

problems often require different methods of approach, and no one method can answer every question we might have.” In the early twenty-first century, innovation in the field is driven by the call to “globalize” history, which as she notes is not a method or a theory but a process.⁹⁰ Some historians worry that the discipline is currently too pacific for its own good, that the reigning eclecticism in methods amounts to the “domestication” of theory in history, a loss of the field’s critical and analytical edge.⁹¹ It is to be hoped that such is not the case, or not for long. Vigorous debates over methods and approaches are vital to history, as to any discipline: arguing about the primacy of causes versus meanings, or about any aspect of how we approach the past, is crucial to clarifying what we are doing and why we are doing it.

90. Lynn Hunt, “Where Have All the Theories Gone?,” *Perspectives on History* (March 2002), 5.

91. For instance, Joan Scott, “History-Writing as Critique,” in Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow, eds., *Manifestos for History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 19–38; Gary Wilder, “From Optic to Topic: The Foreclosure Effect of Historiographic Turns,” *American Historical Review* 117 (June 2012): 723–45.

FACTS OR FICTIONS?

THE RISE AND FALL OF OBJECTIVITY

If you ask historians whether they consider themselves “social scientists” or “humanists” you will get various responses, the most common of which will likely be “both.” The ultimate hybrid discipline, rooted in the real and framed by storytelling, history straddles the “harder” and “softer” disciplines at the “arts” end of the curriculum. On the one hand, historians are quintessentially hard-nosed empiricists, digging endlessly in archives until they get all their information lined up, cowing colleagues in other disciplines with the depth of their command of “the facts.” On the other hand, history books are most often built around stories, and the most successful histories, the ones that are widely read and endure for years, usually have some of the same qualities as a good novel. The discipline’s essential hybridity is one main reason for recurrent debates among historians about the line between “fact” and “fiction” in the reconstruction of the past.¹

On the face of it, the question of whether history is fact or fiction should be easy to answer just by drawing a bright line: history cannot be fiction since the most basic ground rule for the discipline—in its modern form, at least—is that you are not allowed to make things up. But if modern professional norms tell us that history must be grounded in verifiable facts, post-modern sensibilities make us inescapably aware that all historical accounts are the products of choices and that different accounts of the same thing can be equally valid as long as a historian respects professional protocols and standards. Few people, even among members of the public with little exposure to academic debates, nowadays believe that writing history is just a matter of lining up all the evidence and letting the facts “speak for themselves.” Even within the context of wide agreement that accounts of the

1. On the deep roots of history’s quintessential “doubleness,” see Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), chapters 1–6.

past are inevitably shaped by the historian's political, aesthetic, or other predilections, however, there remains a vast amount of room for debate.

And debate there has been, especially around the end of the last century, when the trend known as "postmodernism" hit the academy, engulfing many disciplines in various forms of radical skepticism and touching off especially bitter disputes among historians. But the crisis around postmodernism was merely the final stage in a longer evolution away from an earlier belief that a stance of complete objectivity toward their material was, for historians, both possible and the ultimate professional goal. While postmodernism is no longer the hot-button issue it was twenty years ago, its legacy endures, both as an intellectual trend that has shaped certain aspects of historical writing and as a theoretical challenge that brought up important issues about the practice of historians and their relation to the "past" they track in the archives. It raised in their most acute forms questions that perennially surround the practice of historical research and writing: How can we reconstruct the past accurately and responsibly, even as we acknowledge that we come to our material with specific identities and experiences, and with various intellectual, emotional, and political agendas? How much invention does and should go into connecting the dots between our documents? To what extent is writing history a literary enterprise? And how can historians square skepticism about ultimate truth and objectivity with the goal of writing politically engaged history?

As we have seen (chapter 4), the newly formed historical professions in Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth century modeled themselves on the scientific disciplines, which were then at the peak of their prestige: for academic historians in the decades after 1880, gaining credibility and status for their work depended on establishing truths as unquestionable as those wielded by their colleagues in physics, chemistry, and biology. Firmly rejecting history as "literature" or "art," American historians of the later nineteenth century defined their project as the rigorous and exhaustive mastery of facts. Historian Edward Potts Cheyney, for instance, declared in a 1901 report to the American Historical Association that the task of the historian was "to collect facts, view them objectively, and arrange them as the facts themselves demanded."² Just as a revered scientist like Isaac Newton

2. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 21-40,

was said to have "held a mirror to nature," historians were enjoined to hold a mirror to the past. Their goal should be to line up all the facts through the critical study of original documents; scholars assumed that a scientifically examined source could yield only one meaning, and they sometimes spelled out the implicit corollary that history was an exhaustible discipline. As a leading French guide to historical studies published in 1898 bluntly put it, "History has at its disposal a limited stock of documents; this very circumstance limits the possible progress of historical science. When all the documents are known, and have gone through the operations which fit them for use, the work of critical scholarship will be finished."³

Underlying this scientific ideal of the professional study of the past was the ideal of "historical objectivity," which Peter Novick defines as "a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and, above all, between history and fiction."⁴ From the 1880s until the mid-twentieth century, many, perhaps most, Euro-American historians were convinced that the study of the past wholly free of the distortions of personal bias or belief was both desirable and possible. It was easy to subscribe to that ideal at a time when nobody was around to challenge it plausibly. For decades, the near consensus about historical objectivity was linked to the fact that history departments were extremely homogeneous workplaces peopled by white male Protestant scholars from upper-class backgrounds.

In the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries most history professors came from the upper-middle and upper classes. When the profession began to open up between the wars to young men from a slightly wider range of backgrounds, including non-Protestants, this caused concern within the WASP establishment. It was acceptable at the time for Jews, for instance, to enter the sciences or even the newer social sciences, but not a discipline like history, which, despite its scientific ideals, was assumed to require a humanistic background, a certain sort of

quote 38-39; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), chapter 2.

3. Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques* (1898), as cited in Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 39.

4. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 1-2.

"culture"—leaders of the profession fretted about a potential decline in "taste" or "aesthetic sense." Confidential letters of recommendation written in the 1920s and 1930s for brilliant young Jewish scholars like Oscar Handlin, Daniel Boorstin, or Richard Leopold, who went on to become major historians, include a stream of defensive reassurances that the candidate "has none of the offensive traits which some people associate with his race," "is a Jew, though not the kind to which one takes exception," or, because a Princeton graduate, "is not of the offensive type [of Jew]." Catholic historians most frequently taught at institutions specific to their faith or in seminaries, and the few women who got doctorates were usually sent on to positions at all-female colleges.⁵ The ideal of a value-free, dispassionate approach to the past flourished in part because historians at leading institutions in the United States belonged to a largely uniform sociocultural universe.⁶

The dominant ideal of historical objectivity did not, however, go unchallenged in the first half of the twentieth century, even from within this homogeneous group. Even before World War I, American "Progressive" historians launched an assault on the ideal of impartial and consensual history. Most famously, Charles Beard's provocative *An Economic History of the U.S. Constitution* (1913) courted controversy by interpreting the nation's founding document as a protocapitalist tract whose authors were seeking to protect their interests as property owners. World War I delivered conceptual shocks as well, as historians witnessed governments and the scholars who supported them shaping historical evidence to suit the agendas of wartime propaganda; that this occurred most egregiously in Germany dealt a serious blow to the traditional reverence for Teutonic scholarly standards. Finally, a range of intellectual developments between the wars, from the advent of the a new area of studies, the sociology of knowledge, to the "legal realism" of writers like Oliver Wendell Holmes, to the cumulative impact and growing prestige since the 1880s of cultural anthropology, all contributed to the growth of a relativistic ethos in the social sciences and to burgeoning skepticism about the possibility of value-neutral scholarship.⁷

5. Ibid., 63–68, 169–75, 491; quotes 172–73.

6. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth*, 129–30.

7. Ibid., chapter 4; Novick, *That Noble Dream*, chapters 4–6.

A more fundamental challenge to the ideal of historical objectivity in the American profession was brought on by the massive transformation of academia in the decades after World War II. The GI Bill, which provided education benefits for over two million war veterans—its effects amplified a generation later by the postwar baby boom—created an unprecedented demand for higher education and many new jobs for professors. In the 1930s about 150 history doctorates were awarded annually; by the late 1960s that number was over a thousand. Meanwhile, membership in the American Historical Association grew by over 60 percent in the 1950s, then by 90 percent in the 1960s. The ranks of history professors now included young men (and a few young women) from a much wider range of social, ethnic and religious backgrounds. In 1957 the chairman of Yale's history department fretted that while "the subject of English still draws [graduate students] from the cultivated, professional, and well-to-do classes . . . the subject of history seems to appeal on the whole to a lower social stratum." The sons of janitors, salesmen, clerks, and mechanics were applying to study history at the Ivy League, using the profession, he worried, as a social "elevator."⁸ Such students made up the midcentury generations, alert to the experiences of the non-elite, who would revolutionize the discipline by pioneering such topics and approaches as labor history and "history from below" (see chapter 1).

While the younger generations of the 1950s through 1970s introduced perspectives and agendas sharply different from those of their elders, however, they did not usually question the presumed scientific and objective nature of historical inquiry. Their work featured different actors and different stories but did not challenge the status of historical facts. While the more patrician senior faculty pursued the "truths" of political, military, or diplomatic history, the younger generation countered with another set of "truths" about labor movements, working-class life, or slavery. As the Cold War, McCarthyism, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal engulfed campuses in political turmoil, each side accused the other imposing an ideological agenda on the past, but each side also believed staunchly in the reality of its version of what mattered. The conflicts of the 1960s, in sum, productively destabilized the discipline by introducing sharply differing

8. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 362–66, quote p. 366.

perspectives, but stopped short of mounting a philosophical challenge to the truth-claims of historical narratives.⁹

Far more disruptive to the epistemology of the discipline was the arrival in history departments, starting in the 1970s, of small but vocal minorities of women and African-American scholars. These groups introduced new approaches to the past that for the first time demanded that the historian's identity be an openly acknowledged component of scholarship. The number of women in the historical profession had actually declined in the socially conservative postwar years—from about 20 percent of new doctorates in the 1940s to 12 percent in the 1960s—but “second-wave” feminism, starting in the 1970s, brought them back in even greater numbers; by the 1980s women accounted for about a third of history dissertations (in 2008 that proportion stood at 42 percent).¹⁰ Unlike left-wing male colleagues of their generation whose Jewish, Italian, or Irish ethnic identities bore only implicitly, if at all, on their scholarship—Jewish scholars, for instance, did not typically work on Jewish history—many female scholars explicitly connected who they were to what they studied and how they studied it. Following the lead of feminist social scientists like J. D. Winnicott, Eleanor Maccoby, and Carol Gilligan, who portrayed women's affective and cognitive styles as radically different from those of men, women scholars who espoused feminism (not all of them did, of course) began to argue that because of their differing experiences, women could and should write history differently than their male colleagues. This led some female historians to acknowledge explicitly their “subjectivity” as women, and eventually to explore radical new methodologies, including gender theory, psychoanalysis, and postmodernism.¹¹

Around the same time, radical African-American scholars started to make a similar case that the content of historical scholarship could not, and should not, be separated from the identities and experiences of those who produced it. The most radical among them challenged the ability of white

9. Ibid., chapter 13.

10. Ibid., 366–67, 491–93. Robert B. Townsend, “The Status of Women and Minorities in the History Profession, 2008,” *Perspectives on History*, September 2008. From 1961 to 1980 women made up around 20 percent of faculty hired in history departments, in subsequent decades 30 to 35 percent, and from 2000 to 2008, 47 percent.

11. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 491–93.

historians to speak to the experiences of African-American slaves and other historically subjugated people of color. In the early, more militant days of Black Power movements in the academy, in the 1960s and early 1970s, such concerns sometimes led to white scholars at conferences on slavery being booed and shouted down, to black scholars ostentatiously walking out of white colleagues' talks, or to demands that black studies programs accept no nonblack instructors. While much of the tension around the identity politics of African-American and other minority history eventually abated, questions about who could credibly and legitimately convey the historical experience of ethnic and racial minorities left their mark on the profession and the practice of history.¹²

Through the end of the twentieth century, then, the ideal of historical objectivity in the United States was undermined from within the historical community: scholars practicing "history from below" insisted that the stories of the poor mattered as much as, or more than, those of the powerful, while some historians of women and nonwhites argued that the experience of marginalized groups was so different as to be incompatible with the "master narrative." Only the most radical argued for embracing "subjectivity," but the more different perspectives on history accumulated, the harder it became to believe that any historian, however honest and well-intentioned, could tell the story of the past from a position of Olympian detachment, untainted by class, gender, racial, national, and other biases.

Current global perspectives have dealt a final blow to the ideals of earlier generations where objectivity is concerned. The very form in which we write history today, whether from above, below, or the margins, is itself, we are increasingly aware, the outcome of a historical process that resulted in Western conventions for recording the past overpowering other traditions. It is almost impossible nowadays to escape imagining "history" as a single giant time line into which all of the world's events, as documented by written records, can be fitted. But as Daniel Woolf and others have shown, what is now universally deemed "history" really amounts to a set of Western codes and practices for remembering and narrating the past, which

12. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 289-93; Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 472-79. From the 1960s to the 2000s the proportion of minority faculty hired in history departments has stagnated around 15 percent; Townsend, "Status of Women and Minorities."

colonized the mental landscapes of other societies only when and because Europe, and later America, became economically and geopolitically dominant a couple of centuries ago.¹³

All societies have ways of representing collective pasts, though these take many forms, oral and written, including myths, legends, epics, genealogies, chronologies, and ethnographies. In African and American societies, memories and traditions were transmitted orally, while Asians and Europeans have for centuries kept written records. Asian historiographical traditions predated Western ones: "No civilization in the world," writes Woolf, "has consistently and continuously placed as high a priority on the recording and understanding of its past as the Chinese."¹⁴ Ancient Chinese approaches to historical time differed from those that prevailed in the West, with histories based on a succession of different eras rather than a single time line "since the founding of Rome" or "since the birth of Christ," but historical writing also developed earlier and more elaborately, with official rules, practices, and positions for historians. As early as 90 BC the historian Sima Qian completed a major historical enterprise begun by his father, the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian), a complex work in five sections comprising annals of the major dynasties, chronological tables, treatises on the branches of knowledge, chronicles of the great houses, and biographies. (So devoted was Sima to the project's completion that when he fell out of favor with the emperor he submitted to the degrading penalty of castration rather than honorably committing suicide and leaving his task unfinished.)¹⁵

In Mughal India, as in contemporary Persia and the Ottoman Empire, historical writing flourished at the same time and in similar ways as in the courts of early modern Europe, as a support for princely, royal, and religious authority. Contemporary Europeans recognized the sophistication of other traditions, just as they would later celebrate the fourteenth-century

13. The best synthetic discussion is Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Prasenjit Duara, Viren Murthy, and Andrew Sartori, eds., *A Companion to Global Historical Thought* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), and many essays in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011–2015).

14. Woolf, *Global History*, 51–52.

15. Ibid., 53–66; Burton Watson, *Ssu-Ma Ch'ien, Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), biographical details in chapter 2.

Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldūn as a forerunner of sociological history in the tradition of Giambattista Vico or Charles de Montesquieu.¹⁶ While early modern Europeans acknowledged the written historical traditions of Asian and Islamic cultures, however, they begrudged a past to societies where history took other forms. The sixteenth-century historian Garcilaso de la Vega was unique in that his mestizo heritage allowed him to weave the oral traditions of his Inca ancestors into his Spanish-language histories of Peru; most of his predecessors and contemporaries dismissed indigenous accounts of the past as untrustworthy and "barbarian" because based on oral traditions.¹⁷ Africa, a continent where the written word was much scarcer, was simply considered a place without history, a view that many clung to well into the twentieth century. As late as 1963 the eminent British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper notoriously declared, "Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history."¹⁸ Absent the specific materials for writing Western-style history, a whole continent's past could be summarily dismissed.

Even as Europeans "discovered" and laid claim to far-flung lands, they devised, by the eighteenth century, the concept of a single, "universal," linear history as an umbrella for the previously plural histories of regions, dynasties, and religions: the concept of capital-H History encouraged a vision of the past in which societies were more or less advanced on a single highway to civilization. At the same time, confronted with other modes of historicity, Western historians sought to codify their own scholarship more rigorously by contrasting their ways of recovering and describing the past to the lesser practices of other societies. Thus, while the French historian Joseph de Guignes (1721–1800) showed a commendable interest in Middle Eastern and Asian history, he disparaged Chinese historiography as arid and boring, and "the Arab" as "no more than a chronicler." Major figures of the European Enlightenment dismissed pictorial and oral sources as fatally flawed—conveniently forgetting the reliance of some of their own

16. Woolf, *Global History*, 127–29, 211–25.

17. *Ibid.*, chapter 5.

18. Cited *ibid.*, 16; see also Frederick Cooper, "Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34 (2000): 298–336.

past luminaries, such as Thucydides, on oral traditions. "The frail memories of men," wrote David Hume in the eighteenth century, "their love of exaggeration, their supine carelessness; these principles, if not corrected by books and writing, soon pervert the account of historical events."¹⁹

In the heyday of Euro-American imperialism, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the canons and conventions of Western historical scholarship were implanted in universities all over the world, where the elites of colonized countries had little choice but to adopt them.²⁰ While it has become by now just about impossible to think outside the box of modern Western historical norms, we are at least aware of the historically contingent process that made them inescapable. Viewed in global context, the objectivity long prized by Euro-American scholars amounts to the cherry on the cake of a centuries-long process of Western erasure of competing historical traditions, an ideal linked to underlying convictions about the value of written ("objective") documents as sources and of history as a unitary, linear process.

Since around the 1950s, then, a succession of shocks have rattled the once optimistic (or complacent) conviction that a historian could arrive at the ultimate truth: a previous generation's standard of "objectivity" has been challenged by dissenters within and outside academia as the particular perspective of the white upper-class men at the helm of Western historical professions. In this process of erosion, methodological and sociological developments have been inseparable: scholars from non-elite ethnic backgrounds challenged the primacy of elite political history, women and people of color told white male scholars "your truth is not ours," the globalization of world culture and academia allowed for radical new perspectives on Western historical norms.

Alongside these shifts in the identities and perspectives of scholars there appeared in the 1980s a set of philosophical challenges to traditional understandings of history, broadly labeled "postmodernism," which for a while roiled the profession and continue to this day to cause expressions of alarm in some quarters.

19. Jennifer Pitts, "The Global in Enlightenment Historical Thought," in Dura, Murthy, and Sartori, *Companion to Global Historical Thought*, 184–96; Woolf, *Global History*, 281–340, quotes 283 (Hume), 317 (Guignès).

20. *Ibid.*, chapter 8.

POSTMODERNISM AND HISTORY: RADICAL SKEPTICISM AND NEW METHODS

"Postmodernism" is a catchall term frequently used to describe the intellectual tsunami that hit the humanistic end of the academy with full force in the 1980s, originating in the fields of linguistics, philosophy, and literary studies, associated with the names of difficult and controversial thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Paul de Man. For our purposes, the most important aspect of postmodernism, as it came to affect historical work and nourish controversy, is its emphasis on language and "text." Prominent in the genealogy of academic postmodernity are the twentieth-century French intellectual movements known as structuralism and poststructuralism.²¹ Structuralism goes back to the early twentieth-century work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who carved out a new path in his field by arguing, in his 1916 *Course in General Linguistics*, that every language is a closed system in which words derive meaning not from their connection with the things they designate (signifieds), but in relation to other words, or signifiers. The word "cat," for instance, has nothing intrinsic to do with a four-legged furry animal; it means something to an English speaker because we understand it to be different from "cap" or "bat." Structural linguistics, in other words, departs from a traditional diachronic approach to language (how did it evolve over time?) to consider it instead as a complex synchronic grid in which meaning arises not from a coincidence between word and thing, but from the differences between words within a given system.

Saussure's approach, structural linguistics, became influential as a way of understanding, not just language, but culture in general when it was embraced by anthropologists, most notably the celebrated French ethnographer Claude Lévi-Strauss. As Saussure had done for language, Lévi-Strauss sought to analyze cultures as grids in which meaning derives from codes—kinship patterns, myths, totemic systems—made up of contrasting binary terms. Any item within a culture, Lévi-Strauss argued, is intelligible only in relation to its opposite: the idea of "raw" food has meaning only in relation to its "cooked" opposite, just as ideas such as "male" and "female" or "light" and "dark" are

21. The following discussion relies on the exceptionally lucid accounts of structuralism and poststructuralism in Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), chapters 3 and 4.

understandable only in opposition to each other. (Examples extend into the recent past: we didn't know that our clocks were analog until digital ones appeared, or what it meant to be a cisgender person until transgender identities became conspicuous.)

Structural linguistics and structural anthropology introduced into the nexus of twentieth-century Western thought influential ideas whose offshoots we have already encountered in other contexts. Structuralism posits that meaning is not immanent in the "real world" but rather comes to exist in and through autonomous linguistic or cultural codes, and in particular through the operation of difference within those codes. Because of its emphasis either on language itself (linguistics) or on concepts expressed linguistically (cultural anthropology), structural analysis is primarily concerned with the importance of words and texts rather than with the "real world," with "signifiers" rather than "signifieds." By the same token, structuralism brackets off the human subject.²² Structures, not people, generate meaning, and humans are therefore not the causes but the effects of linguistic and cultural structures: we can think, speak—in short, exist—only through preexisting grids of collective meaning. Structuralism is therefore "antihumanist," in the technical sense that it discounts individual human behavior and experience, which it views as subordinate to systems of signs.

While structuralism, highly influential in the 1950s and 1960s, rejects the humanistic notion that men and women can be the autonomous authors of their own destinies, its method allows for the possibility of ultimately decoding a system of signs such as a language or a culture. Far more radically skeptical were the theories that grew out of and superseded structuralism starting in the 1970s, known as poststructuralism or deconstruction. Poststructuralists (Jacques Derrida was the most famous) pushed structuralist insights to their most radical conclusion. While thinkers like Saussure or Lévi-Strauss were confident that they could tease out meaning from the semiotic structures—systems of signs—that govern human existence in any given place or time, poststructuralists took matters to the edge of a theoretical abyss. Rejecting the stable antinomies of structuralism, they argued that the ultimate meaning of any given term can never be apprehended since meaning is predicated on absence, and entails the rejection of not just one opposing term ("cat" is not "bat") but an unlimited number

22. Ibid., 98–99. See also Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth*, 215–16.

of terms. To be a "man," for instance, is to be "not a woman," but also to be not an infinite number of other things; any given concept, such as masculinity, contains and is constantly threatened by all of the potential opposing terms that go into defining it. Meaning, then, is endlessly "deferred," since a term is "always already" engaged in the process of pushing away this infinity of potential opposites.²³

This sort of high theory sounds remote from the preoccupations of most historians, and indeed only a tiny number of them engaged firsthand with the writings of theorists like Derrida. Within academia, however, structuralism and poststructuralism helped create, by the 1980s, a broad intellectual climate known as postmodernism whose implications translated into controversial propositions regarding historians' approaches to the past. We have already encountered, in previous chapters, some of the writers and movements influential with historians that fall into the broader "postmodern" category. Structuralism had a big influence, for instance, on thinkers like Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz, whose work bypassed "man" in favor of the "discourses" or "webs of signification" in which humans are ensnared. More generally, the 1980s saw the advent in Western historical studies of approaches to the past in which sources were viewed not as transparent windows onto a past reality but as "texts."

The emphasis on "texts," which came to be known as the "linguistic turn," was a change in perspective whereby historians sympathetic to movements like postmodernism and the new cultural history started reading sources as patterns of words and stories, as forms of "fiction" in the broadest sense, rather than as documentary evidence.²⁴ (In its original sense, "fiction" does not mean "something untrue" but "something created and shaped," an important distinction.) One popular application of this strategy, for instance, involves judicial sources.

A traditional historian, faced with the records of criminal law institutions in a past society, would use these to determine, say, the incidence of various types of criminality or patterns of judicial repression: who committed what crimes, how often, and how were they punished? In the context of the linguistic turn, however, cultural historians approached the courtroom

23. Ibid., 110–16.

24. John Toews, "Linguistic Turn and Discourse Analysis in History," in Neil Smelser and Paul Baltes, eds., *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 13 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 8916–22.

not in search of evidence of crime and punishment but as an institutional setting that generates words, and especially narratives. Prosecutors, defendants, and lawyers have always crafted the details of what happened into a story that will (they hope) prove persuasive to the jury, judge, or other authorities because it connects with stories and cultural categories with which the listener is familiar or fits into widespread stereotypes and popular narratives.

Natalie Davis's *Fiction in the Archives* (1987), for instance, a study of judicial petitions addressed to the king in early modern France by petitioners who had committed serious crimes, argues that defendants who sought royal mercy shaped their accounts of their crimes so that they conformed with familiar contemporary narratives. In the opening pages of her book, Davis explains her methodological premise. When she was a student, she writes, "we were ordinarily taught as scientific historians to peel away the fictive elements in our documents so as to get at the real facts."²⁵ In her study, she proposes to do just the opposite, to show how the "fictional" dimensions of pardon tales, the ways in which they were molded into stories that echoed other stories, made them effective within their culture. Petitioners' tales fell into specific types, including plots and details keyed to different social classes and settings. A frequent "peasant's tale," for instance, takes place at a wedding in which young men from another village intrude. They bother the women, and one of them defies and maybe slaps the petitioner, who in a fit of "hot anger" (*chaude colle*) kills the intruder. Such stories were effective (a large majority of petitioners were pardoned), Davis suggests, because the situations and motivations they portrayed corresponded to familiar tales of justified anger.²⁶

Whether in the courtroom or in the press, crime stories have provided fodder for many classic works of cultural history influenced by postmodernism. Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Delight*, for instance, revolves around "narratives of sexual danger" in 1880s London.²⁷ One such set of stories has remained famous, the gruesome newspaper accounts of the crimes of the serial prostitute-killer known as Jack the Ripper. Less well

25. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Polity Press, 1987), 3.

26. *Ibid.*, 36–43, 51.

27. Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

known now but equally electrifying at the time were the exposés of child prostitution penned in 1885 by W. T. Stead, the editor of the popular *Pall Mall Gazette*, under the melodramatic title "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" (Stead's accounts frequently alluded to the legend of the Minotaur, with the journalist as the modern Theseus rescuing young girls from the monster); the first installment described in lurid detail how Stead, posing as a customer, negotiated for five pounds the purchase from her mother of the virginity of a thirteen-year-old working-class girl. Walkowitz shows how, in order to make the "Maiden Tribute" stories resonate with his readers, Stead drew upon familiar contemporary genres such as stage melodrama, gothic romance, pornography, and the writings of urban social reformers. The book situates Stead's voyeuristic journalism—his paper also prominently covered Jack the Ripper—in many overlapping social contexts: traditions of upper-class male spectatorship, the new activities and occupations of women in urban space, the role of feminists in abetting and addressing these sexual alarms, and much else. At the heart of the inquiry, however, is this question: why did this particular setting produce, and respond so strongly to, horrifying accounts of defiled children and murdered prostitutes? *City of Dreadful Delight* belongs to a genre of historical inquiry that is fact-based but organized around fictions, and whose purpose it is to show why certain stories resonated, and to what effect, in a given place and time.

Most historical sources, of course, do not come in narrative form: the storylike nature of a political or judicial speech is a lot easier to grasp than that of a tax roll, a commercial invoice, or a parish register. But stories can also lurk behind ostensibly nonnarrative sources: the constitutions of modern democracies, for instance, all hark back to the story of the "social contract," a dramatic tale of how men (but not women) in a hypothetical state of nature came close to killing each other before deciding that it was a better idea to survive by inventing laws and government.²⁸ A rigorously postmodern approach entails the assumption that all documents, even the most abstract—sets of numbers, for instance—are not windows onto a past reality but expressions of the mental categories and cultural conventions of the world that produced them. Prior to the postmodern "moment,"

28. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988). Pateman's classic in feminist political theory "denaturalizes" contractual theory by highlighting its storied components.

historians examining a census would use it to establish a country's population, or critique it to show how and why it under- or overrepresented the numbers, looking to reconstruct the past "reality" beyond the documents. A postmodern approach, by contrast, would focus on the census as a "text" that reveals assumptions about such things as social categories and hierarchies, or how people carved up social space, and would consider its relation to some past demographic reality either irrelevant or unknowable.

The linguistic turn invited historians to think of all of their sources not as unproblematic reflections of a past reality but as culturally configured texts: a sixteenth-century map, in this perspective, does not tell you about the geography of a physical place but about the mental universe of the cartographers. But the premium that postmodernists placed upon "texts" and "fictions" (again, in the broad sense) also extended to the writings of historians themselves: at the same time that they drew attention to the fictional nature of historical sources, scholars began to attend to the ways in which historical writing, past and present, is shaped by literary conventions. The most famous proponent of this agenda has been the literary theorist Hayden White, who gained fame with the 1973 publication of *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, and remained influential through a large corpus of writings about the theory of history.²⁹

All historical writing, White argues, is a form of fiction-making. He does not thereby suggest that historians invent documents or sources, but that at least in the modern Western mode, historical writing invariably adheres to one of several types of narrative plots drawn from, in the broadest sense, literary culture. White does not deny the existence of historical evidence in the form of facts, but he maintains that for a historical account to be intelligible those facts have to be organized around a recognizable plot. (A historian could theoretically choose just to line up information in chronological order, but that would amount to a "chronicle," a form that in contemporary culture is devoid of meaning.)³⁰ Evidence about the past does not come to us in the form of a story: we impose narrative upon it. The "facts" of history do not themselves contain interpretive elements;

29. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

30. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 42-43.

they are not like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle waiting to be fitted together. Rather, the facts are available in what Alun Munslow calls a "pre-jigsawed" state, and historians shape them so that they can fit a pattern: "Historical facts do not ordain interpretations," writes Munslow, "only plot structures do that."³¹

In *Metahistory*, White identifies Western culture's four basic modes of emplotment as romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire.³² While it is not usually a conscious choice, historians organize their stories to fit these plot types: E. P. Thompson, for instance, tells the story of the British Industrial Revolution as a tragedy in which beleaguered artisans are doomed to exploitation and poverty; another historian might cast it in the classical mode of comedy, in which, despite setbacks and misunderstandings, reconciliation prevails in the end (the standard of living rises for everyone!). Marxist and nationalist historians often write in the mode of romance, which tells of heroes prevailing in the face of adversity.³³ White does not claim universal valence for these plots: they work for Western historians because they draw on their culture's most familiar literary forms.³⁴

White argues that this "fictional" dimension of historical writing is the historian's most powerful tool, since historians do not share a common technical language: "The historian's characteristic instrument of encodation, communication and exchange is ordinary educated speech." As a result, historians must draw on widely accepted forms of figurative language to accomplish their goal "of rendering the strange familiar and, of rendering the mysterious past comprehensible."³⁵ To point to the ways in which historians fictionalize the past does not mean, White insists, that we cannot distinguish between good and bad history based on thoroughness of research, logical consistency, responsible use of evidence, and the like. Nor, it bears repeating, does saying that historical writing adheres to

31. Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997), 149. See also Keith Jenkins, *On "What Is History?"* (London: Routledge, 1995), 134-35.

32. White, *Metahistory*, 7-30.

33. White does believe that two or more of these plot types can coexist in tension within the works of historians and, indeed, that this is characteristic of the greatest among them. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 94.

34. *Ibid.*, 58.

35. *Ibid.*, 94.

familiar plots in any way imply that historians invent their material. Rather than undermining the historical enterprise, White argues, recognition of what history owes to fiction will allow historians to be more lucid and honest about their own practice, and to make use of what has always been the discipline's greatest strength, its ability to connect with lay readers.³⁶ As with the attention to the storied nature of sources, White's writings are symptomatic of a moment in which scholars became highly conscious of the process of fabrication that goes into all "texts," whether the documents we use as primary material, or the secondary accounts written by historians.

EVERYTHING IS CONSTRUCTED

The postmodern "moment" in historical writing, which crested in the early 1990s, decisively recast approaches to many questions, most notably those about social groups and identities. The earliest and most momentous such transformations occurred, as we saw in chapter 1, in the 1980s, when some feminist historians made the case for a shift from "women's" to "gender" history. Historians like Joan Scott drew upon structuralist and poststructuralist methods in order to recast the history of women (a biologically determined category of persons) as gender history, or the history of the linguistically and culturally defined relationship between the sexes. Scott's famous essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" opens with the observation that "words, like the ideas and things they are meant to signify, have a history." "Gender," a grammatical term transposed to social categories, has been not just useful but crucial to all historians in pointing to the arbitrariness of verbal codes, thereby leading us to ponder the similarly variable nature of the sexual differences we take for granted. Some languages have gender classifications, many do not (or have more than two), and within those that do the ascription of gender appears mostly arbitrary: there seems to be no reason why a bed is masculine in French and feminine in Spanish, or why the German word for young girl, *Mädchen*, is neuter. Gender in grammar, writes Scott, is "a socially agreed upon system of distinction rather than an objective description of inherent traits."

36. Ibid., 97-99. For a helpful analysis of White's role within the "linguistic turn," see Lloyd Kramer, "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra," in Lynn Hunt, ed. *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 97-128.

Moreover, the difference between masculine and feminine has varied with time and place. Just as linguistic terms—following the likes of Saussure—have meaning only in relation to one another, so “gender legitimizes and constructs social relationships” by organizing the way we talk about oppositions and hierarchies in the social world. Men can only be “men”—powerful, competent, rational, and so on—because they are “not women” in ways that are constructed by, and reflected in, language.³⁷

Gender theory applied to history performed a crucial role in denaturalizing social categories: as historians stopped thinking of the difference between men and women as grounded in timeless biological fact, they extended this insight to other sorts of seemingly natural social distinctions. What could be more natural, more blatantly visible than the difference between the skin colors and other physical features of various human groups? “Race” has been noteworthy for as long as humans from different places have encountered one another, and in nineteenth-century Europe and America it became the object of intense scientific scrutiny. In the United States, the tragic legacy of slavery and persistent discrimination against black Americans, as well as the vexed history of other groups, including Native Americans, Asians, and Hispanics, have generated, since the mid-twentieth century, a large and sophisticated body of historical studies of the origins and meaning of racial prejudice.³⁸

Until the 1980s, however, most scholars took for granted the existence of race as a physical reality that stood as ground zero for their inquiries: people *were* black, white, brown, or yellow, and the project of progressive scholars was to analyze critically how and why various negative traits came to be associated with skin color and other racial features. One of the first historians to challenge the seemingly obvious biological nature of what we call race was Barbara Fields, in an essay entitled “Race and Ideology in American History” (1982). Fields pointed to well-known facts routinely ignored because they did not fit with dominant assumptions, in this case

37. Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 29, 46. See chapter 1.

38. Pioneering works on the subject include George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), and David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

about the physicality of race. If blackness and whiteness are skin colors, why so many exceptions? Why did nineteenth-century Europeans always describe light-skinned North Africans as black? Why have there always been American "blacks" who looked white? Why the one-drop rule? Why was it a staple of American racial thought that a white woman could give birth to a black child, but a black woman could not give birth to a white child? The answers to all of these questions are not biological, of course, but political, and Fields called for an inquiry into those politics starting from the premise that "the view that race is a biological fact, a physical attribute of individuals, is no longer tenable."³⁹

Race, Fields posited, is a form of belief, an ideology that people hold, often in the face of massive contrary evidence, like those antebellum planters certain that their slaves were physically incapable of surviving without their white masters even as they saw many free blacks doing just that. Fields urges historians to stop looking at race in American history as a transcendent, metaphysical problem, and attend instead to the specific historical circumstances in which divisions and prejudices took root or were abetted—most notably the tragic sociopolitical dynamic of Reconstruction. Although Fields was not drawing on postmodern thinkers, her conclusion about race is strikingly similar to Scott's about gender: "Race became the ideological medium through which people posed and apprehended basic questions of power and dominance, sovereignty and citizenship, justice and right." Race is an ideology, Fields argues, but that does not make its consequences any less tragically real: "Once acted upon, a delusion can be as murderous as a fact."⁴⁰

In historical perspective, then, blackness is in the eye of the beholder; but so, historians have shown, is whiteness. Until not long ago it was common to view whiteness either as a nonrace or as the "default" race from which others constituted abnormal departures, and to assume that most white people have always inhabited a single category. Far more complicated stories have emerged from recent research; the experience of the United States, with its waves of successive European immigrants encountering African and Native American minorities, has allowed historians to

39. Barbara Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson, eds., *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 149.

40. *Ibid.*, 162, 159.

show that "whiteness" is no more a straightforward physical characteristic than any other racial label. Two centuries ago Irish workers in Britain and the United States were represented with dark skin and simian features, and the whiteness of other immigrant groups in America—Italians or Jews, for instance—was not always taken for granted.⁴¹

Workers in industrializing America, as David Roediger argued in an influential book, invoked their own whiteness as a way of warding off their fears of dependency. As more and more of them lost their actual independence to wage labor in the early nineteenth century, losing their workshops and entering factories, they constructed an idealized identity as autonomous white workers in contrast to the degraded status of black slaves; they insisted on being called "hired men" instead of "servants," and adopted for their employers the term "boss" instead of "master." Whiteness became crucial to the identity of early industrial workers as a way of saying "I am not a slave," a psychic compensation for their actual loss of control over their labor: to be white in the early nineteenth century, Roediger suggests, was to be "not black," and for that matter, "not Indian," in the same way gender historians posit that men throughout history have been in different ways "not women."⁴² In America, as in any multiethnic society, whiteness was never a simple or stable category: in the era of mass arrivals from Europe from the 1840s to the 1920s, the Anglo-Saxon elite viewed themselves as at the top of a hierarchy of whitish races that included Teutons, Celts, Slavs, Hebrews, and others. Only after the spigot of immigration was turned off in the 1920s did race in America jell into primarily a dichotomy of "Caucasian" and black.⁴³ Outside of the Western world race has never taken the form of simple biological binaries either: recent work by African historians, for instance, has uncovered the complexity of racial categories, prejudices, and struggles in places like nineteenth-century Egypt and Zanzibar, inviting us to move away from the—literally and metaphorically—black and white categories of Western societies.⁴⁴

41. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

42. David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, 2nd ed. (1991; New York: Verso, 1999).

43. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

44. See, for instance, Jonathon Glassman, "Slower Than a Massacre: The Multiple Sources of Racial Thought in Colonial Africa," *American Historical Review*

BARBARIANS AT THE GATES

In the 1980s and 1990s, then, leading historians of gender and race pioneered a line of inquiry known as “cultural constructionism,” which holds that even those identities that seem to us the most self-evidently biological are defined by the way people speak, write, and think about them. (We have seen in previous chapters instances of this approach applied to issues of sexuality, as historians like Thomas Laqueur and George Chauncey have shown how infinitely variable both homo- and heterosexual relationships and identities have been in past societies.) Such inquiries typically emphasized “texts,” using every sort of descriptive source—pamphlets, treatises, medical texts, news media, plays, novels, and more—to reconstruct the ways in which people imagined, understood, and represented women, gays, members of racial minorities, and others: identities, these works argued, are inseparable from the discourse about them. As in the case of studies that emphasized the fictional or “storied” aspects of sources, this approach owed much to the general influence of postmodernism. As a result, all of these approaches became the target of much criticism, in forms ranging from reasoned objections to vitriolic tirades.

Some of the most eloquent and extreme opponents of the influence of postmodernism on historical work have been British historians seizing the chance to vent traditional Francophobia by denouncing the corrupt Gallic roots of these menacing theories. “The absurd always sounds better in French,” sniffed the politically and intellectually conservative Cambridge don Sir Geoffrey Elton, one of the last prominent historians to proudly define his professional ideal as “the search for truth.”⁴⁵ The late Elton, famous for heated rhetoric when he pronounced on matters of historical method, delivered in the early 1990s a set of lectures that described post-structural theories variously as an infectious disease, a diabolical seducer,

109, no. 3 (June 2004): 720–54; Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

45. G. R. Elton, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27, 48.

and a form of substance abuse. Postmodernism was "a virus," more threatening than Marxism "because it took its origin from characteristically charismatic Frenchmen." He and his allies were fighting, he thundered, not only for their own survival as historians but "for the lives of innocent young people beset by devilish tempters who claim to offer higher forms of thought and deeper truths and insights—the intellectual equivalent of crack, in fact." Among those tempters were "fanatical feminists" like Joan Scott, whose alleged blend of Marxism and deconstruction was "like spiking vodka with LSD."⁴⁶ A few years later Elton's younger colleague at Cambridge Richard Evans—his successor in the prestigious Regius Chair in modern European history—produced a much more balanced but still alarmist statement, a book titled *In Defense of History*, which described postmodernism as an "irresistible" intellectual trend and its adherents as "intellectual barbarians at the disciplinary gates . . . loitering there with distinctly hostile intent."⁴⁷

What was it about postmodern approaches to history that these and many other scholars found so deeply alarming? A rigorously postmodern position does indeed present a serious philosophical challenge to the way most people think of history in that it suggests we can never be assured that the past really happened. All we historians have, a postmodernist would argue, are words and "texts" (including oral testimony, images, and physical artifacts), whose relationship to a "real past" can never be known. Textuality, in the words of the historical theorist Keith Jenkins, is "the only game in town."⁴⁸ Since history therefore consists of the interpretation of those texts, the process of making history is inevitably subjective—for a theorist like Hayden White, as we have seen, writing about the past is akin to emplotting a work of fiction: however respectful of their evidence, historians are always writing, in the widest sense, a literary account. To Elton, a historian's acknowledgment of his or her subjectivity and of an agenda rooted in present-day concerns constitutes an act of egregious narcissism—it amounts to selfishly putting oneself over and above "the authority of our sources."⁴⁹

46. Ibid., 27–29, 41.

47. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 7, 11.

48. Jenkins, *On "What Is History?"* 32.

49. Elton, *Return to Essentials*, 36, 42–43, 49.

Evans does not share his predecessor's old-fashioned views about truth and objectivity; his objections are of the sort widely shared in the 1990s by middle-of-the road historians. A majority, perhaps, of academic historians at the time and since have worried that the postmodern position, bracketing past "reality," undercut the central moral and political rationales for writing history, the reconstruction of a credible narrative that illuminates the present and points to the future. How, they ask, can a past whose existence we question provide us with enlightenment and guidance? Furthermore, such critics argue, the new theories' agnosticism about the reality of past experience is an insult to all those who have suffered in history. Indeed, as many critics of postmodernism have pointed out, there are many instances in which a community finds it morally exigent to state their belief in a past that actually happened. Evans, a historian of modern Germany, points as many others have done to the Holocaust: "Auschwitz was not a discourse. It trivializes mass murder to see it as a text. The gas chambers were not a piece of rhetoric. Auschwitz was indeed inherently a tragedy and cannot be seen as either a comedy or a farce."⁵⁰

More generally, Evans charges that a postmodern focus on words and texts privileges the self-absorbed preoccupations of present-day academics over the reality of suffering and oppression in the past.⁵¹ Nor were conservatives the only ones to attack postmodernism; many left-leaning historians joined them in denouncing what they saw as a dangerous development in the profession. To the most orthodox Marxists postmodernism was anathema in that it inverted the materialist relation between base and superstructure, ignoring the bedrock of socioeconomic life in favor of the abstract and derivative realm of words.⁵² More generally, many left-leaning historians were hostile to theories that located the operation of power in discursive formations rather than in the blood and sweat of actual social relations. Leading feminist historians entered into high-profile arguments with Joan Scott, charging that her emphasis on textuality obscured the realities of women's actual experiences of violence and exploitation in the

50. Evans, *In Defense of History*, 107.

51. *Ibid.*, 159.

52. See, for instance, Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

past. As the title of one landmark critical article put it: "If 'Woman' is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night?"⁵³ While postmodernists always insisted that theirs was a critical political project that exposed the ways in which power works through discourses to define and trap people, their opponents countered that for history to be politically significant and effective it must rest on a belief in the reality of past suffering and injustice. Many left-leaning academics shared with their conservative colleagues the suspicion that postmodernism was a self-indulgent and politically irresponsible intellectual game.

Most historians in the 1990s and after fell somewhere between these warring camps, borrowing some of the insights of postmodernists but rejecting their more radical premises. For all of the loud clanging of alarm bells—Evans claimed, writing in 1997, that postmodernism was "espoused by the majority" of historians—no major scholars actually wrote postmodern works of history; they merely borrowed insights from the trend, while experimental and theoretical work remained confined to the margins of the discipline.⁵⁴ Many creative historians took the "linguistic turn" in the 1980s and 1990s, looking to stories or representations, but almost none of them professed disbelief in the reality of the past. Why, then, did postmodernism cause such a major hubbub? Maybe because its most fundamental premise—that, in the famous words of Jacques Derrida, "there is nothing outside the text"—is indeed very hard to dispute: the existence of the past is highly plausible but not, in the end, provable. In response to the postmodern philosophical challenge, those historians who worry about such

53. Laura Lee Downs, "If Woman Is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 2 (April 1993): 414–37; see in the same issue the response by Joan Scott (438–43) and rebuttal by Downs (444–51).

54. Evans, *In Defense of History*, 12. The targets of Evans's onslaught—written quite late in the game, in 1997—are mostly theorists like Keith Jenkins, Frank Ankersmit, Alun Munslow, and Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth. The actual historians he names are few—Patrick Joyce and Diane Purkiss, notably—and not especially influential. But Evans also wrongly identifies as "postmodernists" some leading cultural and microhistorians, such as Natalie Davis, Robert Darnton, Simon Schama, and Carlo Ginzburg, for whose work he expresses admiration. Lawrence Stone also noted in 1992 that "it is impossible to think of a major historical work written from a thoroughly postmodern perspective." Stone, "History and Postmodernism," *Past & Present* 135 (1992): 191.

things usually find themselves emulating the eighteenth-century British writer Samuel Johnson, who, when asked to rebut the theory of a thinker who denied the existence of matter, famously landed a mighty kick into a large stone and said, "I refute it *thus*."⁵⁵

The best-known historians' script for Johnsonian stone-kicking is laid out in a book published 1994 by a trio of leading historians, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. Their widely read *Telling the Truth about History* seeks to carve out a middle way between the skeptical relativism of postmodernists and other cultural constructionists, on the one hand, and outmoded beliefs in the objective pursuit of historical truth, on the other. Reviewing twentieth-century challenges to absolutist truth in science and history, the authors cheerfully conclude that these have been positive developments, symptomatic of the opening up of American higher education to different voices and perspectives, and that "a democratic practice of history . . . encourages skepticism about dominant views."⁵⁶ The sense of crisis in the academic world of the early 1990s, in this view, was due to the collapse of "absolutist" beliefs in the infallibility of science, the inevitability of progress, and the goal of perfect objectivity; increasing doubt about these verities stemmed from a healthy spirit of democratic challenge. But the authors draw the line at caving in to the "cynicism and nihilism" of complete relativity or the lure of multicultural fragmentation. Rejecting postmodern doubts about the existence of any objective reality, they espouse a stance they call "qualified objectivity," which acknowledges both the subjectivity of those who study history and the existence of objective traces of the past that constrain what the historian can say: the past is indeed present in texts and material remains, though it cannot dictate "history," which is inevitably shaped by those who write it. "Qualified objectivity," then, amounts to an interactive relationship between an inevitably subjective historian and the materials that limit and shape her inquiry. But historians are also trained and constrained sociologically, by the institutions in which they operate, and an ideally democratic society will generate norms of scholarship and learning that encourage dissent and skepticism while also subjecting scholars to the rules and standards set by the intellectual community. The authors, in sum, pragmatically locate

55. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 122.

56. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth*, 3, 11.

the solution to the postmodernist dilemma in the operation of democratic scholarly institutions.⁵⁷

DISTORTION OR IMAGINATION: WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE?

Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob's compromise position—that we are inevitably subjective, but constrained by the traces of the past and the norms of our intellectual communities—is most likely palatable to most historians working today. In any event, social and cultural historians have moved away from focusing on texts and representations and toward concentrating not on how culture shapes people but on what people *do* with culture: concepts of “practice” and “performance” have become productively ubiquitous in recent years.⁵⁸ But issues of truth and fiction, questions about the historian's subjectivity and freedom with respect to past materials, are not about to disappear. A major reason the passions aroused by the postmodernist “threat” among historians have been so intense is no doubt that the allegedly sharp line between history and fiction so easily gets blurred: historians are particularly sensitive to encroachments from the fictional end of the writing spectrum precisely because they are more like novelists than any other group in the scholarly world. Agreement reigns in principle that historians are bound by the facts and obey a strict embargo on invention. But the historian's task also consists in assembling scattered sources and connecting the dots between them, and superior historical work involves the ability to imagine the past and recreate it in vivid prose. Disagreement often arises, often contentiously, as to which forms of dot-connecting and imagination are licit and which are not.

Over the years the historical profession has been rocked at regular intervals by scandals that involve the alleged fabrication or distortion of sources, with historians either united in their indignation or painfully divided. Sometimes wide agreement prevails in the profession about a case of egregious “historical malpractice.” In the early 2000s, for instance, a scandal erupted around a rising star in the American historical profession, Michael Bellesiles, a professor at Emory University, eventually forcing him out of the

57. *Ibid.*, chapters 7–8, especially pp. 254–61.

58. For a good overview, see Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Introduction,” in Spiegel, ed. *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2005), especially 11–26.

academy.⁵⁹ In 2000 Bellesiles was in a position most academic historians can only dream of as the author of a politically important book glowingly reviewed in the popular press, which had already snagged one of the profession's biggest awards, the Bancroft Prize in American history. In addition, he had gained respect and sympathy from his liberal fellow academics for coming under attack from one of their greatest foes, the National Rifle Association. Bellesiles's *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (2000), a study of guns in America from colonial times to the Civil War, centered on a surprising set of findings whose political import was immediately obvious. *Arming America* overturned the standard image of colonial America as a land of proudly gun-toting individuals. From his research into probate sources—wills and inventories—Bellesiles had discovered that in the period 1765–1790 only an average of 14.7 percent of all households owned guns. By the mid-nineteenth century, when the spread of interchangeable parts allowed the industrialized production of arms to surge, the proportion rose to 31 percent, but not until the Civil War, he argued, did gun culture truly overtake the nation. Gun culture in America was rooted, it seemed, in capitalism rather than the Constitution.

Academic reviewers were predictably ecstatic about the implications for Second Amendment–based arguments that grounded gun ownership and its alleged constitutional sanction in the culture of the Revolutionary generation, and the NRA was just as predictably furious, with Charlton Heston himself entering the fray to denounce the book and its author. Wishful thinking and wagon-circling on the part of academics may have delayed serious examination of Bellesiles's sources and methods, but eventually specialists scrutinized his numerical tables and raised serious issues in a forum published in a leading journal in 2002: the crucial table providing the low percentage for the eighteenth century, for instance, did not indicate

59. The following account is based on Peter Charles Hoffer, *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, Fraud—American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis and Goodwin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), chapter 5, and Jon Wiener, *Historians in Trouble: Plagiarism, Fraud and Politics in the Ivory Tower* (New York: New Press, 2005), chapter 4. Wiener's very partisan book argues that cases of academic fraud emerge mainly when historians are targeted by right-wing political interests and media, and that Bellesiles's errors were not all that egregious. The committee hired by Emory that issued the damning 2002 report, however, was made up of three liberal academics.

the base number of cases, the percentage computations seemed to be faulty, and there was troubling vagueness in the identification of actual counties where records were consulted.⁶⁰ On the defensive, Bellesiles piled up excuses: he had not kept a log of his travels to archives, the yellow legal pads where he noted his findings were destroyed in an office flood, and in any case, he protested, his argument rested on far more than those tables. In the end, an outside committee hired by Bellesiles's own department found, after a three-month investigation, evidence of serious professional violations in the conduct of his research, including outright falsification. Within a year Bellesiles resigned his tenured position, his prize was rescinded, and his publisher discontinued printing the book.

The Bellesiles case caused huge embarrassment—all manner of presses, reviewers, and academic committees emerged with egg on their faces—and most professors were chagrined that the outcome played into the hands of the gun lobby. But once Bellesiles's guilt in playing fast and loose with his sources had been established, the case was not especially divisive as he found no prominent defenders.⁶¹ Even less divisive is what many consider the ultimate instance of the dishonestly tendentious manipulation of sources, Holocaust denial. Historians of modern Germany and others refuse as a rule to engage in debates with Holocaust deniers both on the moral grounds that doing so would publicize the deniers' positions and grant them spurious legitimacy, and on the intellectual grounds that it would be a waste of time and energy to go after propositions so far outside the pale of sound scholarly knowledge: would scientists spend time, they ask, arguing with someone who claims that the earth is flat? A debate of sorts was forced upon the public in the late 1990s, however, when a prominent Holocaust denier named David Irving took historian Deborah Lipstadt to court in London, charging that she had defamed him in a book she wrote chronicling the history of those who dispute the Final Solution. Irving in the end lost his suit, but one of the experts called upon for the trial was Richard Evans, who subsequently wrote a book systematically demolishing Irving's work. Evans overcame his field's reluctance to engage with an

60. Hoffer, *Past Imperfect*, 146–51.

61. Jon Wiener, however, argues that Bellesiles was unfairly targeted for “errors in a tiny portion of the documentation,” and writes that several prominent historians whom he names agreed with this assessment in phone conversations. Wiener, *Historians in Trouble*, 91–93.

abhorrent thesis to do the hard and dispiriting work of demonstrating that Irving's claims were based on research rife with tendentious selections, misrepresentations of documents, and deliberate omissions.⁶²

It is easy for professional historians and others to unite in their rejection of the clearly fraudulent manipulation or invention of sources, especially in the case of Holocaust denial, when dishonesty is put in the service of a widely reviled agenda. But the lines between tendentiousness, carelessness, and dishonesty can be a lot harder to draw, as the controversial and wrenching case of a young academic named David Abraham demonstrated in the mid-1980s.⁶³ Abraham, a junior faculty member at Princeton, published a book in 1981 about the relation between the German business community and the rise of the Nazis, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic*. This specialized study presented a rather abstract Marxian argument about systemic strains on the political economy of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, but it was published by a major press and favorably reviewed. The higher administration at Princeton declined to award Abraham tenure, despite his department's support, but his future on the job market looked good.

Around the time of his tenure denial, however, Abraham became the target of attacks by two senior historians in his field, Henry Turner at Yale and Gerald Feldman at Berkeley. Abraham had posited the existence of an objective convergence of interests between German big business and the Nazis; Turner had been laboring for years at his own research, which argued, roughly speaking, the opposite. Scrutinizing Abraham's book, Turner embarked on a campaign of letter-writing to the *American Historical Review* and to every major historian in the field in America and Europe, claiming that Abraham's arguments were based on fraudulent research, including the outright fabrication of nonexistent documents. When Abraham went on the job market and was invited to interview at leading universities, Turner's ally Feldman contacted department heads and deans to warn them against hiring a scholar who had distorted and invented sources. Many people found Turner and Feldman's tactics objectionable—why not critique the author in a published review instead of going after him in private letters and calls?—but the campaign worked, as universities wary of courting

62. Richard J. Evans, *Lying about Hitler: History, the Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

63. My account of the Abraham affair is based on Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 612–21, and Wiener, *Historians in Trouble*, chapter 5.

scandal declined to offer Abraham a position. The unfolding saga of alleged scholarly fraud and nasty academic politics involving some of the nation's most prominent universities was widely reported in the national press.

The problem for Abraham was that, as he himself admitted, he had indeed been guilty of some rather egregious carelessness; a return visit to the archives in the wake of the critiques revealed that he had misdated at least one document, misidentified the author and recipient of a report, and, most seriously, on several occasions presented as direct quotes from the sources what were actually his paraphrases, restatements that happened to support his argument. He called his own errors "inexcusable" but denied that he had deliberately invented any documents, and offered to correct the mistakes in a future edition. Abraham's many defenders agreed that he had been sloppy in his research but maintained that his errors did not invalidate his overall argument; some made the point that no historian's footnotes would survive the sort of hostile scrutiny Abraham's had been subjected to, in his case apparently motivated by a combination of professional rivalry and ideological animus. In the end Abraham's foes prevailed: unable to find a position in history, he changed careers, eventually achieving success as a law professor. Causing considerable soul-searching and bitterness, the Abraham case brought up for historians a host of difficult issues: who should blow the whistle on what they deem to be unacceptable research, and how should they do it? How many mistakes does it take to invalidate a body of research? Above all, the case made all but the most dogmatic believers in the "sovereignty of the sources" ponder what happens in the process of selecting historical material to construct an original argument. Short of actual fraud, how can any historian know where and how to draw the line between interpretation and distortion? What counts as a legitimate, admirable feat of historical imagination, and at what point does a historian cross the line?

The most famous modern debate about historical imagination, invention, and their limits took place some twenty-five years ago around a book written by Natalie Davis, a much admired staple of the historical canon still widely read and frequently assigned in classes. *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) is Davis's account of a legal case that unfolded in deep rural France in the 1560s and has the potential to shed light on the lives of early modern peasants—in short, a classic microhistory. The story is of an imposture, a sixteenth-century identity theft that took place in the village of Artigat in southwestern France. Martin Guerre and Bertrande de Rols, the

children of two prosperous peasant families, were married to each other in their early teens, though it took them eight years to consummate their union and produce a child. In his early twenties Martin stole money from his father and ran away. Eight years later, he reappeared in Artigat. His sisters greeted him warmly, his wife more reluctantly, but on the whole the community welcomed back a man who was in fact not Martin at all but an impostor named Arnaud du Tilh, eager to take up the marriage and property of the missing Martin Guerre. (The new Martin convinced people, including at least initially Bertrande, of his legitimacy by seeming to know all manner of specific details about everyone in the village.) Four years later, however, in the wake of a dispute over property, Martin's increasingly suspicious uncle became convinced that his alleged nephew was a fraud and had him arrested in Bertrande's name. Arnaud maintained that he was indeed Martin and two trials ensued, with villagers divided and the outcome hanging in the balance until, in a dramatic development, the real Martin Guerre, limping on a wooden leg, suddenly appeared in the courthouse. Arnaud was thus decisively exposed and sentenced to die by hanging; he was executed in the village after apologizing to everyone including Bertrande. The tale was many times retold over the centuries as a parable of the astonishing ways in which people's sense of what they know and see can be deceived by a clever manipulator.

The story is an excellent one, but direct sources are scant, consisting mainly in a couple of detailed accounts published after the fact by officials in the court cases, the trial records themselves having disappeared. Davis supplements these by combing through the village legal records for details about the families involved, and reconstructs much of the texture of life in Artigat—inheritance practices, customs, the details of daily life—laterally from her research on various villages in the region. She announces in the opening pages, "What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past."⁶⁴ The gracefully written book offers food for thought on many matters, but one of its central points is a reading of the behavior of Martin's wife Bertrande that grants her considerable agency. In contrast to previous accounts, which held that the young abandoned wife had been fooled along with everyone else, Davis posits that Bertrande must have known that the man who came back was

64. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5.

not Martin. Bertrande was no dupe, Davis proposes, but a shrewd woman with her own needs who understood the social advantages of reclaiming a spouse and probably came to love the clever and attractive man who took Martin's place.

Much of the book's enduring power comes from Davis's vividly rendered recreations of how the different actors in her story "must have" experienced things. Because his parents immigrated from the Basque country, "perhaps it was not so easy for the boy from Labourd to grow up in Artigat. There were languages to sort out . . . and surely he was teased because of his name, Martin." Struggling under the burden of a new child, the shame of his years of impotence, and his domineering father, Martin surely "dreamed of a life beyond the confines of fields of millet, of tile-works, properties, marriages." As for the very young Bertrande, right after her marriage to Martin, "she might not have put it in these words, but it seems clear that for a while she was relieved that they could not have intercourse." Years later, when she was older and a "new Martin" more to her liking had appeared in her life, she tacitly helped him to impersonate her husband. In the course of frequent conversations, "so one must surmise, they decided to make the invented marriage last."⁶⁵ All of these hypotheticals about motivation are predicated on contextual information, since no sources allow us direct contact with the minds of these illiterate peasants.

Davis's informed speculations did not sit well with another scholar in the field, Robert Finlay, who attacked her account in a high-profile article in the *American Historical Review*.⁶⁶ Finlay had no patience for Davis's "perhappes" and "may have beens," and he objected strongly to her rereading of the story in a way that, to his mind, takes unjustified liberties with the historical record. Central to his critique is Davis's portrayal of Bertrande as the impostor Arnaud's accomplice, motivated both by a growing affection for her new mate and a shrewd calculation that having a husband served her interests. (Davis also points to the inroads the Reformation was making in the area to propose that Bertrande and Arnaud may have dealt with the guilt over their knowing adultery by viewing their union as a nonsacramental Protestant marriage.) Finlay maintains that none of the sources state or imply a double game on Bertrande's part, and he accuses Davis of

65. *Ibid.*, 19, 22, 44, 46.

66. Robert Finlay, "The Refashioning of Martin Guerre," *American Historical Review* 93 (June 1988): 553-71.

distorting the record to impose a feminist agenda on the story and tug it in the direction of a "historical romance." Her portrait of Bertrande, he writes, "seems to be far more a product of invention than of historical reconstruction."⁶⁷

Finlay's piece was published as half of a forum, with Davis offering in the same issue of the journal a lengthy and spirited rebuttal, buttressed by far more documentary evidence for her arguments than in the original book.⁶⁸ Both *The Return of Martin Guerre* and the Finlay-Davis debate raise fascinating historical questions—how, for instance, could somebody's identity be ascertained after a lapse of years in a society without mirrors, photographs, and other trappings of modern selfhood? Would the impostor's sexual behavior have given the game away to Bertrande, as Davis believes, or as Finlay maintains, been irrelevant in an environment where people had sex mostly clothed, surreptitiously, in dark and freezing rooms? At the core of the matter, however, the dispute between Davis and Finlay comes down to their very different perspectives on the role of imagination in history. "In historical writing," asks Finlay, "where does reconstruction stop and invention begin?" In his view, none of Davis's central points about Bertrande's role and the nature of her relationship with Arnaud are in the records, and therefore she has crossed the line into writing fiction. Yes, he admits, historians often engage in "perhapses" and "may have beens" when the sources are missing, but in the end speculation "is supposed to give way before the sovereignty of the sources, the tribunal of the documents."⁶⁹ Davis retorts by describing Finlay's stance as narrow-minded traditionalism: the supposedly "sovereign" documents don't say just one thing, she insists. The main source about the case, the judge Jean de Coras's account of the trial, leaves plenty of room for different readings, and hers is but one way of putting together a complex, many-layered story. When she wrote that her version was "in part my invention," she explains, "I opened the gap between what I hope to accomplish and what the sources could yield with absolute certainty; by my last page, the reader has had ample encouragement to think about other ways of making sense of the evidence."⁷⁰ In sum, to Finlay,

67. Ibid., 556–57, 562–66, 570.

68. Natalie Zemon Davis, "On the Lane," *American Historical Review* 93 (June 1988): 572–603.

69. Finlay, "Refashioning," 569, 571.

70. Davis, "On the Lane," 599.

who accuses her of imposing her own preferred story on the sources, Davis replies that the documents are by nature ambiguous, allowing for an endless range of readings; hers is but one of the many stories the sources can tell. One historian's lapse into "fiction" is another one's act of sympathetic and responsible imagination.

The controversies surrounding postmodernism have all but disappeared today in the historical profession. On the one hand, the innovative perspectives and methods of the 1980s and 1990s (cultural constructionism, attention to texts and narratives) have become second nature to most historians; on the other, few people nowadays want to expend time and energy fighting over unanswerable questions about whether "the past" can be proven to have happened. But where questions about objectivity, invention, and the representation of the past are concerned, the debates of the last few decades have changed the nature of the discipline. It is impossible to imagine going back to a time when historians imagined that their task involved bowing down before "the sovereignty of the sources."

Narrative and imagination are probably more central to history as a discipline than to any other field of inquiry since, as we have seen, "doing history" consists above all in the creation of compelling, fact-based stories. The business of researching and writing the past is a paradoxical one. On the one hand, historians base their professional identities on meticulous, exhaustive research into the facts of the past; on the other, the line between terrific history and superior historical fiction can often seem vanishingly thin. Garrett Mattingly's *The Armada*, first published in 1959, and considered a classic of historical writing, contains many a passage, devoid of footnotes, such as the following: "When her dwarf cried out from the window that the duke of Guise was approaching, the queen told him he was mad to say so, and when her own eyes identified the affable man on horseback in the midst of his delirious admirers, her lips were drained of color and her voice choked and trembled."⁷¹ How, one may wonder, is this different from the acclaimed novels of Hilary Mantel, set at the court of Henry VIII? In one scene from Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies*, a messenger gives Jane Seymour a love letter and a bag of money from the married king who is wooing her; Jane returns both to the king's emissary, kissing the letter but leaving it unopened. Mantel, who takes pride in her

71. Garrett Mattingly, *The Armada* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 227.

scrupulous research, drew the scene from a contemporary ambassador's correspondence.⁷² As William Cronon has argued, the distinction between history and scrupulously documented historical fiction (Mantel never, she says, includes historical fabrications in her novels) is not that one is true and the other untrue, or that historical novelists do not have to follow any rules. The biggest difference is that writers of historical fiction have license to recreate areas of the past inaccessible to historians, most typically the inner lives of characters and the informal conversations of everyday life. As historians, writes Cronon, "our rules of evidence build a high wall between us and the inner emotional lives of the human beings about whom we write."⁷³

But like novelists, historians are constantly making choices that dictate the nature of their stories. The history of the American Great Plains in the nineteenth century has been told as a tale of progress, tragedy, or triumph over adversity. It has featured pioneers, New Deal federal planners, and nature itself as heroes, and Native Americans, the state, and capitalism as villains. Time frames—where one chooses to begin and end—have dictated narrative shape and tone. Where the descendants of European pioneers chronicle feats of courage and endurance that opened up an expansive future, a Crow Indian chief, Plenty Coups, ended his 1930 autobiography, set in the same place and time, with these words: "When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened."⁷⁴ History is always someone's story, layered over and likely at odds with someone else's: to recognize this does not make our chronicles of the past less reliable, but more varied, deeper, and more truthful.

72. Larissa MacFarquhar, "The Dead Are Real: Hilary Mantel's Imagination," *New Yorker*, October 12, 2012; <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/15/the-dead-are-real> (accessed February 2, 2016).

73. William Cronon, "Storytelling," *American Historical Review* 118, no. 1 (February 2013): 11.

74. William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (March 1992): 1347–76, quote p. 1366.

CONCLUSION

In the United States the single most frequently quoted line about history's value is the Spanish-American writer George Santayana's "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," a superficially appealing but infinitely problematic aphorism. As we saw at the outset, remembering the past and applying its teachings to the present has often had catastrophic consequences. The French found this out in 1940 after their terrible experiences in 1914-1918 led them to prepare for a new round of sedentary trench warfare by erecting the massive defense system known as the Maginot Line along their eastern border, only to be quickly outflanked by fast-moving German tanks and troops surging north of the line: "lessons" from the previous war led to a rapid and humiliating defeat.

In many situations, to be sure, those who actively seek to forget the past are condemned not to repeat it but to create brand new forms of mayhem and terror, as has been the case every time a modern revolution, from France to Russia to China, has repudiated the old days and old ways at the cost of thousands or millions of lives. But reverence for the past can be just as dangerous: think of the masses of people slaughtered by religious zealots nostalgic for the One True Church, by racists yearning for the gallant South of old, by Nazis bent on restoring the glory of the German Reich. Those who choose to remember an idealized, one-sided version of the past can do as much damage as revolutionaries who try to stamp it out.

Throughout the chapters of this book, I have taken the position, held by most historians today, that the study of history does not teach "lessons" in the form of neatly packaged axioms applicable to present and future circumstances. Not only does no historical situation entirely replicate any previous one, but in many instances it is unclear which lesson best applies: during America's Vietnam war, conservatives drew on the example of Europe in the 1930s to make the case for standing up militarily to the North Vietnamese dictatorship while liberals argued for withdrawal by pointing out that French imperialists had been routed and driven out of Vietnam