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1

Introduction: The Battle of Basic Assumptions

1 Stating my Position

This book offers answers to three questions: What (is history)?; Why (do history)?; How (does one do history)? Note that I say that the book 'offers' answers, not that it 'answers' the three questions. Note that I use the rather coarse verb 'doing' rather than the more elegant 'studying' history. I have, after much thought, chosen my words very carefully, in order that they should express what I intend as clearly as possible, or at least should not lead to misunderstandings or contain misrepresentations. That point will recur throughout the book: however language may be used in poetry, plays and novels, in historical writing it must always be explicit and precise. The answers 'I' offer are those which, I believe, would be agreed to by the vast majority of the historical profession. But I want it to be clear from the start that they are not the *only* answers that could be given: commentators with very different basic assumptions would give different answers. My questions and answers do not relate solely to those who are studying history, that is, by definition, students: they, certainly, are 'doing' history, but then so also are those who actually produce the history, historians, and my questions and answers cover them also. Beyond the question of why students should want to study history, or members of the general public read history books, lies the question of why historical research, leading to the publication of history books, goes on in the first place, and why professional historians are paid out of taxpayer's money to *do* this.

The next big, recurring point I want to make is that the answers one gives (and, often, the questions one asks) – and thus, of course, how one writes a book such as this – depend upon one's basic assumptions. I cannot stress too much this point about assumptions. I use the word 'battle' in my chapter title, and the simple fact is that today (unlike in 1970 when the first version of this book was published) we cannot make any progress at all in discussing the nature of history until we consider the arguments of the postmodernist critics, who have been denouncing

the history of historians (such as myself) as merely bourgeois ideology, and the stories we tell as accounts without any claim to objectivity. Analogous 'science wars' have been going on over the same period, with the postmodernist critics claiming that the sciences, like history, are 'culturally constructed'. If you have done any reading at all in the area, you are almost bound to have come across the postmodernist case. I shall be arguing against it, and my hope is that you will be persuaded by what I am saying. But I know that I have no chance of convincing anyone who is already a confirmed postmodernist. Our basic assumptions are different. In my view, writers and teachers should always state their fundamental assumptions, and readers and students should always seek to find out what these are.

My assumptions relate to the first word in the sub-title of this book: 'knowledge'. We live in a dreadfully unequal world, in which basic human rights and freedoms are denied to millions. However, it is my belief (based, I think, on a rational assessment of the evidence) that the living standards and freedoms which most of us enjoy in the West are fundamentally due to the expansion in human knowledge over the centuries, principally, perhaps, knowledge in the sciences and technologies, but also in the humanities and social sciences. I further believe that decent living conditions, freedom, *empowerment* for the deprived millions everywhere depend on the continuing expansion and, above all, *diffusion* of knowledge. I make no arrogant claims on behalf of historical knowledge, simply the point (which I shall elaborate in Chapter 2) that what happened in the past influences what happens in the present, and, indeed, what will happen in the future, so that knowledge of the past – history – is essential to society.

This leads me to the point that, given that historical knowledge is essential to society, we have to be sure that that knowledge is as sound as we can make it. Technological knowledge which leads to bridges that fall down, television sets that explode, and bombs that do not is of no value. Human beings are not born with knowledge of how to build bridges or make television sets: they have to learn it. Similarly, human beings are not born with knowledge of the past (though it often seems to be assumed that they are): they have to learn it, and that learning, at whatever a remove, and however filtered (through school lessons, magazines, television, or whatever) comes ultimately from the researches and writings of historians. To my mind, it is an enormous tribute to historians that we already do know so much about the past: about ancient China, about the Renaissance, about poverty and ordinary life in an incredible range of different cultures, about the denial and gaining of civil rights by, for example, women, blacks, gays; about the origins of the First World War; about Russia under Stalin and Germany under Hitler; about the recent machinations of the CIA and MI5. How has all this

knowledge come about? It has come about (this is one of my most crucial contentions, or assumptions) through large numbers of historians *doing* history in strict accordance with the long-established, though constantly developing, canons of the historical profession. Most of this book will be taken up with explicating these canons; there are, as I shall show, different types of history (social, diplomatic, econometric, history of science, history of women, and so on), but *all* – let there be no misunderstanding about this¹ – are governed by the need to conform to certain agreed standards and principles. If history, as I claim, is needed by human societies, and if, therefore, that history must be as reliable as it is possible to make it, the guarantee lies in the careful observance of the methods and principles of professional history: ‘historians’, as Eric Hobsbawm, Britain’s most distinguished living historian (and a Marxist as it happens), has said, ‘are professionally obliged not to get it wrong – or at least to make an effort not to’.² Correspondingly, there is little value to society in works which use events and developments in the past to indulge speculative fantasies, to purvey propaganda or to support *a priori* theories, which put forward subjective ‘narratives’ and are proud of it.

My assumptions, then, are the assumptions of the vast majority of professional historians: the ‘History’ in my main title is ‘the History of professional historians’ (my book is not on The Nature of ‘The Past’). However, I have no mandate to speak on behalf of the historical profession, though the claim I will vigorously make is that I have thought longer and harder about the issues implicit in my title than most other members of the profession. Many will disagree with the way I put things, and some even with the things I put. But I seek no identity other than that of ‘historian’, or, at the very most, ‘social and cultural historian’. Others have categorised me, and the history I write, as ‘positivist’ (a nineteenth-century term, which has no meaning today, but which is often used as a general term of abuse), ‘empiricist’ (I would hope that that term could be applied to all historians, as to all scientists), and ‘reconstructionist’ (this label, as used by Alun Munslow,³ is associated with the notion of history as a ‘craft’, to which I am also alleged to subscribe: I have to say, as firmly as I can, that I do not believe that historians ‘reconstruct’ or ‘craft’ anything; what they do is contribute to historical knowledge, that is, knowledge about the past). If further identifying characteristics are required for the history which is explicated in this book, I would say that it is ‘non-metaphysical’ and ‘source-based’: it is not concerned with theoretical speculation about the nature of the past, or the nature of the relationships between past, present, and future; it is concerned with addressing clearly defined problems relating to what happened in the past, and it addresses these problems by meticulously examining all the sources relevant to them.

I have set out my assumptions. The most important one at this juncture is that there are strict historical methods and principles and that the application of these has produced a great corpus of invaluable historical knowledge. What I am saying here, and will be saying throughout this book, is attacked by those who can, in convenient shorthand fashion, be described as ‘postmodernists’ (I will name names shortly), and also, in slightly different ways, by those who hold very firmly to traditional Marxism and those, often followers of Max Weber, who adopt a holistic, social sciences view of the problems of societies, past and present. I am now going to work through the eight main battlegrounds wherein one can perceive the clash of assumptions between non-metaphysical, source-based historians and their postmodernist, and other, critics.

2 Eight Battlegrounds

1 Metaphysical, Nomothetic and Ontological Approaches

What a bunch of pompous polysyllabics! Let me explain. It is proper that human beings should be concerned with questions about the purpose of life, the fundamentals which determine the way in which societies develop, the reasons behind the inequalities and oppressions which exist in the world today, and so on: these are ontological questions, and are the responsibility of that branch of philosophy known as metaphysics. ‘Nomothetic’ is a word which, I’m glad to say, seems to be going out of use. In certain forms of intellectual discourse it used to be argued (with reason, I think) that in all scholarly investigations one could make a broad bipartite division between the nomothetic approach and the idiographic, meaning, roughly, the distinction between, on the one side, the theoretical and speculative approach, and, on the other, the purely empirical one. In the nineteenth century, it was possible for intellectuals (the central discipline was philosophy: professional history was not yet fully established, and what was developing into professional physics was usually referred to as ‘natural philosophy’) to formulate grand-scale statements about how societies evolved from the past, through the present and into the future. Such statements are sometimes termed ‘speculative philosophy of history’. Leading exponents were Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx. Self-evidently, such statements had to be highly abstract and theoretical, and could not be based, if at all, upon any very extensive range of sources. The desire to incorporate studies of the past into some grand theory about human destiny, about the purpose and direction, the ‘meaning’, of life, is still strong (and it does seem that human beings have an inclination towards great holistic schemes, such

as religions, which can have the evolutionary functions of providing unity and emotional security). Many social scientists today, though they would probably define their aims more modestly, see themselves as the descendants of nineteenth-century philosophy; professional history, on the other hand, developed entirely separately from philosophy.

There are those, historians, social scientists, philosophers, critics, artists of all types, who see Karl Marx as a quite exceptional genius, to be ranked with Newton, Darwin and, perhaps (I am not sure that this is a compliment), Freud. This was the view, too, of two twentieth-century intellectuals central to the development of postmodernist criticisms of professional history: Michel Foucault (1926–84) and Hayden White (*b.* 1928).⁴ I shall return to Marxist ‘speculative philosophy of history’ in point 3, but will state now my counter-assumption that, while it was possible for Newton and Einstein (in physics) and Darwin (in biology) to make decisive and authoritative interventions in their particular sciences, it is quite impossible for one person (however able) to make an analogous intervention covering all societies (or even just Western ones) and the relationships within them and between them, through the past, present, and into the future. I would regard that statement as being, anyway, about as absolute as anyone could make at the beginning of the twenty-first century; however, since I am not concerned to go out of my way to denigrate Marx, I would add that while many of his comments were sensible enough in the mid-nineteenth century, when he was writing, they are scarcely likely to have much validity after 150 years of change.

Those who take the opposite view would see Marx as having established the essential groundplan for the study of the way societies change through the past and into the future, which has subsequently been modified by such scholars as the Italian Antonio Gramsci, the German/American Herbert Marcuse, the French post-structuralists, including Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Derrida, and the perfectly formed postmodernists Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. For the broadly Marxist outlook, much qualified and refined by later scholars, I shall use the adjective ‘Marxisant’, meaning ‘leaning towards Marxism’ or ‘inflected by Marxism’. It is proper to record that many historians who are Marxist or Marxisant do subscribe to the principles set out in this book (Eric Hobsbawm being an outstanding example), but, to come to the centre of this battlefield, the main body of those taking up the metaphysical stance I have identified attack professional history on a number of grounds, which I shall be discussing throughout the rest of this chapter. Here, two big ones: that professional history is trivial and overly scholastic, in that it simply does not address the ontological issues; and that professional history is overly narrow and specialised, in that it misses the essential interconnectedness

of everything, failing to adopt a holistic or interdisciplinary approach. Some critics, often strongly Marxist or Weberian, though not usually postmodernist, have called for a complete fusion between history and the social sciences (with, it is generally made clear, the social sciences as the senior partners). The responses presented in this book are: that history cannot, and does not aim, to answer the big questions about human destiny and the meaning of life, and that, on the contrary, its great value to society lies in the fact that in limiting itself to clearly defined, manageable (though never that manageable!) questions, it can offer clear and well-substantiated (though never utterly uncontested) answers; and that the very strength of history in producing these answers lies in its intensive specialisation – though historians have to be aware of other disciplines, and may well borrow from them, trying to resolve usually intractable historical problems requires the full methodology discussed in this book; any contamination with the faith in a single holistic procedure will simply produce muddled and poorly substantiated results.

I want to insist on the distinction between the metaphysical approach and the genuinely historical one (professional, non-metaphysical, source-based). The aims are different and the very language used is different. It is simply not the aim of historians to produce exciting, speculative, all-embracing theories, or gigantic leaps of the imagination utterly detached from the evidence, and still less should they try to integrate their own researches into such speculations. As the distinguished contemporary American philosopher John Searle has written: 'it is a sad fact about my profession, wonderful though it is, that the most famous and admired philosophers are often the ones with the most preposterous theories'.⁵ The language and categories philosophers use firmed up in the nineteenth century, and they have been amplified by postmodernist philosophers adding jargon terms of their own. Of course, as Searle points out,⁶ the way questions are posed determines the (often wrong) answers given: taken out of context, and used as if transparent tools of epistemological analysis, such words as 'positivist', 'humanist', 'idealist', 'materialist', constantly on the lips of the metaphysicists, have no salience for historians.

2 Radical Politics – or just Nihilism?

Marx excoriated the philosophers of his day for merely seeking to understand the world: to him, the problem was 'to change it'. Within these three little words lies the key to a second divide between the metaphysicists and the historians which reinforces the first. At the heart of the metaphysical view lies the fundamental Marxist belief that the society we inhabit is the bad bourgeois society, though, fortunately, this society

is in a state of crisis, so that the good society which lies just around the corner can be easily attained if only we work systematically to destroy the language, the values, the culture, the ideology of 'bourgeois' society. This entails a massive radical left-wing political programme, and everything the metaphysicists write, every criticism they make, is determined by that overriding programme; the exceptions are those postmodernists, still convinced of the utter evil of 'bourgeois' society, who have become so pessimistic about any hope of change that they have fallen back into a destructive nihilism, together with some right-wingers who have taken a postmodernist stance because they see it as the height of intellectual fashion. Now, most historians have political views and loyalties; more critically perhaps, some are highly conservative by temperament, others instinctively ally themselves with reformers, and some can't help being enthusiastic about radicalism in the past. Political and personal attachments will enter into the history historians write, particularly in those frequent cases where the sources are inconclusive, thus leaving a good deal of space for personal interpretation. But historians are obliged, to quote Hobsbawm again, 'to make an effort not to' get it wrong, that is to say to make an effort to overcome any political predilections they may have. As citizens, historians should certainly act in accordance with their political principles; but in their history, they should make a conscious effort to overcome these. It is worthy of note that in Hobsbawm's collection of learned articles and journalistic pieces, *Uncommon People* (1999), the Marxism scarcely shows in the learned articles, where, indeed, at times Hobsbawm takes up positions contrary to orthodox Marxism, while the Marxism is often very evident indeed in the journalism. I don't doubt for a moment that whatever brave efforts the historian makes, vices of various kinds, including unconscious ones, will intervene.

But, with regard to the main battle, there are a number of points to be made. First of all, a very large number of the issues which historians deal with do not lend themselves to different interpretations depending upon political principle. One of the issues I have myself been concerned with is that of whether there is any link between total war and social change: I honestly do not know what a Tory view would be and what a socialist one. The second point is that no accounts given by historians will be accepted as definitive: they will be subjected within the profession to discussion and debate, qualification and correction, and, if they are affected by political bias, this will certainly be vigorously pointed out. Beyond that there is the role of the reader: a book that is, say, very strongly feminist in tone may still be a valuable contribution to knowledge, but the reader will be able to reject for himself/herself the bits which are manifestly feminist propaganda rather than reasoned conclusions. There is, in fact, all the difference in the world between the debates

and discussions held among professional historians (and their readers) and the monolithic positions of the metaphysicists, most of whom, when you pay close attention to what they are saying (often a tough assignment!), are quite openly boastful of their propagandist aims, against the bourgeoisie, against patriarchy, for example. Professional historians should be absolutely clear that they are not propagandists: their job is to understand the past (or parts of it) – an extremely difficult task – not, as historians (as distinct from their role as citizens), to change the future.

In her *History in Practice* (2000) Ludmilla Jordanova (a specialist in the history and philosophy of science, an area which has long been influenced by Foucault) declares that the ‘pursuit of history is, whether practitioners choose to acknowledge it or not, a political occupation’.⁷ That seems to me both a straightforward misuse of words, and a dangerous statement. We all fall short of our principles, but it is important none the less that the principles be stated and restated. We must always bear in mind that history (like the sciences) is a cumulative and cooperative activity. Historians don’t just write research monographs, where, granted, the personal passion may be a vital driving force; they also write textbooks, summaries of existing knowledge, where the biases inherent in difficult research works should be filtered out; and they teach. It is in teaching (certainly at pre-university level) that the obligation to present a fair distillation of differing interpretations, and to avoid any one political line, is strongest. To me a teacher who maintained that history was a ‘political occupation’, and who acted accordingly, would be guilty of unprofessional conduct. Nor would I want the general reader, seeking enlightenment on the crucial issues of the past, to be informed that every historical work is politically biased. The point, I think, comes over most strongly of all if one reflects on the task most professional historians have of supervising PhD students, that is, of enabling aspirant historians to go through their professional apprenticeship. To encourage such students to believe that it is unavoidable that their dissertations will be governed by their political attitudes is to provide exactly the wrong kind of training. Personally, as a supervisor, I have always had most trouble with Marxist students, who are so determined to read off predetermined Marxist lessons that they scarcely get round to analysing the evidence; the same can be true of strongly feminist students. But I have also had trouble with a student writing on the RAF in the Second World War who came in determined that his thesis was going to destroy lefty and pacifist critics of the RAF. Only when I had finally persuaded him to forget his preconceptions and get down to the hard work of wrestling with the primary sources did he begin to produce anything resembling professional history.

The metaphysicists have their own extreme left-wing political agenda; those who do not share this agenda, or at least do not allow it to

influence their history (that is, most historians), they then, in effect, accuse of supporting the cause of the bourgeoisie. The metaphysical worldview does not allow for the possibility that historians regard an understanding of the past as vital to human society, and that it is this belief which provides their fundamental motivation, and the willingness to undertake the taxing and, sometimes, boring grind of serious research. Therein lies the measure of the distance between the two positions I am identifying here.

3 The Nature of Societies: Past, Present and Future

Perceptive readers will have noted that I make a firm distinction between 'history' (what historians *do*) and 'the past' (everything in its near infinitude that happened in the past, entirely regardless of any activities by historians). Not all professional historians make this distinction, and in that they are simply following normal colloquial, and perfectly respectable, practice. However, the distinction is a vital one in the sort of epistemological discussions we are having throughout this book. The metaphysicists definitely do not make the distinction. They, like Hegel, Marx, and (if you read him closely) Foucault, already have an *a priori* conception of history as the process which, proceeding through a series of stages or epochs, links past, to present, to future. To the metaphysicist, each epoch has an intrinsic materiality, and an essential character which, through the workings of 'the discursive', determines the nature of everything produced within that epoch. We currently live, allegedly, in the capitalist era, in bourgeois society, where everything produced is tainted by bourgeois ideology. The postmodernist refinement is that we are actually now in the period of late capitalism, a period of extreme crisis and uncertainty, which, in turn, has given rise to 'the condition of postmodernity'. To professional historians, on the contrary, 'periodisation', the breaking up of the past into manageable epochs or periods, is simply an analytical device: the periodisation that is useful for political history may well differ from that useful for economic history, and once again from the periodisation useful for social and cultural history. The society we live in has evolved through complex historical processes, very different from the Marxist formula of the bourgeoisie overthrowing the feudal aristocracy. It is highly complex with respect to the distribution of power, authority, and influence. Just as it was *not* formed by the simple overthrow of the aristocracy by the bourgeoisie, so, in its contemporary form, it does not consist simply of a bourgeois ruling class and a proletariat. The idea that we are now in a final period of late-capitalist crisis is simply nonsense. Marxists have been looking for the final capitalist collapse for over a century, in 1848, 1866, 1918, and 1968, to choose just a few dates, and they are forever doomed to

disappointment. The notion of a current 'condition of postmodernity' may have analytical validity, particularly perhaps in the area of cultural production: but to treat it as having some ineluctable materiality is ridiculous, as it is to regard it as analogous to 'the Renaissance' or 'the Age of the French Revolution'. Here we have another vital battleground: the metaphysicists take 'history' as something given, something they already know; historians take 'history' as a set of procedures for *finding out* about the past, together with, of course, the results of their enquiries.

4 The Cultural Construction of Knowledge – and Everything Else

Knowledge, I have said, is vital to the existence of contemporary societies, and to their future advances ('advances' in the sense of decent living standards, empowerment, and basic rights being extended to all). To the metaphysicists knowledge is controlled by the bourgeoisie, and is simply a means of maintaining and exercising their power. Thus, Hayden White, in a marvellous simulation of Marxist rhetoric, claims that historical knowledge is actually a means

by which individuals can be taught to live a distinctively 'imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence', that is to say, an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realise their destinies as social subjects.⁸

Note particularly the word 'indentured'; hardly necessary to say that professional historians would not accept that they play a part in 'indenturing' their readers.

Probably the most used – and, in my view, abused – verb in contemporary academic writing of all types is the verb 'to construct': 'identity' is 'constructed', 'sexuality' is 'constructed', 'meaning' (whatever that means) is 'constructed'. Such language is the very bedrock of 'critical' and cultural theory, both 'indentured' to the metaphysics I have been discussing. But there are historians, too, eager to demonstrate that they are up-to-date in their jargon, who make liberal use of this verb as well, though usually, it seems to me, without working out the full implications of what they are saying. Thus we are told that technology is culturally constructed, age is culturally constructed, gender is culturally constructed, and, of course, knowledge. The overuse of the phrase simply evacuates from it all significance, or operates as a barrier to teasing out in detail what is really happening. Thus an able writer tells us that the technology of the internal combustion engine was culturally constructed and that this led to its being exploited purely for private, rather than public, use. But although the Victorian age was even more oriented

towards private enterprise than the early twentieth century, the technology of the steam engine was not exploited for private purposes – you simply could not have little steam locomotives running up and down country lanes. It is in fact the nature of the technology that governs the outcomes. There is a valid point that ‘youth’, particularly in the 1960s, has been defined in a variety of ways: sometimes, for instance, as a synonym for ‘teenagers’, sometimes meaning everyone under 30. But it is quite easy, and far more useful, to tease out all of these different usages, than to resort to the mindless statement that youth is ‘culturally constructed’.⁹ Again, we know all about the discrimination inflicted by society on women: but declaring ‘gender’ to be culturally constructed leads to gliding over the really interesting question of what is biologically determined and what is determined or insisted upon (surely more precise verbs than ‘constructed’) by society. *Who* is doing the ‘constructing’ is never explicitly stated, but one can only assume that the guilty party is the usual suspect, the bourgeois power structure. What we have is an assertion, not an explanation. Professional historians should prefer the more precise verbs used above, or the general phrase ‘socially influenced’, which then leaves scope for pinning down the exact weight of the different influences which do come to bear, such as the *development* of technology, changing perceptions of youth and age, fashion in dress, sexual mores, and so on.

So with knowledge. It is inescapable that history, like the sciences, is socially influenced. Historians, like scientists, are subject to social and career pressures, leading for instance to the slavish following of intellectual or scientific fashion, to publishing without adequate checking, to exaggerating the significance of the results of research. But then, as I have already said, there are the checks of peer-group discussion and criticism. This is a world away from knowledge being culturally constructed in the sole interests of the bourgeoisie.

5 Language: History a Branch of Literature?

On the central importance of language, I am in agreement with the postmodernists (and perhaps in disagreement with some of my fellow historians). However, against specious postmodernist claims to have instituted a ‘linguistic turn’, tearing the bandages from the eyes of those who naïvely saw language as a simple, uncomplicated medium of communication, I point out that historical method has its roots in philology and that questions of semantics and signification have pre-occupied historians for generations, while the study of language formed the core of the empirical philosophy of the inter-war years (ironically Richard Rorty’s *The Linguistic Turn* (1968) consists entirely of examples of this pre-postmodernist philosophy).¹⁰ Anyway, the postmodernists

come to precisely the wrong conclusions; language does not control us (daft, isn't it?), we *can* control language, *but only if we make the most arduous and time-consuming efforts.*

What is agreed is that language is difficult, slippery, elusive and allusive, that it is far from easy to express what we mean in a precise and conclusive way, and that, indeed, people listening to us or reading what we have written may well take away very different meanings from what we intended. Postmodernists, as it were, give up (though with great enthusiasm!). Even if historians have produced objective results from their enquiries, they will never, according to postmodernist theory, be able to convey these with absolute precision; what they write will always have more meanings for their readers than they intend. As soon as they begin writing, historians, this theory insists, are forced to 'narrativise' or 'textualise': what, through the imperatives of language, they will be forced to convey is (wait for it) bourgeois ideology. While Hayden White, at least, is prepared to concede that scientists communicate in logic, and therefore precisely, no special language or forms of communication are allowed for history.¹¹ Historians, he insists, necessarily employ the forms and devices – rhetoric, narratives, metaphor, and so on – of literature. Thus, history is simply a branch of literature, in which the 'narratives' of historians do not significantly differ from the novels of novelists (some historians, novelists *manqués*, or certainly aiming for review in the literary pages, agree, I regret to say).

The position taken by this book (and, I believe, accepted by professional historians when they really think about it) is that novelists, poets, and playwrights use language in a different way from historians. We expect creative writers to exploit the ambiguities and resonances of language, even, perhaps, to express directly the dictates of the unconscious, not always logical in its choice of words. Historians, on the other hand, should convey their findings as clearly and explicitly as possible. Some metaphors may be an aid to communication, others will simply contribute to confusion and obfuscation. With all the temptations to indulge in metaphor and rhetoric, cliché, sloppy phrasing and slang, getting it right is fiendishly difficult. But through constant working, and reworking, it is, contrary to the assertions of the metaphysicists, possible to write history which communicates clear, unambiguous *narrative* (in the historian's sense of chronological account, not the technical, loaded use of postmodernist linguistics), description and analysis. This book (in Chapter 6) will say a good deal about the writing of history, which, I know from personal experience, will prove of great use to students of history and to anyone embarking on the production of history – whether for personal reasons, or in pursuit of a PhD. In the eyes of the metaphysicists, such efforts are utterly futile; that is a very simple indicator of the difference between them and professional historians such as myself.

6 Textuality – the Alleged Existence Thereof

One of the oldest tricks practised by philosophers is the claim to have discovered some process or quality, hitherto unknown, which is now perceived to have great explanatory value: once a label has been clapped on this alleged process or quality, its actual existence is thereafter taken for granted. This trick is much used by the postmodernists: new words are invented, old ones are given new meanings. Thus we have: 'discourse', 'discursive', 'theorise', 'narrativise', 'deconstruction', 'textuality' and 'textualise'. For all the elaborate vocabulary, the basic ideas are very simple, not to say simplistic. They all depend on the notion of bourgeois society, and bourgeois dominance of knowledge, ideology, language. All individual artefacts of communication, according to this trick, are 'texts', and all are, in their very nature, impregnated with bourgeois ideology. Whatever he or she tries to do, the historian, in producing a piece of history, is, it is thus alleged, inevitably creating a 'text'. All complete pieces of writing in the past, whether published books, private letters and diaries, estate records, acts of parliament or whatever, are 'texts'. This theory neatly obliterates the distinction, a vital one for professional historians, between primary sources and secondary sources. In Chapters 5 and 6 of this book, I demonstrate conclusively, and at length, the ways in which these two types of sources are different, and why the difference is important. The historian's belief that historical knowledge must ultimately be founded on the primary sources is a cause for merriment among history's critics, most of whom have never read anything beyond printed books and articles, and who prefer inventing their history to doing the intensely hard work among both secondary and primary sources which is essential for the production of a new contribution to historical knowledge. That awful old Stalinist and Cambridge snob, the late E. H. Carr, wrote mockingly of the professional historian's 'fetishism of documents';¹² more recently Ludmilla Jordanova writes of 'the cult of the archive'.¹³ Neither, as I shall show in Chapter 5, has much of an idea about the nature of primary sources, nor of how historians make use of them.

Works of art, utilitarian objects, articles of clothing, are also, allegedly, 'texts'. Just, then, as postmodernist theory obliterates the distinction between novels and poems and historical books and articles, so also it obliterates the distinction between works of art and works of scholarship. The postmodernists claim one universal, holistic method for dealing with everything, actually Marxism melded with post-structuralism, though they prefer not to declare this too openly: the mode word is 'deconstruction' which they claim to be able to apply to 'texts' of all types. It is claimed that 'deconstruction' is far superior to the techniques historians use in analysing and interpreting primary sources: in fact,

deconstruction simply finds what the postmodernists put there in the first place, bourgeois ideology. When the deconstructionists have produced contributions to historical knowledge that can be set beside those that professional historians have been making for generations, then that might be the time to give more attention to deconstruction.

How historians write up their results and, in particular, how they structure their works is a most important topic, discussed in Chapter 6. The constant refrain of the postmodernist critics is that historians do not think about what they are doing, do not understand how they write their books and articles – thus, of course, requiring the postmodernists to come along to expose how they are simply ‘narrativising’, telling stories, falling victims to ‘textuality’. Readers are welcome to accept their ludicrous assertions if they so wish; if they want to find out what historians really do, they should carry on reading this book.

7 Disagreements Among Historians

In this sub-section I shall, as promised, identify those whom I am referring to as history’s ‘postmodernist critics’; I shall also name those professional historians who have figured most prominently on the ‘battlefields’ listed in this chapter. Both Foucault and Barthes were critical of the history of professional historians – this can be seen most clearly in the essay by Barthes, ‘Historical Discourse’, where history is declared to be mere bourgeois ideology.¹⁴ Hayden White, formerly Professor of Comparative Literature at Stanford University, has been the leading critic in recent years. White apparently started as a historian but seems not to have published any works of history. His researches in medieval and Renaissance Italian history appear not to have yielded any publications. He jointly authored an extremely pedestrian book on the history of ideas.¹⁵ His *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) is undoubtedly a brilliant analysis of the rhetorical techniques of some famous early nineteenth-century ‘historians’, all writing in an amateurish way, well before the emergence of professional history. Unfortunately, White seems to have made very little acquaintanceship with what historians write today. His subsequent books, actually collections of essays, not carefully structured book-length studies, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978) and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), are full of references to other Marxist and post-structuralist writers, such as Fredric Jameson, Paul Ricoeur, Louis Althusser, and, of course, Foucault and Barthes; the only actual historian referred to is Harry Elmer Barnes, an American writer of textbooks. None of this is in any way to suggest that Hayden White was not a most distinguished occupant of first, the Chair of History of Consciousness at Santa Cruz, and then the Comparative

Literature one at Stanford; it is to suggest that he may not be the best qualified person to pontificate about what historians should and should not do. His acolytes in Britain are Patrick Joyce, who has written about the working class in nineteenth-century Lancashire, Alun Munslow, who has written an overtly postmodernist collection of biographical essays, *Discourse and Culture: The Creation of America* (1992), and Keith Jenkins, who has written *The Closed Door: A Christian Critique of Britain's Immigration Policies* (1984). Ludmilla Jordanova seems only now to be wavering in her allegiance to Foucault:¹⁶ her production, in philosophy of science rather than history, has not been immense. In their critical works on professional history,¹⁷ certain names crop up again and again: R. G. Collingwood, E. H. Carr, Geoffrey Elton, Lawrence Stone, A. J. P. Taylor, John Tosh, and (in Jenkins and Munslow, at least, and also Tosh) myself. These writers are not cited on account of any contributions to historical knowledge they may have made, but because of things they have said about the historian's tasks and activities.

I have to say that sometimes historians say very silly things about their own activities. This is particularly the case with historians who, as I have already hinted, like to see themselves as having the same status as popular novelists, fancying themselves as media personalities (exponents of *auteur* theory, I call them). A. J. P. Taylor was simply being ridiculous when he said that historians

should not be ashamed to admit that history is at the bottom simply a form of story-telling... There is no escaping the fact that the original task of the historian is to answer the child's question: 'What happened next?'¹⁸

The question historians address is simply 'What happened?', followed quickly by 'Why?' and 'How?' To find out what historians really do it is necessary to analyse their scholarly works, and that is difficult to do if one has not already written scholarly works oneself. I'll be discussing the historians, and the critics, mentioned here later in the book, with a concentration on epistemological issues in Chapter 7 – where I will move well away from this exclusive concentration on British figures. Here just some very brief words about Collingwood, Carr, Elton, Stone, Tosh, and myself.

Collingwood was both an archaeologist and a philosopher; he didn't do history of the usual kind. I'll explain later in detail why I believe that what he said in *The Idea of History*, much quoted by history's enemies, is complete rubbish. Collingwood held sway, I believe, because few professional historians felt that there was any need to set down an account of their tasks and practices (one did history 'because it was there'), and so Collingwood's book was about the only one there was. Something the

same, I'm afraid, is true of E. H. Carr's *What is History?*, originally given as a series of lectures at Cambridge, and full of little anti-Oxford jokes, as if no intellectual world existed outside of Oxbridge. Carr made some good points: about the value of knowing your historian before reading his/her book (knowing their assumptions, as I would prefer to put it); and about how one evaluates and orders explanatory factors. But Carr's title was a highly misleading one: what he wrote about was the kind of Marxist history that he wished to see replace the professional history which he thought too dominated by the 'fetishism of documents'. I explore Carr's misconceptions about the nature of primary sources in Chapter 5.

Within the historical profession, Lawrence Stone (whose contributions to family history will be discussed later) is most respected for his pioneer ventures into computer-based data analysis, but there has also been a touch of the would-be media star or *auteur*. At one stage, he announced the return of narrative to historical writing, but without really engaging with the technical way in which people like Hayden White were using the term. He did, however, engage vigorously with Patrick Joyce and the ultimate postmodernist contention that 'everything is constructed within language': 'historians', Stone wrote, 'play with words: words do not play with themselves'.¹⁹ My own view, as will be clear by now, is that historians should not play with words, but should deploy them in the most straightforward and unambiguous way possible. That said, Stone has made major contributions to historical knowledge, as have Elton and, in perhaps a slightly different way, A. J. P. Taylor. I would surmise that what I am saying in this book would be broadly agreed to by Stone and Elton, and probably also by Taylor.

Because Carr was an old-style Marxist, and not at all a postmodernist, the critics sometimes lump him together with Elton, Tosh, and myself. Elton, politically, and in general outlook, very conservative, was in fact highly critical of Carr, and his *The Practice of History* (1968) was in part written as a riposte to Carr's *What is History?* If anything (and if possible!), I am even more critical of Carr than Elton was. Tosh, on the other hand, is a Marxist, and like so many other Marxists, has taken up the cause of postmodernism, as seen in the most recent editions of his *The Pursuit of History* (total obeisance in the second edition of 1991, a more reasoned approach in the third of 2000). His argument (which I take up in Chapter 7) was (Tosh now seems to be changing his mind, but it's hard to be sure) that history *must* have theory and since, according to him, Marxism and postmodernism, in their *pas-de-deux*, are the only show in town, we have to opt for them. That argument I find utterly unpersuasive: historians have to try to get it right, and false theory only gets in the way of getting it right. This leaves Elton and myself (not that I am in any way comparing my own contributions to historical knowledge with those of Sir Geoffrey; I'm simply referring to our views on historical

epistemology). Following the last edition of *The Nature of History* I wrote a couple of strongly phrased ('intemperate'!) articles (1993 and 1995) striving to rebut, and perhaps even refute, Marxist and postmodernist criticisms of professional history.²⁰ Having inspired the respect of the historical profession with his *The Practice of History* (1968), followed by *Political History: Principles and Practice* (1970), which took on the philosophers (including Collingwood) on their own ground, triumphantly arguing that the past had had material reality, and that the surviving primary sources were very concrete evidence of this, Elton put together some old material and some pugnacious new stuff in his short book *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (1991). Here his own political conservatism was perhaps too strongly marked and, as the second of the two earlier titles would also suggest, Elton was overly wedded to the notion that conventional political history was superior to all other kinds of history. On that point I very strongly disagreed with him. In addition, I was never fully persuaded by the rather narrowly political model of historical explanation he offered²¹ (it is remarkable, though, how very few of those who write about history do engage with historical explanation beyond, in certain cases, routine invocations of Marxism). All this is simply by way of trying to give readers further insights into my own assumptions – warning you, if you like – before proceeding into the main body of this book. It is proper, also, to refer to the impressive summary of professional history's case against its postmodernist critics in Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (1997), though readers should perhaps be warned that, in this book, Evans goes out of his way to be offensive to me, as if I were the only historian ever to have written a less than perfect sentence. I believe this may arise from the fact that at the beginning of the 1980s I did not shortlist him for a chair at the Open University; I should add that the historical profession, in my experience, is remarkably free of such pettiness.

My case is that history is an autonomous discipline with its own specialised methods. I believe that these methods can, to advantage, be applied to the artefacts created by artists, musicians, architects, novelists, and poets, taken along with all the other primary sources related to cultural production and consumption. As I shall demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 6, I certainly do not think historians should be narrow in their conception of what should be brought within their purview. But – and this is probably where I differ most from many of my colleagues within the historical profession – I do not believe that historical methods can be merged with other approaches. Jeffrey Richards, Professor of Cultural History at the University of Lancaster, has launched a series which explicitly aims to merge history with cultural studies. I wish him well, as I always wish the Scottish football team well when they embark upon

their World Cup campaigns. But, in fact, my view is that the epistemological basis of cultural studies, together with its aims and learning outcomes, are very different from those of history. It is very British, and very gentlemanly, to seek compromise, but I believe all of those interested in history are better served by recognising the autonomy of history and grasping the particular set of methods and principles belonging to it.

8 What Precisely is the Danger?

That question might well follow from the uncompromising statement I have just made. Historians, given the wide range of periods, cultures, and topics to be covered, must always have open minds. I try, in Chapter 6, to say something of how historians finally arrive at their interpretations and explanations. Vital thoughts can often be triggered by reading something which at first sight seems to be remote from the topic in hand. It is very natural, therefore, for historians to talk enthusiastically about the 'perceptions' or 'insights' offered by postmodernist writing. My colleagues must seek inspiration where they may, and they are well able to look after themselves. And I do believe that students should be introduced to the different approaches to history, to the different 'assumptions', and to the criticisms that have been made of professional history, and should be encouraged to decide for themselves which arguments they find the most persuasive. But now, in concluding this chapter, I am going to specify the dangers inherent in adopting the 'gentlemanly' position that the postmodernist agenda, cultural studies, and critical and cultural theory are just other options in the historical endeavour which can readily be incorporated into the standard programme of historical studies.

- 1 There is an organised historical profession, aiming, through the provision of teaching, library facilities, learned journals, and so on, to further the vital task of better understanding the past – not, as the postmodernists would maintain, to better serve as agents of the bourgeoisie. History courses are organised, at undergraduate and postgraduate level, to enable students to achieve certain specified learning outcomes. The whole profession has become steadily more reflexive, and much attention is given to methodology and the nature of primary sources. Postmodernist theories cut right across these developments. Pupils at school who are persuaded that there is no difference between primary and secondary sources will certainly not do well in their exams. PhD students encouraged to believe that there is a 'cult of the archive', and that hard research among the primary sources is not really a sensible requirement, are unlikely to complete

- their degrees. It is open to all young people to adopt postmodern attitudes if they are persuaded by them. But if they are persuaded, they would be best advised to give up the study of history.
- 2 Where there is an attempt to incorporate postmodern attitudes into a basically historical programme, the danger is of students adopting the jargon (the fact of its being incomprehensible often increases the appeal) as a shortcut which will avoid the hard work which all historical study inevitably entails.
 - 3 Postmodernist theory encourages the view that it is impossible to write in a clear, straightforward way (advice which is disastrous for history students). This in turn leads, as the writings of postmodernists themselves clearly demonstrate, to a turning towards exaggerated metaphor and rhetoric – the very things that are not required in historical writing.
 - 4 If we are actually to believe what the postmodernist critics (for example White, Jenkins) say, then their ultimate objective is to wipe out all existing historical knowledge, and the ways in which that knowledge is acquired. One, inevitably, does wonder if the postmodernists really mean what they say, since their vocation seems to entail living off what historians produce. No history, and they would have nothing to criticise. However, the concentration on analysing and criticising what historians write, rather than expanding and communicating historical knowledge, is dangerous enough in itself. This book argues that historical study, conducted in accordance with the precepts set out in it, is important, as well as interesting and, sometimes, exciting. To me, anything which distracts students from studying history in that way, or limits their opportunities to do so, is unforgivable.

I know about the holistic, metaphysical, nomothetic approaches to the study of the past. I reject them because I don't think they actually do assist in furthering knowledge of the past. I reject the propagandist elements implicit within them, though it is not to left-wing propaganda as such that I object. I am equally opposed to right-wing metaphysical propaganda, as embodied most spectacularly (and disastrously) in Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (a book based almost entirely on works of political philosophy and practically devoid of contact with historical sources, even secondary ones). It is not that I don't understand the metaphysical approaches (I am, after all, a specialist in the 1960s, when most of them originated). I understand them only too well. Thus, this book concentrates on presenting what I believe is a coherent, and consistent, account of the nature of historical knowledge and the nature of historical study, which accords with what historians

actually do. I have been in the historical profession for over 40 years and have necessarily had extensive experience in analysing and interpreting the works of other scholars; I have also had a certain amount of first-hand experience in wrestling with the problems historians encounter when they try to make their own contributions to historical knowledge.

Notes

- 1 Keith Jenkins in his feeble *Rethinking History* (London, 1991, new edition) apparently thought it hilarious to refer to 'Marwick's twenty-five varieties', completely confusing what I was saying in the original *The Nature of History* about different philosophers of history and the different approaches of 'historians' down the ages, with my quite unambiguous account of basic historical methodology. See my 'Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (including "Postmodernism") and the Historical', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30/1 (January 1995), pp. 26 and 34 (note).
- 2 E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 12–13.
- 3 Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London, 1997), p. 18. Indeed, according to Munslow I am a 'hardened' reconstructionist, whatever that may mean.
- 4 Foucault's Marxism comes through most strongly in the selection of his writings published in Colin Gordon (ed.), *Michel Foucault Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (London, 1980), that of White in his response to my *Journal of Contemporary History* article cited in note 1 above, published in *JCH*, 30/2 (April 1995).
- 5 John Searle, *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* (London, 1999), p. 11.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 50–1.
- 7 Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000), p. xiv and passim.
- 8 Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, Md., 1987), p. x.
- 9 Sean O'Connell, *The Car and British Society: The Car, Gender and Motoring 1896–1939* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 112ff.; Bill Osgerby, *British Youth Since 1945* (London, 1997), p. 2.
- 10 Richard M. Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago, 1967). This contains essays from the thirties to the fifties, by such distinctively non-postmodernist thinkers as Gilbert Ryle, Stuart Hampshire, and P. F. Strawson.
- 11 White, *Content*, p. 39.
- 12 E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, 1961; pb edn, 1964), p. 16.
- 13 Jordanova, *History*, p. 186.
- 14 The essay by Roland Barthes, 'Historical Discourse', in translation, is conveniently available in Michael Lane, *Structuralism: A Reader* (London, 1970), pp. 145–55.

- 15 William H. Coates, Hayden V. White, J. Selwyn Schapiro, *The Emergence of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe*, 2 vols (New York, 1966, 1970).
- 16 Jordanova, *History*, p. 82, where she appears to be accepting what I had said some years earlier, that Foucault, far from being a philosopher of majestic vision, was very much a product, and a prisoner, of his time. See Arthur Marwick, "'A Fetishism of Documents?' The Salience of Source-Based History', in Henry Kozicki (ed.), *Developments in Modern Historiography* (New York and London, 1993), p. 111.
- 17 In addition to works already cited, note Patrick Joyce, 'History and Post-Modernism', *Past and Present*, 133 (November 1991), pp. 204–9, and *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994).
- 18 A. J. P. Taylor, *A Personal History* (London, 1983), p. 124.
- 19 Lawrence Stone, 'History and Post-Modernism', *Past and Present*, 135 (1992), p. 190.
- 20 Marwick, "'A Fetishism'" and 'Two Approaches'.
- 21 G. R. Elton, *Political History: Principles and Practice* (London, 1970), pp. 138–42.

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