Chapter 2
History and Narrative

2.1 Philosophy and the Historians

The approach that I am taking in this book asks abstract questions about historical processes and historical knowledge, but it does not derive from existing research traditions of the traditional philosophy of history. Instead, it takes its inspiration from the philosophy of the special sciences. I take the view that historians are attempting to make sense of the past in ways that can be supported by the evidence of the present. They are interested in identifying "significant" historical events or outcomes (e.g. the French Revolution, the outbreak of the American Civil War, the collapse of the Qing Empire); giving realistic and factual descriptions of these events; and answering questions about the causes and effects of these events. And they are interested in examining the intentions, goals, and meanings that were involved in historical actions by the actors who performed them. The task of the philosophy of history as I will pursue it is to analyze and assess the practice of outstanding historians in order to uncover the assumptions they make about the goals of historical inquiry, examine the ways in which evidence, theory, and inference can lead to discoveries within historical disciplines, and identify some of the conceptual and methodological difficulties that arise in the practice of historical investigation.

How, then, should the philosophy of history interact with the practice of working historians? The philosophy of history is challenged to discover and explore the most fundamental questions about historical inquiry and knowledge. How should this research be conducted? And how should the philosopher's development of the subject make use of the practice of the historian?

The guiding intuition is that historians implicitly define the rationality and objectivity of the discipline of historical knowledge; and philosophers can elucidate (and criticize) that ensemble of assumptions about historical inquiry and knowledge in a way that illuminates both the nature of historical knowledge and the ways in which current approaches might be strengthened. In other words, the philosophy of history can function as a conceptual enhancement for working historians, and it can function as a source of rational criticism of specific methods or approaches within contemporary historiography.

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Look at this question from the point of view of the historian, and we will find that the separation between "doing" and "reflecting upon" history is not as sharp as it might appear. For the best historians, there is no recipe for good historical inquiry and exposition. There are methods and practices of archival research, to be sure, and there are general recommendations like "be well informed about existing knowledge about your subject matter." But the great historians take on their subjects with fresh eyes and new questions. They often arrive at novel ways of framing their historical questions; they find new ways of using available historical evidence, or finding new historical evidence; they discover new ways of drawing inferences from historical data; they arrive at new ways of presenting their knowledge and narratives; and they question existing assumptions about "causation," "agency," or "historical period." As the historian grapples with the topic of research and the evidence that pertains to the topic, he or she is forced to think creatively about issues that go to the heart of historical inquiry and reasoning. In other words, the historian is forced to think as a philosopher of history, in order to achieve new insights into the problems she considers.

There is a less creative approach to historical research, of course. One can choose a familiar topic; seek out some new sources that have not yet been fully explored; adopt some familiar theoretical motifs; and place the findings into a standard narrative for publication. This mechanical approach resembles "normal science" for historians. But the results of this type of approach are inherently disappointing; it is unlikely in the extreme that new historical insights will emerge.

So when we consider the work of really imaginative historians, we find that the historian is functioning as a philosopher of history at the same time as he or she is developing an innovative approach to the historical question under examination. And this means that the philosopher can gain great insight by working very carefully with the writings of these great historians. The philosopher can probe questions of historical inquiry, historical reasoning, historical presentation, and historical knowledge, by thinking through these questions in conversation with the working historian.[1]

Consider a few examples that illustrate this productive possibility. First, consider the evolving state of affairs in historical treatments of the French Revolution. In the past 40 years historians have taken a shifting series of perspectives on the events, social conflicts, cultural circumstances, and political realities of the Revolution. New research and new narratives have emerged on the *ancien regime*, the revolution, the Terror, and the consolidation of power by Napoleon. Fertile historians such as Soboul, Cobb, Darnton, Schama, Sewell, or Chartier have tested and explored a variety of new perspectives—from Marxism, from social history, from cultural studies. And they have provided a much more nuanced body of knowledge about

[1] There is quite a bit of reflective work underway on the scientific foundations of relevant areas of the social sciences, in which practitioners of international relations theory, comparative politics, and globalization are rethinking the nature of scientific study of these forms of social processes. Particularly valuable are Lebow and Lichbach (2007), Elman and Elman (2003), Geddes (2003), and George and Bennett (2005).

the social and cultural reality of the Revolution. This body of work provides a rich domain of conceptual and historiographical material for the philosopher of history.

A second example is the lively debate that has occurred about comparative economic history of England and China. In the past 15 years historians of Chinese economic history have challenged standard models of economic development and have argued for a more balanced comparative economic history for Eurasia. This debate has moved into great detail in the effort to answer such basic questions as whether China's agricultural economy was declining, static, or rising in productivity in the eighteenth century; or whether the standard of living was higher or lower at opposite ends of Eurasia. Once again, a philosopher of history can find great stimulation to further conceptual and philosophical research by studying this debate in detail; the debate provides a living example of how historical knowledge is born. (This debate is considered in some detail in Chapter 8.)

So my answer to the primary question here is this: that the philosophy of history needs to be fully immersed in some specific historical debates involving the most creative and imaginative historians. Careful study of these debates and sustained interaction with historians like these will lead in turn to much more developed understanding of the nature of historical reasoning.

A good example of a working historian with a sophisticated philosophy of history is Robert Darnton. And his philosophy of history emerges very clearly from his numerous reviews of books on the period of the French Revolution in the *New York Review of Books* (Darnton, 1973, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1989, 1991, 2004). (Darnton's own book, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, was also an innovative contribution to historians' practice, including especially his adept use of tools of ethnography to illuminate a baffling and seemingly small incident in French history (Darnton, 1984). This book is discussed in Chapter 9.)

Written over roughly a 30 years period, Darnton's intelligent reviews provide a nuanced perspective on how the historiography of the French Revolution has changed. From the structural, class-centered approach of Albert Soboul, through Richard Cobb's insistence on *mentalités* or Simon Schama's person-centered telling of the story, it is possible to see a shifting scene of historians' judgments about causes, structures, ideas, movements, and scale. All by itself this is an important insight into historical understanding. And it illustrates an important fact about historical knowledge: no event is ever known with finality.

But it is also possible to look at Darnton's reviews themselves as an extended and implicit historiographical essay. In his commentary on the writings of others Darnton also reveals many of his own historical intuitions. And of course Darnton's own ethnographic turn in *The Great Cat Massacre* (Darnton, 1984)—worked out while Darnton was teaching an interdisciplinary seminar with Clifford Geertz—is itself an important step on the historiography of French social change. So the project of trying to discover whether there is a coherent and innovative philosophy of history embodied within these reviews is a fruitful one. Several points come out of this set of reviews quite vividly: for example, the deep contingency of historical change, the importance of the particular, the importance of experience and *mentalités*, the

dialectic of events and agents, and the difficulty of framing a large historical event. And this provides an interesting new avenue of approach to the problem of formulating a philosophy of history, a different insight into what we can learn from observing the practice of great historians.[2]

2.2 What Is History?

Let us consider a foundational question: what is history? Most innocently, it is the human past and our organized representations of that past. We can of course write about the chronology of non-human events—the history of the solar system, the history of the earth's environment over a billion year expanse of time. But the key issues in the philosophy of history arise in our representations of the human past—a point emphasized in Collingwood's philosophy of history (Collingwood, 1946, pp. 215–216). And history is fascinating for us, because (in Marx's words) "Men make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing" (Marx, 1974). That is to say: history reflects agency—the choices by individuals and groups; and it reflects constraining structures and circumstances. So historical outcomes are neither causally determined, nor entirely plastic and unconstrained. Therefore it is open to the historian to attempt to discover the historical circumstances that induced and constrained historical agents to act in one way rather than another, thus bringing about a historical outcome of interest. So we might begin by saying that history is a temporally ordered sequence of events and processes involving human doings, within which there are interconnections of causality, structure, and action, within which there is the play of accident, contingency, and outside forces.

But we might also say: there is no such thing as "history in general." The description just provided suggests that there is a comprehensible collection of historical processes that might be characterized as a "total" human history: population growth, urbanization, technological innovation, economic differentiation, the growth of knowledge and culture, and so on. But this impression is highly misleading. It suggests a degree of order and structure that history does not possess. There are only specific histories: histories of various conditions or circumstances of interest to us. Historical space is dense: at any given time there are countless human actions and social processes underway in the world, and the "cardinality" of historical events does not diminish over time. So to single out the history of something specific—agriculture, the French Revolution, modern science, Islam—is unavoidably to select, from the full complexity of events and actions, an abstract set of characteristics that will be traced through a process of development. And this in

[2] William Sewell is another good example of an historian who makes a strong contribution to the philosophy of history. His *Logics of History* (Sewell, 2005) offers a singular contribution to historiography, with careful, analytical attention to some of the problematic constructs and frameworks that underlie the ways in which scholars attempt to characterize and explain historical change.

turn raises the point that "history" depends partly on "what occurred" and partly on "what we are interested in."

This point does not undercut the objectivity of the past. Events and actions happened in the past, separate from our interest in them. But to organize them into a narrative about "religious awakening" or "formation of the absolutist state" is to impose a structure of interpretation on them that depends inherently on the interests of the observer. There is no such thing as "perspective-free history." So there is a very clear sense in which we can assert that history is constituted by historical interpretation and traditions of historical interest—even though the events themselves are not.

What, then, is historical representation? We want to know, represent, understand, and explain the past. This perspective emphasizes our cognitive or epistemic relationship to the past. We use facts in the present—ruins, inscriptions, documents, oral histories, parish records, and the writings of previous generations of historians—to support inferences about circumstances and people in the past. Here we can single out several ideas: the idea of learning some of the facts about human circumstances in the past; the idea of providing a narrative that provides human understanding of how a sequence of historical actions and events hangs together and "makes sense" to us; and the idea of providing a causal account of the occurrence of some historical event of interest. Notice that these descriptions invoke some of the important philosophical issues that arise in the philosophy of history: the role of interpretation of meaningful human actions; the role of causal explanation; the status of empirical knowledge of facts about the past; and the status of assertions about "meaning" of large historical events. Each of these formulations raises new and difficult issues for philosophical clarification.

But the cognitive relationship to the past is not the only relationship we have to history. We also possess an expressive or performative relationship to the past. We also create, interpret, fictionalize, mythologize, and valorize the past. And we use some of our stories about the past—our "histories"—to represent the right way of acting, good and bad political behavior, the character of one nationality as opposed to another, and to justify our conduct in the future. This feature of historical representation too raises philosophical problems. Do these stories have epistemic standing? Are some of these value-laden interpretations more justified than others? And can we sharply distinguish between the two kinds of representation of the past? (This aspect of history plays a key role in the formation of ethnic and national identities (Anderson, 1983; Kammen, 1991).)

2.2.1 Micro, Meso, Macro

Doing history forces us to make choices about the scale of the history with which we are concerned. Are we concerned with the whole of the Chinese Revolution, the base area of Yenan, or the specific experience of a handful of villages in Shandong during the 1940s? And given the fundamental heterogeneity of social life, the choice of scale makes a big difference to the findings.

Historians differ fundamentally around the decisions they make about scale. William Hinton provides what is almost a month-to-month description of the Chinese Revolution in Fanshen village—a collection of a few hundred families (Hinton, 1966). The book covers a few years and the events of a few hundred people. Likewise, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie offers a deep treatment of the villagers of Montaillou; once again, a single village and a limited time (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979b). Diane Vaughan offers a full study of the fateful decision to launch the Challenger space shuttle (Vaughn, 1996). She hopes to shed light on high-risk technology decision-making through careful study of a single incident. These histories are limited in time and space, and they can appropriately be called "micro-history."

At the other end of the scale spectrum, William McNeil provides a history of the world (McNeill, 1967) and a history of the world's diseases (McNeill, 1976); Massimo Livi-Bacci offers a history of the world's population (Livi-Bacci, 2007); Jared Diamond offers a history of the interrelationships between the Old World and the New World through the medium of weapons and disease (Diamond, 1997); and Goudsblom and De Vries provide an environmental history of the world (De Vries and Goudsblom, 2002). In each of these cases, the historian has chosen a scale that encompasses virtually the whole of the globe, over millennia of time. These histories can certainly be called "macro-history."

Both micro- and macro-history have their shortcomings. Micro-history leaves us with the question, "how does this particular village shed light on anything larger?". And macro-history leaves us with the question, "how do these grand assertions about causality really work out in the context of Canada or Sichuan?". The first threatens to be so particular as to lose all interest, whereas the second threatens to be so general as to lose all empirical relevance to real historical processes.

There is a third choice available to the historian, however, that addresses both points. This is to choose a scale that encompasses enough time and space to be genuinely interesting and important, but not so much as to defy valid analysis. This level of scale might be regional—for example, G. William Skinner's analysis of the macro-regions of China. It might be national—for example, a social history of Indonesia. And it might be supra-national—for example, an economic history of Western Europe. The key point is that historians in this middle range are free to choose the scale of analysis that seems to permit the best level of conceptualization of history, given the evidence that is available and the social processes that appear to be at work. And this mid-level scale permits the historian to make substantive judgments about the "reach" of social processes that are likely to play a causal role in the story that needs telling. This level of analysis can be referred to as "meso-history," and it appears to offer an ideal mix of specificity and generality.[3]

Here are a few works that represent good examples of meso-history: R. Bin Wong (1997), Kenneth Pomeranz (2000), and Charles Tilly (1990). Wong and Tilly define their scope in terms of supra-national regions. Pomeranz argues for

[3] The issue of causal analysis across levels of social and historical organization has received attention in recent years. Goertz and Mahoney focus attention on the importance of identifying the levels of analysis and discovering the causal relations that exist within and across levels (Goertz and Mahoney, 2005).

a sub-national scale: comparison of England's agricultural midland with the Yangzi region in China. Each pays close attention to the problem of defining the level of scale that works best for the particular task. And each does a stellar job of identifying the concrete social processes and relationships that hold this regional social system together.

Both macro- and meso-history fall in the general category of "large-scale" history. So let's analyze this conception of history. Large-scale history can be defined in these terms.

- The inquiry defines its scope over a long time period and/or a large geographical range;
- the inquiry undertakes to account for large structural characteristics, processes, and conditions as historical outcomes;
- the inquiry singles out large structural characteristics within the social order as central causes leading to the observed historical outcomes;
- the inquiry aspires to some form of comparative generality across historical contexts, both in its diagnosis of causes and its attribution of patterns of stability and development.

Large-scale history falls in several categories.

- History of the "long durée"—accounts of the development of the large-scale features of a particular region, nation, or civilization, including population history, economic history, political history, war and peace, cultural formations, and religion
- Comparative history—a comparative account, grounded in a particular set of questions, of the similarities and contrasts of related institutions or circumstances in separated contexts. For example, states, economic institutions, patterns of agriculture, property systems, bureaucracies. The objective is to discover causal regularities, test existing social theories, and formulate new social theories
- World history—accounts of the major civilizations of the world and their histories of internal development and inter-related contact and development

The choice of scale is always pertinent in historical analysis. And in many instances, I believe that the most interesting analysis takes place at the meso-level. At this level we get explanations that have a great deal of power and breadth, and yet that are also closely tied to the concrete historical experience of the subject matter.

2.2.2 Longue Durée

Let us turn briefly to a different kind of question of scale: the structure of historical time. Many historical changes take place on a human scale—the Great Depression came and went within the lived experience of many millions of people, and they were able to tell comprehensible narratives of the beginning, middle, and end. Likewise with periods of political transition and upheaval—the Vietnam War

protests, the Reagan revolution, the Cold War. So these events can be scaled within the historical sensibilities of individuals who experienced them. But what about changes that are so extended and so gradual that they are all but imperceptible? How is history of the *longue durée* to be understood?

Think of some of the gradual processes of change that have important effects on human society: for example, soil erosion, water pollution, loss of jobs, inflation, diffusion of innovation, a firm's decline in market share, and a nation's decline of naval power, to name a heterogeneous list. And think about the very different time scales associated with large processes of change, from days to months to years to decades and centuries. Does the scale over which a change unfolds make a difference in the ability of an organization to respond? It does, at both ends of the spectrum. Is there a special problem for historical cognition posed by long, slow processes?

Paul Pierson's *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Pierson, 2004) raises some of the challenging research questions that are raised by the time scale of a historical process. He provides a very useful taxonomy of events in terms of "time horizon of cause" and "time horizon of outcome". This creates four categories of events around "long" and "short"; illustrations of each category include tornado (short-short), earthquake (long-short), meteorite (short-long), and global warming (long-long). And he points out that much research in the social sciences focuses on examples from the "short-short" category—events with discrete causes and time-limited effects. The issue of time scale is also invoked in the history of the *longue durée*, including particularly writings by Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, where the historians of the *Annales* school paid particular attention to the long, slow changes in structures that influenced European history. We might say that these are examples of historical processes working "behind the backs" of the participants.

The sorts of changes I have in mind here run along these lines: a long, slow increase of population density relative to available resources; a gradual shift in the gender ratio or age structure of a population; the gradual silting of a river system and estuary; a slow erosion of a traditional system of values; and an extended process of increasing or decreasing tolerance between intermixed religious groups. In each case it is possible for the changes to be slow enough to defy recognition by historical participants; and yet each of these slow processes may have very important historical consequences.

The question here is a simple one: what are the methods of observation and inference through which historians can identify and investigate these sorts of long, slow processes? And what is the standing of such processes insofar as they stand outside the scope of events of ordinary historical experience? Given that participants have no basis for identifying the long, slow processes within which they swim, what is the status of the historian's hypotheses about such processes?

As for the question of how historians can identify these kinds of century-long processes: this task is really no more challenging than the problem of arriving at hypotheses about unseen processes in other areas of science. It takes ingenuity and imagination to hypothesize how a gradual increase in local violence might relate to slow demographic trends; but once the historical demographer turns her eye in this

direction, it is no great leap to hypothesize that a rising male-to-female ratio may be a part of the cause (as Valerie Hudson and Andrea Den Boer argue in *Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population* (Hudson and Den Boer, 2005)). Jack Goldstone's efforts to link the occurrence of revolution to slow demographic processes falls in this category as well (Goldstone, 1991). Demography and the natural environment offer many examples of long, slow processes that are relevant to human history. What is necessary, though, is a fairly rigorous ability to measure variables of interest at different points in time and to discover trends among these observations. In other words, the turn to cliometrics—quantitative observation of historical trends—is more or less essential to the history of the *longue durée*. And it is not surprising that the *Annales* historians were deeply interested in demographic history, price series, and historical measurements of economic activity.

So this answers part of the question: a history of long processes requires careful observations of quantities over time, and it requires the formulation of causal hypotheses about how these trends influence other historical circumstances of interest.

And what about the other question—the status of historical conceptions of these long, slow processes? They are not abstractions from the historical self-understandings of participants. By hypothesis, participants cannot perceive these sorts of processes. Instead, they constitute a more hypothetical historical structure that may nonetheless play a future role in the narratives participants tell about themselves. A slow process of climate change may be imperceptible at a given point in time. But once it is identified and articulated by the analytical historian the construct may come into popular consciousness; what was previously invisible may become part of the furniture of the popular narrative.

So if we conceptualized historical episodes along the lines of life events, then the *longue durée* would be forever outside of history. If, on the other hand, we include in our definition of history all the structures and trends that can be identified by analytical history, then the history of the *longue durée* is entirely comprehensible. Moreover, it is apparent that ordinary historical apperception can itself incorporate the theories of historians. And in this sense, the *longue durée* can enter back into ordinary historical experience.

2.2.3 Marc Bloch's History

Marc Bloch was one of France's most important medieval historians in the first half of the twentieth century, and he died at the hands of the Gestapo while serving in the Resistance in Paris in 1944. Bloch's historical imagination and his innovative research strategies qualify Bloch as one of the truly great historians of the twentieth century.[4]

[4] Carole Fink's biography is an outstanding treatment of his thought and life (Fink, 1989); also important is *Marc Bloch, l'historien et la cite* (Deyon et al., 1997). Susan Friedman (Friedman, 1996) provides an excellent intellectual history of Bloch's development.

Here I am primarily interested in the substantive contributions Bloch brought to the writing of history. Bloch was one of the founders of the *Annales* school of history, along with Lucien Febvre, and he left a deep impression on subsequent historical imagination later in the twentieth century. In particular, he gave a strong impetus to social and sociological history, and he brought a non-Marxist materialism into the writing of history that represented a very important angle of view. The largest impact of the *Annales* school, through the writings of such historians as Febvre, Bloch, Ladurie, Braudel, and Le Goff, is the set of perspectives it forged for the understanding of social and cultural history. This group of historians emphasized the value of looking closely at the structures and experiences of ordinary people as one foundation for the formation of history. This required the invention of new historical vocabulary and new sources of data. And Bloch was central in each area.

Bloch and the other scholars of the *Annales* school of French history characteristically placed their analysis of historical change within the context of the compelling structures—economic, social, or demographic—within which ordinary people live out their lives. They postulate that the broad and enduring social relations that exist in a society—for example, property relations, administrative and political relations, or the legal system—constitute a stable structure within which agents act, and they determine the distribution of crucial social resources that become the raw materials on the basis of which agents exercise power over other individuals and groups. So the particular details of a social structure create the conditions that set the stage for historical change in the society. (André Burguière provides an excellent discussion of the *Annales* school; Burguière, 2009.)

The *Annales* school also put forward a concept that applies to the temporal structure of historical change: the idea that some historical changes unfold over very long periods of time and are all but invisible to participants—the history of the *longue durée*. So large enduring structures, applying their effects over very long periods of historical time, provided a crucial part of the historical imagination of the *Annales* school. Bloch's treatment of French feudalism illustrates a sustained analysis of a group of great structures enduring centuries over much of the territory of France (Bloch, 1964), as do Le Roy Ladurie's treatment of the causes of change and stasis in Languedoc in *The Peasants of Languedoc* (Le Roy Ladurie, 1974) and Fernand Braudel's historical formulation of the Mediterranean world (Braudel, 1995).

Several of Bloch's books are most significant. *Feudal Society* (Bloch, 1964) is a foundational contribution to our understanding of the institutions and social relations of French feudalism—the manorial system, vassalage, and kingship. And his writings about French agricultural history are of special interest (Bloch, 1966, 1967). These books document many important aspects of French rural social life, both high and low. But even more importantly, Bloch brought several distinctive ideas into historical writing that continue to serve as illuminating models about how to understand the past. One is a version of materialist historical investigation. Bloch provides great insight into the forces and relations of production in rural medieval France and the material culture of the Middle Ages. A second is an adept ability to single out and scrutinize some of the forms of political structure and power that defined French feudal society. And a third is a subtle way of characterizing the

social whole of medieval society and mentalité that owed much to Durkheim. In a curious way, then, Bloch's work picked up some of the themes that constituted modern social theory in Marx, Weber, and Durkheim.

Bloch's materialism is most evident in *French Rural History* (Bloch, 1966). Here Bloch gives a detailed and scholarly treatment of the social and community consequences of the diffusion of the heavy wheeled plough. He provides a careful technical analysis of the advantages and exigencies of the heavy plough, which was most suited to the heavy soil of northern France. And he works out the social prerequisites of this technology—fundamentally, a degree of community organization that could successfully coordinate land use consistent with ownership and the turning radius of the heavy implement and its team of horses. The technical requirements of the plough required certain social arrangements. The social structure of the northern French village satisfied these conditions—in striking contrast to the looser coordination found in southern French villages.

This is materialism; but it is not especially Marxist materialism. It does not give primacy to class relations. And it does not support any kind of teleology in historical development. But the central point was clear. Bloch paid close attention to the concrete social relations that obtained in rural France, and he attempted to discern the complex system of social life and agricultural technology that constituted peasant agrarian life in certain regions of France. In particular, Bloch sought to demonstrate that a major technology—cultivation with the heavy plough—incorporates and implicates a whole complex social and cultural system. And a major part of social history is to discover the sequence of adjustments through which the technology system is incorporated.

The Durkheim part of the story is also an important one. Durkheim was a major influence on French social thought in the first decades of the twentieth century, and the vector to Bloch was particularly direct. Bloch and his generation were greatly influenced by Durkheim's journal, *L'année sociologique* (Burguière, 2009; Rhodes, 1978). Bloch brought into his historical writing a deep sensitivity to the social reality of communities, moralities, and social collectivities. Susan Friedman (Friedman, 1996) argues that Bloch's historical sensibilities and methods were deeply influenced by the debates among the historians, sociologists, and geographers that set the terms of Bloch's development; but that ultimately his thinking remains "historical."

> Even in his later years when he came closest to Durkheimian sociology, Marc Bloch remained essentially an historian. He was an historian in the sense that his primary interests lay in change and differences rather than laws and theory and that the problems which he chose to address were human ones rather than those of the physical environment. (Friedman, 1996, Chapter 10)

The final feature of Bloch's thought to highlight is his vocabulary of structure and power in his treatment of French feudalism. There is a parallel with Weber in this body of thinking. Bloch spent a year studying in Germany and was presumably aware of Weber's thought, although there is no clear evidence of direct influence. But there are several ways in which some of Bloch's thought parallels Weber's. One is in his use of ideas about historical concepts that are similar to Weber's concept of

ideal types. And the other is his careful analysis of the historical realities of relations of power and social structures that embody power.

Let us examine more closely Bloch's treatment of the nature and development of French medieval agriculture. His treatment brings together the history of technology, the social relations of rural France, and the material culture that bound social life and work together in early medieval France. Here I will draw some important lines of argument in *French Rural History* (Bloch, 1966). The heart of what I want to emphasize in Bloch's treatment of French agriculture is the notion that there are distinctive and enduring practices that embodied this agricultural system; that these practices can be identified through various markers (place names, agricultural implements, and field shape, for example); and that they are distinctive of this region in this *longue durée*. Agricultural practice is thus an important example of a dispersed set of knowledge and techniques within a population, transmitted by social mechanisms that can be studied, with long-standing implications for such things as commercial development, transportation, movements of peoples, and the transmission of ideas. "An agrarian regime is not characterized solely by its crop rotation. Each regime is an intricate complex of techniques and social relations" (Bloch, 1966, p. 35).

Techniques of cultivation represent a fairly visible illustration: the practical knowledge, tools, and techniques associated with the growing of crops and the preparation of soil represent a specialized knowledge that diffused perceptibly through France in the Middle Ages. Field shape is one of the compelling examples that Bloch analyzes—the long rectangular fields of northern France, in contrast to the patchwork of irregular geometries of southern France. Crop selection and cultivation varied across regions—"the rules governing cultivation varied considerably according to the region" (p. 26). It is possible to discern different systems of crop rotation across the map of France—all embodying attempts to allow the soil to recover its natural fertility, but implemented in regionally and culturally specific ways. This body of activity and practice reflects a form of "local knowledge", embodied in the practices, tools, and folk beliefs conveyed through concrete local mechanisms of influence and education.

Bloch emphasizes throughout the importance of regional variation of agricultural practices—another marker of socially transmitted forms of local knowledge. He writes, "When one considers all the patient observation, practical intuition and willing co-operation, unsupported by any proper scientific knowledge, which from the dawn of our rural history must have gone into the cultivation of the soil, one is filled with feelings of admiration akin to those which inspired Vidal de la Blache" (p. 26).

> The exact geographical distribution of these two rotations [biennial and triennial] has not so far been established. It would probably not be difficult to reconstruct the pattern as it was in the late eighteenth century, before the more flexible rotation introduced by the agricultural revolution put an end to fallowing; but for this we should need detailed studies which are at present lacking. What is certain is that the two systems occupied distinct blocks of territory, and had done so since the Middle Ages. (p. 31)

Consider the main forms of evidence that Bloch uses in establishing the nature, distribution, and evolution of social practices in medieval agriculture: place names, estate surveys, edicts, rustic calendars, village groundplans, census records, and

seigneurial archives. One of Bloch's recurring sources of evidence for varying social practices is linguistic; thus, in describing systems of triennial rotation he writes that "the names for these divisions vary with the region and include *soles*, *saisons*, *cours*, *cotaisons*, *royes* or *coutoures*, and in Burgundy, *fins*, *épis* or *fins de pie"* (p. 30). Likewise, he offers inventory of a variety of words used to describe bounded parcels: "quartiers, climates, cantons, contrées, bènes, triages, delles" (p. 38). These forms of specialized vocabulary found in historical records permit Bloch to arrive at rigorous and data-grounded conclusions about changes in the agrarian regime of France over a very long time.

It is worth noting the play of contingency and opportunism in Bloch's historical vision. He describes, for example, the gradual increase in field size as the plough is driven a little beyond its legal limit, year after year (p. 37). Here is an instance of the opportunism of the medieval actor leaving a permanent imprint upon the land. On the other hand, Bloch identifies the role of compulsion as an ineffable mark on the face of the agrarian community: "Only a society of great compactness, composed of men who thought instinctively in terms of community, could have created such a regime" (p. 45). Another telling observation: "How true it is that all rural customs take their origin from an attitude of mind! In 1750, when there was a proposal to introduce into Brittany a modified form of the common herd, under which the arable would still be protected, the representatives of the Breton Estates rejected as unpracticable a measure accepted as part of the natural order by the peasants of Picardy, Champagne and Lorraine" (p. 59).

Bloch's thinking is deeply spatial; he is frequently drawn to imagine how the social practices he describes would be distributed on a map of France. Thus: "In the present state of our knowledge, a distribution map would show the following as areas of enclosure: the whole of Brittany, . . . Maine; Perche; the bocages of Poitou and Vendée; most of the Massif Central, . . . Bugey and the Pays de Gex; and finally the Basque lands of the extreme south west" (p. 59). As Friedman (1996) points out, the discipline of historical geography had become important in French academic circles in the late nineteenth century, and Bloch was certainly influenced by Paul Vidal de la Blache and his followers.

Interestingly for the period, Bloch takes issue with other historians' efforts to account for regional differences in terms of ethnicity or race. Thus he takes up earlier efforts to explain differences in agrarian regime on the basis of *Volkgeist*: "'Race' and 'people' are words best left unmentioned in this context; in any case, there is nothing more elusive than the concept of ethnic unity. It is more fruitful to speak of types of civilization" (p. 62). I would interpret his points here as demanding a more disaggregated account: an account that looks for a more fine-grained analysis of geography, local practice, inherited agrarian regime in our historical efforts to account for specific regional outcomes.

2.2.4 Comparative History

One of Bloch's most important contributions was to reinvigorate the idea of "comparative history." Bloch believed that we could understand French feudalism better

by putting it into the context of European legal and property regimes; and more broadly, he believed that the careful comparison of agrarian regimes across time and space could be an important source of insight into human societies. Moreover, he did not believe that the cases needed to be sociologically connected. He thought that we would learn important new truths by comparing medieval French serfdom with bonded labor in Senegal in the twentieth century, and one of the innovations developed in Bloch's editorship of *Annales d'histoire économique et social* was precisely his openness to this kind of comparison.[5]

What is "comparative history"? Most basically, it is the organized study of similar historical phenomena in separated temporal or geographical settings. The comparative historian picks several cases for detailed study and comparison, and then attempts to identify important similarities and differences across the cases. Theda Skocpol's treatment of social revolution is a case in point (Skocpol, 1979); Skocpol is interested in examining the particulars of the French, Chinese, and Russian Revolutions in order to discover whether there are similar causal processes at work in these three cases. Other possible comparative research projects might include—

- Slave-based agriculture in Rome and the antebellum United States South
- Rituals of royal healing in medieval France and Bali
- Religious pilgrimages in Islam and Christianity
- Periods of rural unrest in Britain and Malaysia
- Modern economic development in England, France, and China
- Frontier societies in nineteenth-century North America and seventeenth-century Russia
- Feudal legal institutions in eastern and western Europe
- Processes of urban development in London, Mumbai, and Berlin

What is the intellectual purpose of comparative history? What might we expect to learn through careful examination of sets of cases like these? What sorts of knowledge can comparative historical research provide? There might be several goals.

First, we might imagine that some of these phenomena are the effect of *similar causal processes*, so comparison can help to identify causal conditions and regularities. This approach implies that we think of social structures and processes as being part of a causal system, where it is possible to identify recurring causal conditions. This seems to be Skocpol's approach in *States and Social Revolutions*, though she later extends her views in an article mentioned below. Researchers often make use of some variant of Mill's methods in attempting to discover significant patterns of co-variation of conditions and outcomes.

Second, we might have a theory of *social types and subtypes* into which social formations fall. The purpose of comparison would be to identify some of the

[5] Bloch's early ideas about comparative history are presented in his 1928 article, "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," (Bloch, 1953); see also William Sewell, "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History" (Sewell, 1967).

sub-types of a general phenomenon such as "slave economy". This sounds pretty much like the approach that Comte and Durkheim took; it corresponds to a social metaphysic that holds that there are finitely many distinct types of society, and the central challenge for sociology is to discover the structural characteristics of the various types.

Third, we might have a fundamentally *functionalist view of social organization*, along with a basic repertoire of social functions that need to be performed. We might then look at religious systems as fulfilling one or more social functions—social order, solidarity, legitimacy—in alternative ways. Comparison might serve to identify functional alternatives—the multiple ways that different social systems have evolved to handle these functional needs.

Another possible purpose of comparative history is to attempt to discover *historical and social connections* across separate historical settings. For example, examining different methods of labor control in different fascist countries in the 1930s may give us a basis for assessing some of the forms of influence that existed between these movements and governments. And Victor Lieberman's comparative study of the rise and fall of state power in France and Burma falls in this category as well (Lieberman, 2003).

An important application of comparative history stems from the increasing availability of similar *quantitative data across widely separated geographical settings*. Demographic and economic data from Europe, North America, China, Japan, and India now permit detailed comparison of demographic and economic processes in these various settings, and sophisticated quantitative techniques are now allowing comparative researchers in these fields to arrive at significant reassessment of received views about fundamental social processes at the local and regional level. Malthusian ideas about Asian and European population processes have been challenged on the basis of more fine-grained data now available; likewise, standard assumptions about the standard of living in Europe and Asia have been re-examined. Historical demography and economic history have been especially enriched by a surge of rigorous work along these lines; we will return to these examples in Chapter 7, including especially the example of the Eurasia Project on Population and Family History.

Finally, we might have a social metaphysics that emphasizes *contingency and difference*. This perspective differs from the first several ideas, in that it looks at structured comparative study as a vehicle for identifying *difference* rather than underlying similarity. Examining the histories of Berlin and Delhi may shed a great deal of light on the range of social forces and historical contingencies that occurred in these ostensibly similar cases of "urbanization". Here the goal of comparison is more to discover alternatives, variations, and instances of path dependency. Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin's analysis of alternative forms of capitalist development in "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production" illustrates this possibility (Sabel and Zeitlin, 1985; see also Sabel and Zeitlin, 1997).

So there are a number of different intellectual purposes we might have in undertaking comparative historical research. How have other historians and social scientists understood these issues? Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers address

precisely this issue in "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry" (Skocpol and Somers, 1979). Their analysis highlights three distinct models of analysis that can underlie comparative inquiry:

> There are, in fact, at least three distinct logics-in-use of comparative history. One of them, which we shall label comparative history as *macro-causal analysis*, actually does resemble multivariate hypothesis-testing. But in addition there are two other major types: comparative history as the *parallel demonstration of theory*; and comparative history as the *contrast of contexts*. Each of the three major types of comparative history assigns a distinctive purpose to the juxtaposition of historical cases. Concomitantly, each has its own requisites of case selection, its own patterns of presentation of arguments, and—perhaps most important—its own strengths and limitations as a tool of research in macrosocial inquiry. (Skocpol and Somers, 1979, p. 175)

R. Bin Wong offers a different view of the value of comparison in historical studies in his important comparative study of Chinese economic and political development (Wong, 1997). Wong argues that comparison allows the historian to discover what is distinctive about a particular series of historical developments. Features which perhaps looked inevitable and universal in European economic development look quite different when we consider a similar process of development in China; we may find that Chinese entrepreneurs and officials found very different institutions to do the work of insurance, provision of credit, or long-distance trade. Likewise, elements that might have been taken to be *sui generis* characteristics of one national experience may turn out to be widespread in many locations when we do a comparative study.

Ultimately it seems that there two fundamental intellectual reasons for being particularly interested in historical comparisons. One is the hope of discovering recurring social mechanisms and structures. This is what Charles Tilly seems to be about in his many studies of contentious politics. And the second is the hope of discovering some of the differentiating pathways that lead to significantly different outcomes in ostensibly similar social settings. The first goal serves the value of arriving at some level of generalization about social phenomena, and the second serves the goal of tracing out the fine structure of the particular.

2.2.5 New Understandings of China's Cultural Revolution

Let us consider a more current example that raises questions about the nature of history. An important area of current historical research in China has to do with arriving at a better understanding of China's Cultural Revolution. Recent research on the extent of violence during the Cultural Revolution has been one stimulus to this renewed emphasis. The prevailing assumption among China historians was that violence during the Cultural Revolution was relatively limited and incidental, rather than wide-spread and orchestrated. However, Song Yongyi, a Chinese-born American scholar and participant in the Cultural Revolution, has created a large database on the events of the Cultural Revolution, including especially an effort to document the killings and massacres that occurred during this period (Song, 2008).

Song and other contemporary researchers assert that deliberate mass killings were much more extensive during the Cultural Revolution than previous accounts have indicated. Song estimates that more than 50,000 people were killed during the purge of the Mongolian Communist Party alone, and he attributes to an internal party document a figure of 1.72 million deaths during the period of the Cultural Revolution (Song, 2008). Similarly, sociologist Yang Su carefully documents deliberate massacres in Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hubei involving thousands of innocent people (Su, 2006). So what is the truth of the matter? Was the Cultural Revolution much more violent than it has previously been understood to be?

The question is relevant to the philosophy of history because it raises important questions about historical knowledge and understanding. A vast amount has been written about the Cultural Revolution—by western scholars and by Chinese people who participated in the period or were victims of its violence. Tony Chang's 1999 annotated bibliography of documents and reference works in English includes over a thousand references (Chang, 1999), and dozens of memoirs of Red Guard cadres and victims have been published in English, including Yuan Gao's *Born Red* (Gao, 1987). We have both first-hand accounts and careful academic scholarship that document many aspects of this period of China's recent history. So in one sense, we are in a position to know a lot about this period of China's history. And China scholars have asked the "why" question as well—why did it take place? For example, Roderick MacFarquhar's multivolume history of the period, culminating in *Mao's Last Revolution*, goes into great detail about the politics that surrounded the Cultural Revolution (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, 2006).

We might want to say, then, that the history of the Cultural Revolution has been written. But as Song Yongyi demonstrates, this would be incorrect, in two ways. First, the scope of the violence and the ways in which it was perpetrated—the military and political institutions that were involved deeply in the transmission of the violence across China—these factual aspects of the period of 1966–1976 are still only partially known. And there is reason to believe that the remaining areas of ignorance are likely to substantially change our interpretation of the events. In brief, it seems likely that the scope of violence and killings is substantially greater than what historians currently believe, and the degree of deliberate political control of the instruments of disorder is greater as well. So the simple factual question, what happened? is still to be answered in many important areas. More would be known if the authorities were to make the official archives available to scholars; but this has been a highly sensitive and secretive subject since 1989. Researchers like Song have been arrested and jailed in China for their efforts to gather materials from publicly accessible sources (Rosenthal, 2000).

Even more challenging than the factual story, though, is the explanatory story. We do not yet have a good understanding of why this period of upheaval took place; what the social and political causes were, what the institutions were that facilitated or hindered the spread of disorder, and how these events aided or impeded the political agendas of powerful figures and factions in China.

So the history of the Cultural Revolution still remains to be written. Fortunately, a new generation of scholarship is emerging that promises to greatly deepen our

understanding of this period of recent Chinese history. Important new perspectives are offered in Joseph Esherick, Paul Pickowicz, and Andrew Walder's recent edited volume, *China's Cultural Revolution As History* (Esherick et al., 2006). The research presented in this volume differs from the previous generation of research in several important ways. First, it pays much more attention to the question of organized violence, as noted above. Second, it is much less concerned with formal structures of party organization, ideology, and command, and more concerned with the social realities that China experienced during this decade. Third, several scholars make a strong effort to push down into the local and regional experiences of the Cultural Revolution. For example, Xiaowai Zheng's essay on the Red Guards at Qinghua University delves into the specific local issues and strategies of contending groups of students, and she makes extensive use of oral history interviews of people who were participants in the movement at the relevant time. Yang Su makes use of recently available archives from communes and districts in the three provinces he studies, to get a more accurate understanding of the episodes of mass killing that took place in these provinces. And Jiangsui He pushes aside the rhetoric of "evil landlord" to get a better understanding of the persecution and death of one particular Shaanxi man, Ma Zhongtai, and the social and village relations that framed his political persecution. In each case we get a more granular understanding of the processes and human experiences that constituted the Cultural Revolution, and we are in a better position to be able to conceptualize and explain this large, complex historical event.

The current rethinking that is underway about China's Cultural Revolution presents us with a very real question of historical epistemology: how much can we ultimately know about a vast and important event, for which there are voluminous archival sources and surviving witnesses? Can we hope to come to a "final" and approximately true interpretation of these events? And can we learn something important about social movements and political institutions from this history?

2.3 Narratives of History

Representing history often takes the form of creating a *narrative* of events. Complicated things happen: riots occur, military coups take place, governments collapse. The happenings consist of a myriad of events and actions, many social actors, and a range of political interests and grievances. We want to know what happened; who did what; and who is responsible for the course that events took. It is one of the tasks of historians, journalists, and commentators to arrive at accounts of complicated things that answer many of these questions. And we want those accounts to be objective, truthful, and unbiased. Each account is a creative act of selection and narrative construction; the analyst has to sort out the evidence that is available to him or her and arrive at a chronology and a causal interpretation that makes sense, based on the evidence.

People sometimes imagine that history is narrative, full stop.[6] This is not the case; there certainly are important forms of historical writing that do not take the form of narrative. At least as important in much historical scholarship is what might be called "synchronic history"—research aimed at exploring the texture and interrelatedness of persons, practices, and institutions of a given time in the past. But let us consider some of the logical and pragmatic features of narrative, since there is no disputing that this is one important variety of historical representation.

What is a narrative? Most generally, it is an account of the unfolding of a series of events, along with an effort to explain how and why these processes and events came to be. A narrative is intended to provide an account of how a complex historical event unfolded and why. We want to understand the event in time. What were the contextual features that were relevant to the outcome—the settings at one or more points in time that played a role? What were the actions and choices that agents performed, and why did they take these actions rather than other possible choices? What causal processes—either social or natural—may have played a role in bringing the world to the outcome of interest? (For example, the Little Ice Age beginning in the sixteenth century pushed Europe's population into different patterns of cultivation and fishing, with major consequences for subsequent developments; (Fagan, 2000). So this natural event would play a significant role in the narrative of population change during this century.)

So a narrative seeks to provide hermeneutic understanding of the outcome—why did actors behave as they did in bringing about the outcome?—and causal explanation—what social and natural processes were acting behind the backs of the actors in bringing about the outcome? And different narratives represent different mixes of hermeneutic and causal factors. Some are primarily actor-centered and interpretive—who said what, who influenced the decisions, the reasons and motives that ultimately prevailed with the president and top national security officials. A key goal of the narrative is to clarify the reasoning, motives, and dynamics among decision-makers that led to the outcome. Other historians, treating the same topic, may give greater importance to large features of the international environment, the economic and material factors that influenced the course of affairs.

Narratives about specific momentous decisions affecting war and peace have an important feature in common: they single out a fairly brief historical moment and focus on the proximate actions and causes that created the outcome. This is an instance of "micro-history"—an effort to explain and understand an important but

[6] If there is a unifying theme to the philosophy of history in the past 15 years, it is the "linguistic turn" represented by Frank Ankersmit and others: the idea that narrative is the key distinguishing form of historical representation, and that the rhetorical and linguistic features of narrative should play a key role in the philosophy of history (Ankersmit and Kellner, 1995). On this approach, we should attempt to understand historians' writings in something like the way that we analyze literature. The approach taken in this book is one that is closer to the social sciences; my approach emphasizes the cognitive and semantic content of historical knowledge. The key issues are to be able to provide good interpretations of the causal analysis of social processes and empirically supportable interpretations of historical actors that play central roles in historical explanation.

bounded event. Is it possible to construct narratives of more extended historical processes? Certainly it is. Consider histories of World War II, the Ottoman Empire, or the Qing Dynasty. These are each large complexes including thousands of events and conditions over an extended period of time. Histories of these topics often take the form of chronologically organized presentations of occurrences and conditions, with a narrative storyline that attempts to hold these events together in a single story. There may also be an effort to break down the history topically or regionally—"War in the Pacific; North Africa; Western Europe" or "Technology; Intelligence; Supply and Industry; Command; Genocide". But for the history to take the form of a narrative, there needs to be an organized effort to weave the account into a somewhat coherent story; a series of intertwined events and conditions leading eventually to an outcome.

A crucial and unavoidable feature of narrative history is the fact of selectivity. The narrative historian is forced to make choices and selections at every stage: between "significant" and "insignificant", between "sideshow" and "main event", and between levels of description. (Is World War II better described at the level of generals and policy-makers or infantrymen and factory workers?)

It has to be acknowledged that there are often multiple truthful, unbiased narratives that can be told for a complex event. Exactly because many things happened at once, actors' motives were ambiguous, and the causal connections among events are debatable, it is possible to construct inconsistent narratives that are equally well supported by the evidence. Further, the intellectual interest that different observers bring to the happening can lead to differences in the narrative: one observer may be primarily interested in the role that different views of social justice played in the actions of the participants; another may be primarily interested in the role that social networks played, so the narrative is structured around network connections; and a third may be especially interested in the role of charismatic personalities, with a consequent structuring to the narrative. Each of these may be truthful, objective, unbiased—and inconsistent in important ways with the others. So narratives are underdetermined by the facts. And there is no such thing as an exhaustive and comprehensive telling of the story—only various tellings that emphasize one set of themes or another. That said—it is entirely possible that a given event will have provided enough factual data in the form of witness reports, government documents, YouTube videos, etc., that the main sequence of events, cast of actors and responsibility for events are unambiguous.

Another crucial feature of the genre of narrative history is the tension between structure and agency. Historians differ about where to set the balance between constraining structures and choosing agents. Partially this is a difference of opinion about the relative weight of various kinds of historical factors; but it is also a disagreement about what is interesting—choices or background conditions.

What are the criteria of success for a historical narrative? To start, there is the issue of the factual claims included in the account. A narrative of Abraham Lincoln's presidency that gets the names of the members of his cabinet wrong will not do well in critical judgment of other historians. Second, there is the overall persuasiveness and foundation in evidence of the interpretations of actions that are offered. Third,

the causal claims that the account advances will be tested for their empirical and logical foundations. If the claim is made that some aspect of Andrew Jackson's presidency was influenced by the fragility of current banking institutions, we will want to assess whether this financial feature could be judged to have this result in the circumstances.

These are criteria that relate directly to the epistemic status of the many claims that the narrative advances. In addition, it is plausible that we evaluate narratives according to non-evidentiary criteria: the coherence of the story that is told, the degree of fit between "our" interest in the historical moment and the content of the narrative, and the degree of "lean" comprehensiveness the author provides. Does the author provide enough of the right sorts of details to make the story comprehensible, without overwhelming the reader with a thicket of extraneous facts?

Some of these criteria are clearly epistemic, having to do with evidence and credibility. But others are more aesthetic and interest-based, having to do with how well the account fits our expectations and interests. And this fact seems to set a bound on the degree to which one account is objectively superior to another.

2.3.1 Selectivity: China at War

Consider a mid-range example of historical research: Stephen MacKinnon's book, *Wuhan 1938* (MacKinnon, 2008). MacKinnon offers a short account of the suffering that China experienced during the anti-Japanese war (1937–1945) through the lens of the defense of the city of Wuhan in 1938. MacKinnon focuses on the strategically and historically crucial role that Wuhan played in the unfolding of Japan's war of conquest over China. Wuhan is a tricity on the upper Yangzi, including Hankou, Hanyang, and Wuchang in close proximity at the juncture of the Han and Yangzi rivers. In 1938 it had a combined population of roughly two million, and hundreds of thousands of refugees soon crowded into the city. The location of Wuhan along the Yangzi placed the city in a central position from the point of view of Japanese war planning: capturing Wuhan would leave central China open to rapid conquest. After the rapid fall of Shanghai and other coastal cities, it was expected that Wuhan would fall quickly as well. In fact, the defense of Wuhan was much more effective than previous efforts had been, and the Chinese military was successful in delaying Japan's offensive into the interior by a crucial 10 months. When it eventually fell, Republican forces were able to fall back to Chongqing, and though the Japanese subjected the wartime capital to intensive bombing, they did not succeed in capturing the city. So the prolonged defense of Wuhan set the stage for a turning point in the Chinese resistance to Japan.

MacKinnon provides a schematic military history of the Japanese assault on Wuhan. But the book is not primarily an exercise in military history. Instead, MacKinnon gives focused attention to the civilian part of the story: the burst of journalism and political debate that took place in the city, the great expansion of social services for orphans and displaced persons, and the mobilization of students and

other young people in support of the war effort. The cultural experience of Wuhan is as important a part of the story as the military events.

The topic of Wuhan and wartime China is inherently interesting and important. But it is also valuable from the point of view of historiography. Consider the choices that a historian must face in setting out to write a history of an event of the scope of Wuhan 1938. This event is more localized and limited than "the French Revolution" or "British colonialism in South Asia." At the same time, it is far more complex and multi-stranded than events such as "the assassination of President Lincoln" or "MacArthur's decision to cross the Yalu". The Wuhan story involves millions of people, military organizations of great complexity, movements of population, rapidly changing political circumstances, the creation of dozens of newspapers, and shifts in popular culture. And the consequences of the Wuhan episode are complex and unexpected as well. So the historian is forced to decide which threads he or she will focus on; what she wants to explain; and how much of the story to attempt to tell.

Consider the wide range of questions that could be posed about this piece of China's history: What were the actions and deployments of the Japanese and Chinese military forces in the middle Yangzi region during 1938? What was the nature of the human experience of civilians in Wuhan during the period of assault, bombardment, and destruction? How did circumstances of Guomindang leadership and power relationships influence the behavior and deployment of the Chinese military? What role did Communist forces and leaders play in the defense of Wuhan? What influence did the defense of Wuhan have on later events in the conduct of the war? How was the battle of Wuhan captured in popular memory in China? What influence did this historical moment have on future developments of politics or culture?

So one could try to use available historical sources to tell a fairly straightforward factual narrative; one could give an interpretation of the actions and choices of the leaders and generals; one could attempt to reconstruct the experiences and memories of ordinary Chinese people who lived through these events; and one could offer an analysis of historical causation: X led to Y, Y had important consequences Z. The point here is a simple one: each of these approaches is a different kind of historical reasoning and presentation, and each involves a somewhat different kind of historical reconstruction. It is possible to interweave these approaches; but their foundations in evidence and reasoning are fairly distinct. So many histories of Wuhan could be written; and they might all be grounded in roughly similar bodies of historical evidence.

2.3.2 Narrative and Bias

The accusation of bias is a particularly troubling one for a historian. What we want from the historian and the journalist is easily described, though achieved with difficulty. We want an account that provides an accurate and truthful narrative of the events, based on the best available factual and historical information. We want an account that avoids the biases of the actors, including especially those of the most

powerful actors who have the greatest capacity to shape the story—the government, the military, and the major parties. We want an investigator who is able to question his or her own initial assumptions—sympathy for the underdog, patient acceptance of the government's good intentions, or whatever. And we want a narrative that provides a balanced *synthesis* of the many events of the time period into a storyline with a degree of coherence: what the major events were, what choices were made by the actors, what the motivations of the actors were, and perhaps—who acted responsibly and who acted recklessly or out of narrow self-interest.

Examples of complex events supporting multiple narratives are easily found: the taking of the Bastille, the Haymarket Square riot in Chicago, the return of Franco to Malaga, or the decision of General MacArthur to cross the Yalu River in Korea. Virtually *every* historical event is a complex happening; so the problems raised here are endemic to historical interpretation.

We can raise the question of objectivity at two locations: the investigator and the narrative. So let us begin with the narrative itself—what do we want in a good comprehensive piece of historical writing that tells this story accurately and fairly? We want an account that lays out the causes, events, and actions that made up this period of time. We want to know what organizations and leaders took what actions at what time, to call forth what organized responses. We want to know what key decisions the government made. We want to know how the prime minister and the police and military deliberated about responses to massive demonstrations. We want to know how the several occasions of mob violence against officials and offices transpired. We want to know the crucial details of the final hours of confrontation between the military and the crowd, and the degree of violence that transpired at that point.

And what do we want from the investigator of a complex happening in Bangkok, Chicago, or Madrid? We want a commitment to arriving at the most truthful account of the story possible; a commitment to considering the full range of empirical and factual evidence available; and an ability to tell the story without regard to one's antecedent affinities and loyalties. It should not be a partisan's story; rather, it should be a *factual* story, based on critical reading and assessment of the available evidence. In order to arrive at such an account, the honest reporter needs to exercise critical good sense about the sources and the interests that the conveyors of the information have: the biases of the government, the press, and the parties as they provide evidence and interpretation of the events. And we want this account to be as free as possible of the interfering influences of bias and political interest. We want an honest and comprehensive synthesis, not a one-sided spin.

Both goals are possible. The standards and values associated with both good historical writing and good journalism lead at least some investigators to exert their talents and integrity to do the best job they can to use the evidence to discover the details of the story. Not all journalists are equally committed to these standards; that is why we prefer the I. F. Stones to the Jayson Blairs of the world. But enough are committed that we have a good likelihood of sorting out the realities and responsibilities of the complex happenings that surround us through their objective, fact-based reporting.

2.3.3 History, Memory, and Narrative—Recent China

What is the relation between "history", "memory", and "narrative"? We might put these concepts into a crude map by saying that "history" is an organized and evidence-based presentation of the processes and events that have occurred for a people over an extended period of time; "memory" is the personal recollections and representations of individuals who lived through a series of events and processes; and "narratives" are the stories that historians and ordinary people weave together to make sense of the events and happenings through which a people and a person have lived. We use narratives to connect the dots of things that have happened; to identify causes and meanings within this series of events; and to select the "important" events and processes out from the ordinary and inconsequential.

If we think that "history" should be informed by the ways in which historical events were experienced by individuals, then we must also address the question of how to use the evidence of memory as a prism for attributing subjective, lived experience to the people who lived this history. If we are interested in the Great Leap Forward famine years in China in 1959–1961, for example, we need to know more than the timeline of harvest failure or the map of grain distress across China; we need to know how various groups experienced this time of hardship. And for this we need to have access to documents and interviews reporting the experience of individuals in their own words; we need to have access to memory.

A particularly valuable body of work on China's recent history is currently underway, in the form of careful use of oral histories, memoirs, and other expressions of personal memories of some of China's most dramatic chapters of its history since the 1930s. C. K. Lee and Guobin Yang have presented some excellent examples of this work in *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memory in Reform China* (Lee and Yang, 2007). The book contains research contributions that draw out important new insights into the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, the changing conditions of women, cinema, the experience of ethnic minorities, and the occurrence of violence and disorder in the past 60 years in China's history. Especially interesting are contributions by Paul Pickowicz and Guobin Yang.

In "Rural Protest Letters: Local Perspectives on the State's War on Tillers" Paul Pickowicz describes an extensive collection of interviews and private writings of a single Hebei peasant leader, Geng Xiufeng, written between the 1950s and the 1990s. Geng's writings often take the form of protest letters, addressed to leaders extending from local party officials to Chairman Mao himself. Geng also maintained a journal in which he recorded his observations of the effects of various state-directed reforms of agriculture—and the inimical effects these reforms had on peasant standard of living. Geng was a peasant activist and leader in the 1940s in support of rural cooperatives, as a practical mechanism for improving agriculture and improving local peasants' standard of living. And he turns out to be an astute and honest observer of the twists and turns of policy disaster (rapid collectivization of agriculture), corruption, and disregard of peasants' welfare by the CCP. (This latter is the meaning of Pickowicz's phrase, "the state's war on tillers.") Pickowicz

had conducted a number of interviews with Geng in the 1970s and 1980s, and was greatly surprised to learn that Geng had written dozens of protest letters and had accumulated a multi-volume memoir that chronicled many of these social observations about change in North China. The content of these writings is fascinating; but even more important is the evidence they offer of the astute abilities possessed by ordinary Chinese people in observing and criticizing the processes of change that enmeshed them. These manuscripts offer Pickowicz and the reader a window into the consciousness of some ordinary rural people as China's history enveloped them; and they make evident the fact that Chinese peasants were not mere passive instruments, but rather practical, observant, and sometimes wise thinkers about revolution and reform.

Guobin Yang's article, "'A Portrait of Martyr Jiang Qing': The Chinese Cultural Revolution on the Internet" touches the other end of the information spectrum—not handwritten letters and reflections penned in the 1950s, but over 100 contemporary websites devoted to archiving and chronicling the Cultural Revolution. There are widely divergent stories that can be told in defining the Cultural Revolution as an episode of history: an excess of leftism, a deliberate use of power by China's leaders against each other and against society, a period of social hysteria, or even "still a good idea." (The latter is the theme taken by the website incorporated into Yang's title—"A Portrait of Martyr Jiang Qing." This is one of the few publicly available websites that Yang discovered that continues to glorify Madame Mao and her fellow radicals.) Yang demonstrates that we can learn a lot about how the current generation views the Cultural Revolution—and the strands of disagreement that continue to divide opinion about its causes and meanings—by examining in detail the editorial judgments and online commentaries that accompany these online "exhibition halls".

The use of photography and cinema to represent memory—both individual and collective—is an important theme in the volume. The photographs included in the exhibitions Yang discusses often represent a "struggle" session against "class enemies," capture a particular moment in time—for example, two particular men, exposed to a particular crowd. But in its particularity a photo also emblemizes scenes that were common throughout China during the Cultural Revolution. And, presumably, it triggers very specific personal memories for individual Chinese people who lived through the Cultural Revolution, whether as victims, Red Guards, or bystanders. As David Davies notes in "Visible Zhiqing: The Visual Culture of Nostalgia among China's Zhiqing Generation" (Lee and Yang, 2007), no photograph stands wholly by itself. But some photos have the directness and honesty needed to stand for a whole dimension of historical experience—in this case, the violence and humiliation perpetrated against teachers, scholars, and officials by zealous mobs of Red Guards and their followers. In this way the photo can faithfully capture one important strand of the history of this period.

The editors have provided a particularly valuable contribution with the innovative thinking the volume provides about the nexus of experience, identity, and history. The editors and contributors are very sensitive to the fact that there is no single "Hebei experience" or "Chinese women's experience"; instead, the oral history materials permit the contributors to discern both variation and some degree of

thematicization of memory and identity. Another important contribution of the volume is the emphasis it offers to the idea of the agency involved in memory. Memories must be created; agents must find frameworks within which to understand their moments of historical experience. "As people grope for moral and cognitive frameworks to understand, assess, and sometimes resist these momentous changes in their lives, memories of the revolution thrive" (Lee and Yang, 2007, p. 1). A third and equally important thrust of the volume is the persuasive idea that memories become part of the political mobilization possibilities that exist for a group. Groups find their collective identities through shared understandings of the past; and these shared understandings provide a basis for future collective action. So memory, identity, and mobilization hang together.

2.3.4 Age Cohorts and Historical Experience

These examples from recent Chinese history raise another important point for the historian: the importance and salience of *age cohorts* within history. It is worth reflecting a bit on how absolutely tumultuous China's history has been since the Communist Revolution in 1949. The Great Leap Forward and consequent famine—1958–1960, in excess of twenty million famine deaths. The Cultural Revolution—1966–1976, in excess of 1.5 million deaths by violence, many times that number of maimed and ruined lives. The Democracy movement and Tiananmen Square and its dramatic suppression—1989, unknown thousands of victims. And since the early 1980s, economic reforms, rapid growth, and a substantial degree of social transformation.

If we consider these events in terms of age cohorts, the historical experience of almost every recent Chinese generation has been a traumatic one. Chinese men and women born in 1930 were children during the anti-Japanese war and teenagers during the Revolution, and they experienced famine, chaos, civil violence, and economic reform in the remainder of their lives. The generation born in 1950 experienced the GLF famine as children, they were the teen-aged militants in middle school who formed the Red Guards, they experienced years of rustication in the countryside in the 1970s, they returned to universities after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, they participated in or observed the tumult of Tiananmen Square as they approached their forties, and they participated in China's economic reforms in their forties and fifties. This is an astounding quantity and pace of historical change for a single cohort to experience.

The children of the 1950 generation were born in 1970. They were born in the middle of the one-child policy. These children largely escaped the violence of the Cultural Revolution. Tiananmen Square was a reality for them in their teens. Their generation has been at the center of the dynamism of entrepreneurial China, with broadened opportunities in education and business. They have some of the expertise and comfort with the Internet that allows them to bridge to the China of the twenty-first century. And their standard of living—for urban people anyway—is

dramatically improved over that of the previous generation. And of course the generation of 1990 is the youth generation of today. This is the generation that will set China's course for the next half century, and it appears to be quite different from previous cohorts.

These generations surely created vastly different mentalités for themselves—different ideas about politics, equality, morality, and social stability. The ideologies of each generation were shaped and burned by the super-heated political struggles through which they passed. And surely their thoughts about what China should become, what standards of fairness should be respected, and how they should live their lives, are very deeply affected by their generational experiences. So twentieth-century Chinese history was experienced and narrated by these cohorts in very different ways.

2.3.5 Maps and Narratives

There is an intriguing analogy between narratives and maps. Both are ways of organizing a great deal of factual knowledge about the world. Both involve selection and choice on the part of the designer. And each is itself an encapsulated form of social or historical knowledge. It is worthwhile examining the analogy briefly.

To start, it is obvious that maps are selective representations of the world. They represent an abstraction: a representation of a complex, dense reality that signifies some characteristics while deliberately ignoring other aspects. The principles of selection used by the cartographer are highly dependent on the expected interests of the user. Topography will be relevant to the hiker but not the motorist. Location of points of interest will be important to the tourist but not the long-distance trucker. Location of railroad hubs will be valued by the military planner but not the birdwatcher. So there is no such thing as a comprehensive map—one that represents all geographical details; and there is also no such thing as a truly "all-purpose" map—one that includes all the details that any user could want.

We also know that there are different schemes of representation of geography—different projections, different conventions for representing items and relationships, etc. So there is no objectively best map of a given terrain. Rather, comparing maps for adequacy, accuracy, and usefulness requires semantic and pragmatic comparison. (Here the word "semantic" is used in a specialized sense: "having to do with the reference relationship between a sign and the signified.") Semantically, we are interested in the correspondence between the map and the world. The conventions of a given cartography imply a specific set of statements about the spatial relations that actually exist among places, as well as denoting a variety of characteristics of places. So there is a perfectly natural question to ask of a given map: is it representationally accurate? This sort of assessment leads to judgments like these: This map does a more accurate job of representing driving distances than that one, given the rules of representation that each presupposes. This map errs in representing the

relative population sizes of Cleveland and Peoria. These are features that have to do with the accuracy of the correspondence between the map and the world.

The pragmatic considerations have to do with how well the representation or its underlying conventions conform to how various people want to use it. Maps are particularly dependent on pragmatic considerations. We need to assess the value of a map with respect to a set of practical interests. How well does the map convey the information about places and spatial relationships that the user will want to consult? How have the judgments about what to include and what to exclude worked out from the point of view of the user? Pragmatic considerations lead to judgments like these: this mapping convention corresponds better to the needs of the military planner or the public health official than that one. The pragmatic questions about a map have to do with a different kind of fit—fit between the features and design of the map and the practical interests of a particular set of users. Do the conventions of the given cartography correspond well to the interests that specific sets of users have in the map?

Here is the point of this discussion: are there useful analogies between the epistemology of maps and the cognitive situation of historical narratives? Several points of parallel seem particularly evident. First, narratives are selective too. It is impossible to incorporate every element of a historical event or natural process into a narrative; rather, it is necessary to select a storyline that permits us to provide a partial account of what happened. This is true for the French Revolution; but it is also true for a much more limited event, for example, the resignation of Richard Nixon.

Second, there is a parallel point about veridicality that applies to narratives and theories as much as to maps. No map stands as an isolated representation; rather, it is embedded within a set of conventions of representation. We must apply the conventions in order to discover what "assertions" are contained in the representation. So maps are in an important sense "conventional." However, given the conventions of the map, we can undertake to evaluate its accuracy. And this is true for narratives as well; we can attempt to assess the degree of approximate truth possessed by the construction. Are the statements about the nature of the events and their sequence approximately true? (Given that an account of the French Revolution singles out class interests of parties within the narrative, has the historian correctly described the economic interests of the Jacobins?)

And third, the point about the relevance of users' interests to assessment of the construction seems pertinent to narratives as well. The civil engineer who is investigating the collapse of a building will probably find a truthful analysis of the thermodynamics of the HVAC system unhelpful, even though it is true. The human rights investigator investigating police violence during a demonstration will probably become impatient at a narrative that highlights the sequence of street noises that were audible during the demonstration, rather than the descriptions and actions of the participants and groups during the relevant time.

When it comes to narratives, there is another value dimension that we want to impose on the construction: the idea of explanatory adequacy. A narrative ought to provide a basis for explaining the "how and why" of historical events; it ought to single out the circumstances and reasoning that help to explain the actions of

participants, and it ought to highlight some of the environmental circumstances that influenced the outcome. A scientific theory is intended to identify some of the fundamental causal factors that explain a puzzling phenomenon—the turbulence that occurs in a pot of water as it approaches the boiling point, for example. So when we say that a narrative is an abstraction, part of what we are getting at is the idea that the historian has deliberately excluded factors that do not make much of a difference, in order to highlight a set of factors that do make a difference.