" the Tower, and 1989, when she went back to it for a diachronic, post-bicentennial snapshot. In 1981 the Tower portrayed and stood for, among other things, a clichéd "narrative of Progress," "as an annunciation of modernity":

The lower deck proclaimed the transformation of Sydney as a locale; . . . the upper deck celebrated the history of towers, lookouts, and associated tourist activities. The theme linking the two levels . . . was the overthrow of . . . "the tyranny of distance" . . . enabling Australia's integration into the age of global simultaneity.

All this was gone in 1989. "Worse," writes Morris,

it was as though none of the representations I had studied had ever been there. I asked questions about the renovations, but no one who was working there had been around long enough to remember the decor of the Tower having

ever been different from the way it is today. So there was a crazed culture critic staggering round the turret saying "What have you done with the evidence?"

The lower deck "had become a cafeteria," its old photographs replaced by "plastic bas-reliefs with a wildflower motif," and the upper level had lost most of its historical references. "With them, the whole linking discourse to the history of Sydney as a 'site' had disappeared." The work of consumption had left the Tower with no "historical" memory of its older self.

I say "*historical* memory" advisedly, for I am not talking about just any use of the past tense (such as those made in fairy tales, legends, or "myths"). I am discussing a particular form of memory (i.e., History, the discipline) which regulates itself by appealing to what Peter Burke calls its rules of evidence, the kind of "evidence" that Morris had in mind when she referred to the destruction of it in the Tower. Constructing "evidence," I want to argue, is a project of preservation, of making "monuments" of certain objects that are actually contemporaneous with ourselves. For them to acquire the status of "historical evidence," however, we have to be able to deny them their contemporaneity by assigning them to a specified period in a calendrical past, an act by which we split the "present" into the "modern" and the "traditional" or the "historical," and thereby declare ourselves to be modern. This denial of the contemporaneity of certain objects is what constitutes the historical sense of anachronism. Without it there is no evidence, and without evidence, there is no "history." History is therefore a practice of "monumentalising" objects — from documents to sculptures — of simultaneously acknowledging and denying their existence in our "own" time. What allowed my Melbourne student to express her sense of anachronism about my flares (and about their wearer, the "dag") was that they existed as tangible evidence in the same time as the one she inhabited at the time of speaking. I had kind of monumentalised my anachronistic, Indian/Third World sense of style!

Monumentalising, preserving, making a "heritage" out of assorted objects is essential to the politics of both nationalism and the nation-state. This is where history becomes the business of the citizen, the subject of the grand narratives of Freedom and Progress that, ultimately, legitimise both the nation-state and the modern market. As an activity, monumentalising can only live in tension with consumerist practices. This is the contradiction that marks the historic life of capital, the tension between the citizen and the consumer. And to the extent that consumption has dominated the productive side of capitalism in its self-representations since the Second World War, this tension, it would seem, has been far more obvious in this period than ever before in the history of capitalism (though, as we know from Berman's astute reading of Marx and modernism, this tension was something Marx saw as a defining characteristic of capital). It points us to a deeper contradiction between capital and the nation-state.

When I say "contradiction," I mean a contradictory relationship. For the collusion between consumerism and "heritage," i.e., between the consumer and the citizen, reveals itself in the discourse of tourism. This is the discourse of "heritage industry" which some historians now see as the side of the bread that is buttered. The relationship, however, is inherently fraught with conflict, as so many cases of heritage litigation would suggest. Besides, with the heightened sense of commodification of history that assails the historians (who are preservers after all) as the heritage and the travel industries increasingly expose "history" to the vagaries of the marketplace and to the fickleness of a media-

influenced public culture, a tension develops between what is now called "public history" and what has until now constituted the "high culture" of the historical profession.

The heritage industry is new in India but shows all the symptoms of this tension between the citizen and the consumer. I quote a recent report:

In 1988 the pre-Mughal Chaumachi Tomb in Mehrauli on the outskirts of Delhi almost joined the ranks of vanished monuments. Enthusiasts of a citizens' group known as the Conservation Society of Delhi (CSD) were horrified to find a developer, armed with a written decree, about to demolish the tomb. The developer had apparently found a loophole in the uncoordinated zoning laws, but the CSD, with the support of an alert press, succeeded in getting a stay order from the Supreme Court. Examples of this type could be multiplied. In Bombay, when the navy proposed demolition of the historic clock tower in its dockyard, various citizens' groups including the Bombay Environmental Action Group, the Save Bombay Committee, and the Indian Heritage Society intervened and saved the structure.

The same report, of course, by its discussion of "conservation" and "tourism," reminds us of the flip side of this relationship, the collaborative side which gives the otherwise oxymoronic expression "heritage industry" some meaning.

History will die when this contradiction between the citizen and the consumer, between the nation-state and capital, is resolved (exclusively or overwhelmingly) in favour of the consumer and capital. But until that has happened — and there is no a priori reason why it must be resolved this way — postmodernity will remain, as Lyotard puts it, primarily a condition of knowledge. On the other hand, as the concept of the nation-state loses the sanctity it once had for both imperialists and nationalists (one has to remember the close connection between these two apparently contradictory ideologies), postmodern critiques of the grand narratives of "nation" and "progress" can converse fruitfully with Third World experiences of modernity. It is possible that one day the nation-state will become (at most) a purely practical arrangement unadorned by passions or sentiments of nobility. But even this cannot happen without struggle, nor is such an end in any sense a "given" in history. In the meanwhile, however, we will need "history as critique" in order to develop "critiques of history" as part of our understanding of both capital (the narratives of production/consumption) and the state (with its narratives of progress and freedom). In this we need dialogues between intellectuals who locate themselves in the First World — where consumerism has been "naturalised" — and those who speak out of their experience in the Third World, where much of both capitalism and the modern state remains, to return to Guha's creative invocation of Gramsci, dominant but not hegemonic.

I therefore do not read Lyotard's claims about the death of the grand narratives (of the state) as realist description. For me, the dead of Baghdad (or those of Kuwait) will always be far more dead than the lethal grand narratives of Freedom and Progress which killed them.