

showed, interpretations really can be tested and confirmed or falsified by an appeal to the evidence, and some of the time at least, it really is possible to prove that one side is right and the other is wrong. What counts as evidence is not determined solely by one historian's perspective but is subject to a wide measure of agreement which transcends not only individuals but also communities of scholars. Still, it has undeniably been a frequent cause of dispute, above all, perhaps, when historians have come to deal with the problem of causation, as we shall now see.

CHAPTER FIVE

CAUSATION IN HISTORY

I

IN his book *What Is History?* E. H. Carr famously declared that "the study of history is a study of causes."¹ Historians had to look for a variety of causes of any given event, work out their relationship to one another if there was one, and arrange them in some kind of hierarchy of importance. Causes had to be ordered as well as enumerated. Carr poured scorn on the views of Sir Isaiah Berlin and others who argued, in the style of Cold War attacks on Soviet historical "determinism," that history was governed by chance, accident, and indeterminacy and that individuals were autonomous and endowed with unfettered free will and were thus morally responsible for their own actions. These therefore could be explained only as the outcome of their will and not of some larger impersonal "cause." But in everyday life, Carr noted, not unfairly, people did not proceed on such extreme assumptions. To adduce causes was not to deny moral responsibility; nothing was less true than the dictum that "to understand everything is to excuse everything." Morality and

causation were two distinct categories which should not be confused.

Admittedly, Carr conceded, accident and contingency in history were real enough. It would be futile, for example, to argue that Lenin's premature death at the age of fifty-four had had no effect on the subsequent course of Russian history. But, Carr insisted, broader trends were more important. Insofar as the essence of being a historian was to generalize, and accidents of this kind were not generalizable, then they were in practice of little interest; they belonged to the "facts" which it was the historian's duty to get right, not to the interpretations which it was the historian's real purpose to advance. It might be the case, for example, that Mark Antony would not have fought and lost the Battle of Actium if Cleopatra had had a big nose and so had failed to attract him (an example quoted by J. B. Bury from Pascal's *Pensées*). Thus, if Cleopatra had not been beautiful, Octavius would not have founded the Roman Empire. Carr said: "It is true that Cleopatra's nose had results. But it makes no sense as a general proposition to say that generals lose battles because they are infatuated with beautiful queens Accidental causes cannot be generalized . . . they teach no lessons and lead to no conclusions."²

Carr thought that historians operated a kind of commonsense approach to explanation which might not satisfy the philosopher but would operate perfectly well in everyday life. If Mr. Jones, driving a car with defective brakes, ran over Mr. Robinson on a blind corner, Carr said, we might explain the incident in terms of the corner, or the brakes, or by reference to Mr. Jones's excessive consumption of alcohol at the party from which he was returning; but we would not get much credence if we argued that the cause lay in the smoking habit which had led Mr. Robinson to cross the road to buy a packet of cigarettes at the corner shop. For Carr, this last-named cause lay in the realm of chance and contingency and therefore effectively had to be ruled out of court. You could say that blind corners, defective brakes, or drunk driving made road accidents more likely, but you could not say that cigarette smoking by pedestrians did.³

Carr's example of Mr. Jones and Mr. Robinson has been reexamined recently by Professors Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob. "Doesn't any

analysis of this case," they ask, "depend on whether Mr. Robinson and Mr. Jones were white or black, homosexual or heterosexual (perhaps one of them was on his way to a gay bar and was preoccupied), or even accident-prone or rock-steady?"⁴ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob seem to be objecting to Carr's account because it is not a politically correct way of approaching history in the 1990s. But their argument is itself open to objections which point to the limitations of rewriting history from a particular political perspective. In the first place, while it might indeed have been important that one of the two men in question was thinking about the bar he was going to visit instead of the oncoming traffic, if indeed he was, and if indeed this could be proven, it is not immediately apparent why it should matter whether the bar in question was straight or gay. In any case, however, we know that Mr. Jones was on his way home and that Mr. Robinson had simply popped out to buy cigarettes, so Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob just haven't read the evidence correctly, and we can rule out their speculative point as factually wrong. As far as the ethnicity of the two gentlemen is concerned, this, too, is irrelevant to an explanation of the accident unless we can show that Mr. Jones was a racist and deliberately ran down Mr. Robinson because he belonged to a different ethnic group. But there is no evidence for this in Carr's account, since Mr. Jones clearly stepped on the brake pedal when he saw Mr. Robinson crossing the road (otherwise it would not have mattered that the car's brakes were defective, since he would not have tried to use them; indeed he would have stepped on the accelerator). So we can rule this out, too, as factually incorrect as well as irrelevant.

The British historian A. J. P. Taylor used to delight in provoking more sober historians by positing tiny causes for vast events. The First World War, for instance, in his view was caused by railway timetables because this locked the belligerent powers into a sequence of troop mobilizations and war declarations from which they could not escape.⁵ Even in his autobiographical writings he liked to emphasize the element of chance in his life.⁶ Doubtless he would have been sorely tempted by the idea that Mr. Robinson was killed because he smoked cigarettes. But it is less than certain that he intended to be taken entirely seriously in this kind of thing, and more likely that he

intended it to irritate his more pedestrian colleagues, an activity at which he was generally very successful.

A more fruitful way of indicating the importance and limitations of chance (or contingency, as the more theoretically inclined like to call it) in history is to imagine what might have happened had things been slightly different. Suppose, for example, that U.S. President John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated but had instead gone on to a full two terms in the White House. Would things have turned out differently from the way they did? Certainly his presidency would have been more glamorous than that of Lyndon B. Johnson or Richard M. Nixon, and the chances are that the latter would not have come to power and thus the whole Watergate scandal would never have happened. But the big issues—civil rights, welfare, the Vietnam War—would not have been much affected. We would still most probably have had Medicare. The student and other radical disturbances of the late 1960s would not have been prevented by a Kennedy presidency. America would still have been involved in Vietnam and would still have been defeated. Nothing in Kennedy's record up to 1963 makes us think that he would have differed strongly from his successors on these issues. Of course we can never know for sure what would have happened. The relevant point here is that despite very significant differences, it is unlikely that the overall pattern of events would have diverged totally from what actually happened had Kennedy not been assassinated. Accident, chance, and contingency certainly have a real effect, but that effect is almost always rather limited in practice.

As far as this goes, therefore, Carr's argument, though put in a rather extreme way, certainly has a good deal to recommend it. But there are problems with it, too. To begin with, Carr went on to argue that causality is a matter of interpretation and therefore inevitably bound up with value judgment. History must serve the present, and so, too, must our view of the causes of historical events. In the case of Mr. Jones and Mr. Robinson, for example, we could cite the blind corner, the defective brakes, or the alcohol intake of the driver, because we could do something about these things—alter the corner, for instance, or introduce tougher laws about the standards of

maintenance and repair of motor vehicles and the level of alcohol with which people are permitted to drive them. But although we could ban cigarette smoking, and thus prevent Mr. Robinson from killing himself in another way, this would have no effect at all on traffic accidents of the kind which took place when Mr. Jones ran him over. The enumeration of accidental causes, therefore, concluded Carr, is "from the point of view of the historian dead and barren," because it cannot contribute anything to our ability to shape the future.⁷ Our search for the causes of Mr. Robinson's death is guided by our objective of reducing deaths on the road.⁸

But while the citation of accidental causes may be dead and barren from the point of view of the politician or the social reformer, it is difficult to see why it should be dead and barren from the point of view of the historian, whose primary purpose is to understand the past. If your main aim is to shape the future, then it is not a good idea to devote your life to studying history; it would be far better to avoid academic or intellectual life altogether and go into politics or business or the civil service or some other kind of practical career. If the sources suggest that an accidental cause was at work, it would not be right to rule it out just because it could not be made to serve our purposes in the present. Indeed an even greater danger lurks here. Suppose a cause, accidental or otherwise, suggesting itself powerfully from the documents, goes against our ideas about the present and the future? Was Carr really saying that we should suppress it in the interests of present-day ideology?

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Carr did not really think his argument through. Nor, in the end, was the example of Mr. Jones and Mr. Robinson particularly well chosen. For historical explanation is not just about finding causes for discrete events like car crashes or world wars. Historians are just as interested in what events or processes decide, what they mean, as in what causes them. Consequences are often more important than causes.⁹ "Why" is far from being the only question historians ask. Categorizing past societies or political systems or structures of belief is no less legitimate than inquiring into the causes of past events. Historians can "explain" something by putting it into a context (i.e., arguing it was part of this

movement rather than that, belonged to one period or trend rather than another, and so on). Nor is explanation itself all that history is about. Allan Megill's view is typical: "It is a rather widely held opinion among professional historians that the truly serious task of historiography, making it a contribution to knowledge and not a triviality, is the task of explanation."¹⁰ But are description and the recovery of empirical fact really no more than trivialities? Few historians would wish to concede this point in practice, given the enormous amount of time they spend on these activities. Moreover, some historians at least have become somewhat dismissive of the search for causes in recent years. Geoffrey Barraclough, a specialist on medieval Germany whose experiences in the Second World War converted him to the idea that history had to be relevant and oriented toward the present, argued in 1967 that historians should stop teaching their pupils about causes, which could only be speculated upon and had no relevance to the present, and concentrate on results instead.¹¹ More recently John Vincent has declared that the search for causes is futile; it is better in his view to look for explanations, though he never makes the distinction between the two very clear. "Cause," he says, "is a constriction on historical thought; let it be unbound."¹² Writing in 1976, Theodore Zeldin rejected narrative history and the search for causes in favor of what he called a *pointilliste* method, which would compose a picture out of unconnected dots, from which the reader could make "what links he thinks fit for himself."¹³ "Causation," he observed, "has been almost as merciless a tyrant to historians as chronology."¹⁴ He, too, thought it was time for historians to escape its clutches.

In his own great work *A History of French Passions*—originally published as *France 1848–1945* in the *Oxford History of Modern Europe*—Zeldin looks at French society over the century in question under a variety of novel perspectives—ambition, love, politics, intellect, taste, anxiety—and includes surveys of almost every aspect of French life, illustrated with telling and often entertainingly told examples of individual Frenchmen and women whose lives seemed to come into the perspective in question. The book is indeed remarkable for its refusal to engage in large-scale theories or explanations and its rigorous

avoidance of narrative and chronology. But at the same time all is not quite so innovative as it seems. Often, for example, the novel-sounding titles conceal quite old-fashioned subjects. "Ambition," for example, introduces the reader to a masterly synthesis of recent research on French social structure, with chapters on the peasantry, the bourgeoisie, and the working class. A chapter on "Hypocrisy" turns out to be mainly about the Communist party. And so on. The book's section on politics not only has a chronology concealed beneath the thematic approach, moving from Legitimism and Orleanism via Bonapartism to Republicanism and so on, but also in practice delivers numerous quite cogent and persuasive explanations of French political history, for example, of the reasons why the Third Republic managed to last so long. Since Zeldin's previous experience had been as a straight political historian specializing in the Second Empire, it is perhaps hardly surprising that the political coverage was the most coherent in the book. But the rest, too, consisted not only of attacks on historical orthodoxies but of numerous explanations of the subjects with which it dealt.¹⁵ There is indeed a refusal to put forward any overarching thesis to bind the various parts of the book together. But perhaps this is inevitable in a survey of a century of modern French history that aimed to be totally comprehensive in its coverage.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, other historians have emphasized the importance of causation and the prominent role of accident and personality in history. Geoffrey Roberts, an expert on Soviet Russia, has argued for a

human action approach to the study of history [which] emphasizes the freedom of individuals to act, the importance of reconstructing what happened from the actor's point of view, and the role of accident, miscalculation and unintended consequences in shaping historical outcomes. . . . The idea that people do things for a reason, that their individual and collective actions are the stuff of history and that it is possible to construct an evidence-based account of why past actors acted as they did is, for most of us, plain common sense.¹⁶

But this is not true at all. Historians by and large do not concentrate on the accidental, do not assume that individuals have unfettered

freedom of choice, and do not confine themselves to reconstructing the past actor's point of view. To argue, as some philosophers of history have done, that historians are only interested in discovering what individual actors thought and intended in the past, and frame their causal explanations in terms of what they find out about these things,⁷ is plainly wrong, as a glance at any one of a whole variety of major areas of historical scholarship, from economic history to the history of climate, will show. Long ago, Sir Herbert Butterfield pointed out in his little essay *The Whig Interpretation of History* that many of the greatest and most important developments in modern history were the unintended consequences of actions whose originators had had something entirely different in mind. The Protestant Reformation, for instance, and its Catholic counterpart in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe had intended to make people more godly, but the religious upheaval and conflict which followed eventually produced such widespread disillusion that the secular rationalism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment was the result.⁸ Friedrich Engels expressed this view much earlier and far more succinctly when he famously spoke of historical change as resulting from the operation of a "parallelogram of forces"; one person moved one corner of the parallelogram, moving all its arms and thereby affecting things far away from the point of origination and far removed from the intentions of the actor.

Moreover, while "common sense" may not exactly be coterminous with "prejudice" and imbued with "a potential for repressive bigotry," as Christopher Lloyd has charged, it certainly varies widely from epoch to epoch and culture to culture.⁹ "Common sense" in the medieval and early modern periods, for example, included the notion that human action was guided by divine (or diabolical) inspiration and that disease was frequently caused by black magic or witchcraft. The recounting of miracles was part of the "common sense" of medieval historiography. The giveaway here is of course Roberts's phrase "for most of us," a phrase which implicitly ejects from the community of historians those who do not write political or diplomatic history and are therefore not one of "us." This does not really do justice to the breadth and diversity of historical scholarship

today. Nor does the view taken by Sir Geoffrey Elton, that because historians are concerned with particular events, they should only look for particular causes. Even the most empirical of political historians must make some attempt to look for broader explanatory factors, and in a wider sense all of us mobilize explanations that depend on broad assumptions about how human beings think, feel, and behave in a given culture and society.²⁰

II

WHILE Roberts would have us concentrate on explaining historical events in terms of their relation to the aims and intentions of the people who took part in them, Carr's concept of causation has often been labeled "determinist"—that is, it rests on the assumption that events are generally caused by factors independent of the will of the people involved in them. In an early piece, written in 1966, for example, Hayden White declared that history's claim to discover true patterns in the past trapped human beings, as it were, in an inescapable net of causation and robbed them of freedom of action in the present; if this was abandoned, then people could use history to assert their control over the future, and this indeed should be history's primary purpose.²¹ White's argument rested on the idea that it didn't matter whether the history we used to further our present concerns was true or not. Any history beyond the merely antiquarian was by definition a "metahistory" the truth or otherwise of which could never be determined since it was essentially the creation of the historian.²² "Explanation" in history really consisted only of theories made up by historians without reference to the source material and imported into it from outside. It rested on a series of poetic insights into how things happened, formalized into a philosophy of history which was to be found, if only implicitly, in every historical work, in one variant or another.²³ This argument collapsed a number of distinct, though, to be sure, clearly related phenomena into one another, abolishing altogether the distinctions between them, and reducing them all in the end to the single phenomenon of the poetic insight.

Empirical research into the causes of specific events is arguably more than the expression of a philosophy of history, though admittedly the historian has to have some basic theory of how and why things happen, some fundamental idea of human motivation and behavior, to begin with. Moreover, White did not say why historians' explanations of the causes of things were "poetic" rather than rational. Given the dull and pedestrian manner in which many historians write, "poetic" seems something of a misnomer. His argument was also remarkable for its trivialization of questions of evidence and its elevation of interpretation to a position of almost exclusive preeminence in the nature of historical scholarship. Historians, according to White, are less concerned to establish *that* certain events occurred than to determine what certain events might *mean*. But establishing that events occurred is a central part of the historian's business and cannot be dismissed as a secondary problem or a side issue.

In the hands of some postmodernists, White's argument can be turned into a general criticism of the historian's enterprise as a whole. Thus Keith Jenkins, for example, declares roundly that "historians are not too concerned about discrete facts. . . . No," he says gleefully,

historians have ambitions, wishing to discover not only what happened but how and why and what these things meant and mean. This is the task historians have set for themselves (I mean they did not have to raise the stakes so high). So it is never really a matter of the facts *per se* but the weight, position, combination and significance they carry *vis-à-vis* each other in the construction of explanations that is at issue. . . .

He proceeds to reprimand historians for this folly. "Working historians," he says, "clearly ought to recognise" that interpretations do not just arise from the facts, but are put there by historians themselves and will have only a limited temporal and local validity before they are superseded by other interpretations. The concept of historical causation is itself merely an element in the arbitrarily constructed discursive formation of professional historiography.⁴⁴

Even more radical criticisms have been leveled at the concept of

historical causation by some postmodernists. The idea of a cause depends rather obviously on the concept of sequential time. Something that causes something else generally comes before it in time, not after; thus the causes of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 are to be sought in the years 1775 and before, not 1777 and after. If sequential time is recognized as no more than an intellectual construct, of course, then the consequences of this recognition for historical research are very serious, as a number of writers have recognized. Frank Ankersmit expresses a widespread view when he says, "Historical time is a recent and highly artificial invention of Western civilization." Writing historical narrative based "on the concept of time," he has declared, is "building on quicksand."⁴⁵ Drawing on Einsteinian physics, many postmodernists are skeptical of the notion of time as even and regulated; in political terms, they see such a view of time as oppressive and controlling, legitimating hegemonic discourse and privileging Western ways of viewing the world over non-Western.⁴⁶ A democratic history written according to the precept of abandoning sequential time would be, as one postmodernist writer has argued approvingly, an "interminable pattern without meaning," rather like some forms of contemporary music or some contemporary experimental novels. This would lead to a new form of history which would abandon "the time of clocks and capital" altogether.⁴⁷ Yet those who argue in this manner are caught in a paradox; indeed the very use of the concept of "postmodern," which is inevitably tied to a particular time period of history, is contrary to the postmodern notion that there are no particular time periods of history. As a perceptive critic has remarked, when a postmodern writer puts forward the claim that "historical time is a thing of the past," she does not seem to see all the ironies present in the statement, for declaring something to be a thing of the past itself uses the historical concept of time which the statement is intended to dismiss.⁴⁸ Besides, a historical—that is, basically linear—concept of time continues to be used the world over by people both in the conduct of their everyday lives and in their preference for, say, novels which narrate a story over novels which do not, for John Grisham over Alain Robbe-Grillet, for example. Historical time is

thus in no way merely adhered to as a concept by people who, as some argue, are "privileged by the prevailing hegemonic arrangements."²⁹ It is in essence far too powerful a principle to be dispensed with, even by those who reject it. Indeed any attempt to deny historical time necessarily presupposes the very thing it denies. *How* we count the years—whether we use the Western calendar, or the Jewish, or the Chinese, or whatever—is completely irrelevant to this point, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that postmodernists here are confusing the Western hegemony implicit in the worldwide use of the Christian calendar with the culturally neutral, universal sequence of time which calendars are designed to count.

III

TIME passes, therefore; yet no historian can hope to capture every passing moment. As I am writing this, I can hear the click of my fingers on the word processor, the faint whine of the computer in the background, the dull but constantly varying roar of the traffic in the main road behind the houses across the garden, the twittering of the birds outside, the light ticking of the clock on my desk, the soft padding of my cat as he comes up the stairs, the sound of my own breathing, and so on. All this in a handful of seconds, and already it is gone beyond any hope of complete or accurate reconstruction, least of all in the exact sequence in which these noises have come to my ears. So we all pull out from the seamless web of past events a tiny selection which we then present in our historical account. Nobody has ever disputed this. The dispute arises from those who believe that the selection is largely made by the narratives and structures which occur in the past itself and those who think it is largely made by the historian.

Is it the case, as Hayden White has maintained, that most professional historians believe that they are constructing their narratives as simulacra of the structures and processes of real events in the past, not as the product of their own aesthetic sensibilities and purposes?³⁰ It seems unlikely. Every historian is aware of the complexity of the

facts, their irreducibility to a single narrative strand, and everyone writing a history book, or, come to that, a Ph.D. thesis, is confronted by the problem of how to separate out the still rather inchoate material collected—or to be collected—during research into a series of more or less coherent narrative and structural strands and then of how to weave these strands together into a more or less coherent whole. Often the decisions taken are a direct consequence of the interpretation advanced. What might appear to be a conventional historical narrative is often nothing of the kind, but the outcome of a series of aesthetic and interpretative choices by the historian. For example, LaCapra has described *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada* by Garrett Mattingly rather patronizingly as "a lovely old-style tale" and Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* as a "highly conventional narrative" presenting a "traditional story."³¹ But in both cases he misses the point. First, of course, a conventional narrative account of the Inquisition register on which Le Roy Ladurie based his book would use it to describe the inquisitorial process in Montaillou. The whole point about Le Roy Ladurie's book is that it reads it *against the grain*, for a structural analysis of everyday life and relationships in the village, in which a whole battery of modern anthropological theories is brought to bear on everyday life.³² Similarly, Mattingly's book is a highly complex and sophisticated narrative, moving from one geographical center to the next (London, Madrid, Antwerp, and so on), in a rather cubist fashion, trying to give us a multiplicity of viewpoints and interweave a number of different narratives. It seems to me to be very much aware of modern novelistic techniques, despite LaCapra's dismissal of it for belonging to the "traditional narrative" genre unaffected by the modern novel. Mattingly cast his classic book in this multistrand narrative form because as an American he wanted to get away from the common habit of British historians of narrating the whole thing from the British point of view. Historical narrative, then, seldom simply consists of a single linear temporal strand.

Perhaps I may illustrate some of these problems of interweaving narrative and causal argument by referring to my own work. When I began researching the cholera epidemic of 1892 in Hamburg at the beginning of the 1980s, it was because I was attracted by the

immense amount of source material this major disaster generated, revealing details of the structure and dynamics of everyday life, social inequality, politics and administration, mentalities and behavior in a major European city which remain largely concealed from the historian's view in more normal times. As I went through the material, it became clear that explaining why a major epidemic happened in Hamburg that year and nowhere else in Western Europe would be even more revealing of the social and political assumptions and practices of nineteenth-century liberalism than the epidemic itself. It became clear that a whole range of factors was involved, from the amateurism of the city administration through the overcrowding of the city slums to the peculiar theories of disease transmission held by the city's medical profession. The major cause seemed to be the failure to modernize Hamburg's water supply, and this, too, required lengthy explanation.

The question then arose of how to present all these causes over a period stretching from the 1830s to the eve of the epidemic in 1892. Eventually, after a good deal of experimentation and shifting great chunks of text around as I wrote, I came up with a mixture of narrative and analysis which I hoped would generate an increasing sense of suspense and excitement in the reader as we came closer and closer to the actual narrative of the epidemic itself in the second half of the book. So I divided the causes into twelve groups or sets, each of which, readers would be clear, was to play a major role in the epidemic itself; narrative tension was generated by withholding information about precisely what this role was to be until we arrived at the epidemic itself. The book narrated each causal group from around 1830 or so up to the spring or summer of 1892 (the epidemic began in August), so that in effect it presented twelve separate narratives, each piling another layer of causation upon the previous ones and modifying them in the process. Starting with the most general—the amateurish nature of the city administration—it moved through the analysis of political inequality, poverty, and the social tension which governed the expenditure priorities of the city administration to the growth of environmental pollution and lack of public hygiene, the failure to build a properly purified water supply, and the inade-

quacies of popular nutrition, all of which, it was implied without explicitly being so stated, would act as multiplier effects in one way or another in the spread of cholera in 1892 until more than ten thousand people died of the disease in the city within the space of six weeks or less. The next six narratives, each once more beginning early in the century and moving up to the eve of the epidemic, dealt with the unfavorable patterns of death and disease in the city even in normal times, the *laissez-faire* dogma which prevented the local doctors from intervening in epidemic situations, the inadequacies of their responses to earlier, lesser epidemics, and finally the arrival of cholera in Germany in 1830, its recurrence at intervals thereafter, the medical theories evolved to account for it, and its reemergence in the course of 1892, setting the scene for the narrative of the epidemic in Hamburg itself.

There was never any doubt in my mind from the very outset that what I was doing was constructing an ensemble of narratives that added up to a set of causal explanations of why the epidemic broke out in Hamburg and (as comparisons with other cities like Bremen showed) nowhere else in 1892. This set of causal explanations was then recapitulated and weighted at the end of the book in a much briefer, more schematic fashion, where I argued that the epidemic occurred because the causative agent, the cholera bacillus, brought in by Russian emigrants on their way to America, passed through a series of safety nets. All or some of these were present in other cities, none in Hamburg. Medical skepticism in Hamburg about the infectious nature of the disease prevented proper isolation of the emigrants and delayed the notification of the outbreak. The failure to filtrate the water supply sent the bacillus through every household tap. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, and unhygienic housing aided person-to-person transmission. Administrative inefficiency made it difficult to contain the epidemic once it had broken out. It would have been perfectly possible to have put this argument in a completely different way; the reasons for devising twelve parallel causal narratives were mainly aesthetic. It simply seemed the neatest, most economical, most exciting, and most interesting way of organizing and presenting the evidence. Above all, it seemed the best way of using the

wonderfully rich source material generated by the epidemic to explore all these various aspects of daily life, social structure, and political action in a city where—and this was the book's overarching thesis—laissez-faire liberalism proved incapable of dealing with the problems generated by massive urban-industrial growth and was forced by the ensuing disaster to give way to "Prussian"-style state interventionism.³³ There could never be any question of presenting a "simple" chronological narrative in this case—not even of the epidemic itself—because there were simply too many strands of events going on at the same time. Arranging it all purely in terms of chronology would have delivered a chronicle with no explanatory power whatsoever. The book's structure was the result of a series of deliberate aesthetic and intellectual choices in which I sought the most effective way of putting across a mass of empirical material to support a series of causal arguments and hypotheses.

Most historical narratives consist of a mixture of revealed, reworked, constructed, and deconstructed narratives from the historical past and from the historian's own mind. We start with a rough-hewn block of stone and chisel away at it until we have a statue. The statue wasn't waiting there to be discovered, we have made it ourselves, and it would have been possible for us to have made a different statue from the one we finally created had we wanted to. On the other hand, we are constrained not only by the size and shape of the original stone, but also by its nature; an incompetent sculptor runs the risk not only of producing an unconvincing statue that doesn't much resemble anything, but also of hammering or chiseling too hard, or the wrong way, and shattering the stone altogether. We have to work within the limitations of the material, the way a wood carver has to work with the grain of the wood, not against it. These limitations are often strict and severe.

Nor is it true to say, as many postmodernists do, that narratives do not exist in the past itself but are all put there by the historian.³⁴ In some cases the narrative is there in the sources, lived and thought by the people we are writing about: German or Italian unification in the nineteenth century, for example, or the making of the United States in the eighteenth. In other cases it is not. Yet even where historians

are aware of the fact that people in the past were consciously living a story they believed in and sought to shape, they can never rest content with simply reproducing it; it must be juxtaposed with others, hidden meanings must be discovered, flaws and contradictions in the story must be exposed. Historians not only deconstruct the narratives of other historians but deconstruct the narratives of the past as well.

Hayden White has suggested somewhat condescendingly that history has become "a refuge" for people who want "to find the simple in the complex and the familiar in the strange."³⁵ But if this ever applied to historians in the past, it certainly doesn't apply today. It may be part of the postmodern turn in historical studies that so much work is now being done on the irrational, the bizarre, and the exceptional in the past. But in truth, ever since the early nineteenth century, one of the main purposes of historians has been to find the strange in the familiar, to increase the distance between ourselves and the past. Empirical historians are constantly telling us that the past is far more complex than the great, suprahistorical metanarratives would seem to allow. Back in the 1950s the great liberal American historian Richard Hofstadter was even worried that historians' commitment to the "rediscovery of the complexity of social interests . . . may give us not only a keener sense of the structural complexity of our society in the past, but also a sense of the moral complexity of social action that will lead to political immobility."³⁶ It was precisely this kind of political consequence, of course, that conservatives like Sir Geoffrey Elton most welcomed. Professional historians have more often than not been hostile to "oversimplification" rather than indulging in it.

The postmodernist critic Sande Cohen has gone further than Hofstadter and argued that historical narrative in itself is inherently anti-intellectual. Historians, he says "use narration in order to deflect thinking," and he condemns their "outrageous recreation of tutelary narration" where "the reader is not even allowed to *think*." Thus history, he thinks, is part of "the discourse of bourgeois society." By focusing attention on the past, historians are engaging in "aggression against the present," which is part of "capitalism's promotion of thought forms that make the present as something that matters all

but inaccessible." Cohen goes on to condemn the Marxist historian Edward Thompson's polemic against French structuralist Marxism, *The Poverty of Theory*, as "an aggressive rejection of the nonnarrated" demonstrating a "sad" conformity to "bourgeois historiography" and a most un-Marxist rejection of "critical thinking," while even Hayden White's analyses of historians' writings are dismissed as "defensive protections of the historical discipline," something which would surprise the many historians, such as Elton and Marwick, who have seen them in a rather different light.³⁷ But like many postmodernists, Cohen vastly underestimates the critical capacity of people who read history and hugely overestimates the historian's ability to discipline the reader's thought, even by the use of "tutelary narration." Other versions of postmodernist thought suggest, at the opposite extreme, that the reader's ability to impose meaning on narratives is virtually unlimited. Neither extreme, however, comes anywhere near the reality.

Many historical narratives have been devoted to providing historical justification or inspiration for political and social movements in the present. Reading or writing about the feminist struggle for equal rights and human dignity for women in the nineteenth century in no way closes off the possibility of contemplating women's situation in the present. Rather the contrary, in fact; that is why present-day feminists have devoted so much attention to it. It is quite wrong to see narratives as constricting and essentially reactionary myths that have little to do with historical truth or to argue, as some postmodernists do, that narrative is essentially conservative or even fascist.³⁸ The official historiography of Soviet Russia and the Eastern bloc was, in the view of the French originator of this particular critique, Jean-François Lyotard, a "master-narrative," imposed and sanctified by the state. What he termed local narratives were by contrast forms of resistance, individual stories told by prisoners, students, peasants, and deviants of various kinds, impossible to incorporate into the state's version of events and thus directly subversive of it. Unlike the master-narrative, local narratives did not claim omniscience or universal validity, and they were subjective rather than lay claim to objective historical truth.³⁹ Hence history in general consisted—and

should consist—of a mass of local histories. "Postmodernism" indeed was defined by Lyotard simply as "incredulity toward master-narratives."⁴⁰ But of course it is not true to say, as Lyotard tended to, that master-narratives are the hegemonic stories told by those in power. The Marxist master-narrative itself, in many different variants, was developed over decades by an oppressed minority. The same may be said of the master-narratives of feminist history, or gay history, or black history. Even master-narratives do not have to be oppressive.

Historians in general have not only always been active in constructing local narratives or counter-narratives but also taken special pleasure in attacking master-narratives of every kind. Sir Geoffrey Elton was particularly insistent on the historian's duty in this respect. Many historians have seen their task not in creating narratives but in destroying them. "Ever since historical study became professional," Elton declared toward the end of his life, "—that is to say, systematic, thorough and grounded in the sources—it has time and again destroyed just those interpretations that served particular interests, more especially national self-esteem and self-confidence."⁴¹ The continued prevalence of national historical myths in the Third World was for him a matter for regret. "The world is now in the hands of adolescents," he moaned.⁴² "Historians," Theodore Zeldin has written, echoing Elton in his own, less apocalyptic manner, are "the counterpart of the social scientists; they say what cannot be done, rather than what should be done. Their function is less glamorous than that of the soothsayer. They are only court jesters."⁴³ It was a function of the court jester in medieval times, of course, not only to entertain and amuse, but also to tell his audience unpalatable truths. History has always been seen by historians as a destroyer of myths as much as a creator of them.

In destroying myths, historians have often sought to substitute for them narratives which are more closely grounded in the sources. But narrative of course is by no means the dominant mode of historical representation that postmodernists, fixated on the great narrative histories of the nineteenth century, like to claim it is among contemporary historians. Indeed the sequential presentation of historical material has often been entirely abandoned by modern historical

scholarship, under the influence of the social sciences. Probably the majority of histories other than introductory textbooks have in the last three or four decades done their best to avoid having their structure shaped by the passage of time, and this is even more the case with articles and theses than it is with monographs. Moreover, some of the most famous history books of earlier periods have avoided narrative too: Namier's *Structure of Politics*, like Braudel's *Mediterranean*, sought to uncover the deep and largely unchanging structures which underlay the surface froth of events. Stephan Thernstrom's *The Other Bostonians*, Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, even Wehler's *Kaiserreich* all were structural histories in which the passage of time was either frozen in the period studied, and change consigned to periods before and after, or abolished altogether in the continuities being posited. The first injunction history tutors in universities give to their students is "avoid narrative"; only thematic analysis gets the top grade, a judgment which also reflects wider attitudes in the twentieth-century historical profession to the presentation and communication of historical research and scholarship at every level.⁴⁴

IV

HISTORICAL narratives do not necessarily have to be bound to a forward direction of time's arrow. Some of the most celebrated historical works of modern times move backward in time instead. For an English legal historian like F.W. Maitland, in his book *Domesday Book and Beyond*, it could mean peeling off the layers of time which had accumulated in the returns made about custom and law to William the Conqueror's massive landholding survey of 1086, *Domesday Book*, to reveal earlier and earlier patterns of tenure and settlement as he went back through the centuries; "beyond" in this sense meant moving toward more and more remote periods of the past, seen from the perspective of the late eleventh century. For the nationalist German historian Hellmut Diwald, writing a history of the Germans in reverse chronological order, starting with the pre-

sent (in his case, the 1970s), meant moving backward from what he saw as his country's humiliation, division, and impotence in the third quarter of the twentieth century to a more and more glorious past—a past he clearly hoped the book would help his readers want to recover.⁴⁵ Whatever its purpose, writing history backward has long been part of the stock-in-trade of historians, one of a large variety of ways in which they have managed to smash what the French historian François Simiand called at the beginning of the twentieth century "the tyranny of chronology."⁴⁶

Postmodernist critics of linear notions of time ignore the fact that historians have long been accustomed to employ a variety of concepts of temporality in their work; indeed one could say that it is precisely this that distinguishes them most clearly from chroniclers, whose notion of time is by definition confined to the tale of years.⁴⁷ Even in the most traditional kinds of political history, historians skate quickly over years or even decades when nothing much changed, to concentrate on periods, like the revolutionary years of 1789–94 in France, when as much of political importance happened in a month as happened in a year for most of the time under the *ancien régime*. There are periods when political history seems to speed up, as in America in the 1770s, others when it seems to move in slow motion, as in Spain in the postwar years of General Franco's dictatorship. Historians are also used to the idea that historical processes of a similar kind occur in different countries at different times. Industrialization, for example, got under way in Britain in the 1780s, but not in Germany until the 1840s or Russia until the 1890s. The "demographic transition" from a society of high birth and death rates to one of low birth and death rates began in France in the eighteenth century but in Italy only a century or so later.

Historians have long been familiar with the notion that there are different kinds of periodization for different kinds of history. Most obviously, economic change moves at a different pace from political change. The history of changes in, say, military technology also has its own particular periodization, as does that of culture and the arts; recently it has been argued that women's history should also be periodized differently from men's. Change in any one of these areas obvi-

ously had an effect on the others, but to cram them all into conventional boxes of time framed by major political turning points, although it has been done often enough in textbook surveys of national histories, is artificial and unhelpful, and insofar as the post-modernist questioning of linear notions of time has contributed to a realization of this, it is to be welcomed.⁴⁸ But of course, conventional, politically defined periods have always provided their own testimony to the unevenness of historical time and its malleability in the hands of the historian. In modern European political history, for example, the nineteenth century is conventionally dated from 1815 to 1914, or in some versions from 1789 to 1914; the "short twentieth century," from 1914 to 1989. In American history the conventional time spans are framed by events such as the Declaration of Independence or the Civil War, not by abstract and evenly spaced dates like 1700, 1800, or 1900.

Some historians have also built the notion of different kinds of historical time into their own work, most famously Fernand Braudel, who said that his major problem in writing his great book *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* "was to show that time moves at different speeds."⁴⁹ At the top level were political events, which Braudel recounted in the third part of his book. Here things happened quickly, if unevenly. Battles, treaties, court intrigues, and political rivalries were "surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs."⁵⁰ These tides of history were covered in the second part of Braudel's massive work: slow-moving social and economic trends, often imperceptible to contemporaries, changing military technologies, social structures, and state systems. Finally, at the very bottom of the ocean of time were the still, deep waters "in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles." Treated at length in the opening section of *The Mediterranean*, this was the level of "immobile history," the "*longue durée*," in which preindustrial society's possibilities of change were confined by the unchanging powers of the natural environment.⁵¹

In turn this generated persistent systems of belief or "mentalities" which other historians, such as Jean Delumeau in his history of fear

in the West, charted over a period of several hundred years in which they seemingly underwent little change or no change at all.⁵² In retrospect, the French historians often seem to have exaggerated the extent to which these things did not change: Braudel was heavily criticized for taking the natural environment of the Mediterranean littoral as a given, instead of investigating the ways in which it was transformed by human activity, for instance, in the massive deforestation carried out to supply wood for shipbuilding, construction, and fuel. Nor did he always show very clearly how his three different levels of time related to one another. The *Annales* model was never very good at accounting for historical change at any level; its interest in causation was often rather limited. Nevertheless, for all these undoubted problems, the point here is that it made explicit in a way that had seldom been done before the manner in which historical time is not the same as linear time. It is in many ways the opposite: not a given, unchangeable series of dates, but a construct which the historian has to argue rather than take for granted.

Postmodernism's new view of time can be seen in a more concrete sense in architecture. Postmodern buildings jumble together the architectural styles of several centuries to achieve a new synthesis; postmodern novels mix up genres popular at different periods or even interweave action scenes set in different eras.⁵³ But this is not really rejecting historical concepts of time; it is simply using them in a new way, rather like the way the authentic performance movement in music now prefers to perform eighteenth-century music on eighteenth-century instruments instead of modern ones, or at least on replicas of them (something which of course itself raises key questions of authenticity in a more subtle form). This aspect of postmodernism can perhaps be seen as extending an invitation to historians. Why should not we, too, raid the many and various genres of historical writing which have been developed over the past couple of centuries, to enrich our own historical practice today? Why do we have to stick rigidly, for example, to one particular model; why can't we take what we want from Macaulay, Braudel, structural history, and the history of events, diplomatic and economic history, cultural and social history, and so on, and weave them into a new synthesis?

Periodization is in large measure a function of teaching syllabuses in universities, with their division into neat chronological sections, each of which is then served by a textbook from a multivolume series, further solidifying the boundaries, and if postmodernism helps us escape from the straitjacket which this imposes on our segmentation of past time, that can only be to the good.⁵⁴ More generally, if postmodernism makes us more aware of the possible models available to us within the history of historical writing and research, this can only be a source of enrichment for our own practice as historians in the present.⁵⁵

V

IN the end, therefore, time does pass, a fact we experience only too obviously in the process of human aging to which we are all subject ourselves, and we cannot abolish it by simply declaring, as Ankersmit does, that there is no difference between the fourteenth century and the twentieth, or that time is merely a collection of unrelated presents, or that the textuality of the world abolishes the principle of cause and effect. To argue that we can only know causes from their effects and that therefore the effect is the origin of the cause, as some postmodernists do, is to mistake the process of inquiry for its object. History rests on the belief that the present differs from the past and derives from it; it also points to the future, which will be different again. In the end everybody knows that the present is affected by the past, that what happens today can affect or cause what happens tomorrow or the day after, and that the texts and other material objects we produce today provide the basis on which the future can attempt to know us. "It is an illusion," therefore, as Perez Zagorin has concluded, ". . . to assume that historiography can dispense with the concept of causality."⁵⁶

If time is inescapable in its inexorable sequentiality, that still does not solve the fundamental problem of historical causation; it only makes it possible to contemplate it. It is obvious enough what a cause is; we can have *necessary* causes (if A had not happened, then B could

not have happened) and *sufficient* causes (A's happening was enough to make B happen). Within the first category at least, we can have a *hierarchy* of causes, *absolute* causes (if A had not happened, then B *definitely* could not have happened) and *relative* causes (if A had not happened, then B *probably* could not have happened). Accustomed as they are to stating their arguments in a careful gradation of assessment of probability and plausibility, historians do not in practice approach the discussion of causation in concrete historical instances in such a schematic way. They prefer to talk of the disposition of things to bring about certain outcomes in certain circumstances, and many argue counterfactually that if a cause had not happened, then the probability of the effect's having happened would have been lessened to a determinable degree.⁵⁷ Most historians will go to some lengths to avoid a "monocausal explanation." They often approach the question of causes by turning it around and thinking of whatever has to be explained as the consequence of something else. This is what Sir Geoffrey Elton meant when he observed, reasonably enough, that historians explained events by "deducing consequences from disparate facts."⁵⁸ Almost all historians are used to the idea that historical events are frequently *overdetermined*—that is, they may have several sufficient as well as necessary causes, any one of which might have been enough to trigger the event on its own. Generally, however, they see it as their duty to establish a *hierarchy* of causes and to explain, if relevant, the relationship of one cause to another. "Opposition to a strict hierarchy of causation," one defender of this procedure has argued, "*can* lead to a refusal to admit any sense of causative priority, to a mere description of 'free-floating,' relatively valid and equally significant forces."⁵⁹ This is something most historians usually try to avoid.

Historical explanation commonly proceeds by relating an event or a process or a structure to a broader historical context, for example, locating a text in the society in which it was produced, relating the behavior of a political party to the social identities of the people who belonged to it, or linking rising death rates to an increase in poverty, malnutrition, environmental deterioration, and disease. Some postmodernist theory denies any possibility of separating text from

context and so involves a rejection of this procedure. However, if, as we have seen earlier in this book, it is in fact possible to distinguish a historical source from the past reality to which it (in part) refers, and if it is meaningful to set this source and this reality against other sources and other realities, then the procedure remains defensible. It is true that contexts themselves are in a sense infinite. For reasons of time and effort historians cut out a small segment or segments from this infinity, and this is where their own preconceptions and intentions come in. Relating a source to its context depends above all on what questions one is asking of it; once the decision has been made to ask one set of questions rather than another, then it follows that one particular set of contexts has to be examined rather than another, and in this sense, once more, there are certain inescapable routes the historian has to follow. Historians do therefore, in a sense, reconstitute the historical contexts in which they read sources, but once again, the possibilities of reconstitution are far from infinite once the initial direction of research has been decided; moreover, research itself usually throws up new contexts of which the historian was originally unaware, but which are of obvious relevance to the project nonetheless, while undermining or drastically altering the originally conceived shape of others.

The contexts which historians choose to bring into play are far from arbitrary, however roughly the seamless web of history is torn asunder. Historians usually stop looking for explanatory contexts once they reach areas that are so remote from what they are trying to explain that the connection becomes minimal. Nevertheless, different historians will discover different contexts. Some have drawn far-reaching conclusions from this obvious fact. David Harlan, for instance, writes:

The overwhelming abundance of possible contexts and perspectives, the ease with which we can skip from one to another, and the lack of any overarching meta-perspective from which to evaluate the entire coagulated but wildly proliferating population of perspectives—all this means that the historical fact, once the historian's basic atomic unit, has jumped its orbit and can now be interpreted in any number of contexts, from a virtually unlimited range of perspectives. And if

the historical fact no longer comes embedded in the natural order of things—if it is no longer bred in the bone, so to speak—then what happens to the historian's hope of acquiring stable, reliable, objective interpretations of the past?⁶⁰

The answer is: not much. Because Harlan here is confusing two issues. On the one hand, he is right to say that individual facts may be interpreted in a variety of different contexts, according to what question the historian is asking. On the other hand, this is quite a different matter from saying that none of these interpretations can be reliable or objective in themselves.

Much more serious for the nature of historical explanation is the question of exactly what kind of context we are looking for. The recent turn to cultural history and *mentalités* has seriously undermined the notion of historical causation as understood by someone like Carr. The new focus on culture and language undermines the common prioritization of causes common to Marxism, the *Annales* school, and neo-Weberian social history, in which economic causes work through social and on up to politics and culture. The new cultural history has removed the idea of socioeconomic determination while replacing it with cultural determination in which culture is itself of course relative and so lacks any universal explanatory power. Just as Foucault and Derrida have rejected the search for origins and causes as futile, so postmodern theories of interpretation in general challenge any attempt to interpret cultural artifacts in terms of anything besides themselves, as we have seen, because there is in this view nothing outside the text anyway.⁶¹ While cultural history, intellectual history, and even the history of high politics have received something of a fillip from the new theories and approaches of the late 1980s and 1990s, the principal victim, as we shall now see, has thus been social and economic history, precisely the areas which experienced the greatest growth and expansion in the 1960s and 1970s.