



Education Quartet part 1

History in Peril

may parents preserve it

Alan Beattie



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES



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Preface

'History in Peril' introduces a series of four papers. The first three will be devoted to subjects in schools which are at present under threat – history itself, mathematics and English (particularly English grammar). Several themes will form recurring threads: declining standards of scholarship, questionable demands for usefulness and relevance, neglect of rigorous disciplines, easy appeals to pupils' 'creativity'.

The fourth and final part of the quartet discusses the nature and purposes of the institution in which most of us gain such understanding as we have of these subjects and disciplines: that is to say, our schools. Discussion of their character all too often takes second place to other topics of pressing concern, such as the means of funding, the advantages and disadvantages of forms of selectivity, the iniquity of 'racism' and so on. Yet these latter are and should be of less influence upon pupils during their long years of learning than, for example, the eccentricity or dedication of schoolmasters, the formation of loyalties, the tradition of success in games and examinations. It is time that what 'schools' are or ought to be, what they try to be or fail to be, come to the forefront of the debate; for they shape our lives.

DIRECTOR OF PUBLICATIONS

Introduction

Were history to follow classics in its descent from a normal part of the curriculum into a beleaguered redoubt of an esoteric minority¹ it might seem, from the standpoint of eternity, a matter of no great moment. Even from a shorter perspective there is, as Adam Smith reflected, 'a good deal of ruin in a nation'.

Although the history which we now recognise to be one of the great intellectual languages of our civilization is carried on largely within the institutions of higher education, its emergence was not wholly their doing and much important work is still carried on outside them. However hard politicians and some teachers try, history will not die, if only because no great intellectual tradition is altogether lost, and because groups such as 'amateur' local historians are hardy perennials.

But that is no reason why historians should, with world-weary stoicism, resign themselves to their fate.

The problems which beset history in the schools and the institutions of higher education are often taken to be solely the result of external pressures such as reductions in government funding and the increasing demand for the teaching of 'relevant' subjects. It is true that these pressures constitute a real threat to history; but the way that some teachers and historians have responded to them are an essential part of the story. What has happened – and is happening – is in large part rooted in the peculiar character of the British system.

Unfortunately a great deal of what goes on under the rubric of history (as enshrined for example in some aspects of the new GCSE arrangements)² is a long way removed from history properly understood. But what is history proper? Whereas mathematics is an unambiguous label, history seems to encompass divers concerns. We cannot assess the quality and implications of what goes on under the name of an education in history without saying something about its character and its place on the educational map – about what it is not, as well as what it is.

What history is not

Two approaches in history teaching are becoming ever more

widespread: 'relativism' and 'curriculum reform'.

Relativism involves the denial that historical texts are best understood as attempts to explain the past: what is substituted is the search for 'hidden bias', the importance of 'creative imagination' (especially on the part of the pupil) and the near impossibility of establishing what 'the facts' are. In this way, texts and sources can be read in ways which fit them for the needs of the pupil rather than introducing the pupil to the intellectual place of the author of the text. The National Criteria for the new GCSE examination include the following aims:

2. 2. To promote the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of human activity in the past, linking it, as appropriate, with the present; . . .
2. 7. To provide a sound basis for further study and the pursuit of personal interest.³

The implications of this are spelt out in a recent authoritative guide :

Some of the questions. . . [begin] with easy sub-questions and [end] with more difficult ones. For example:

(a) List the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

(b) To what extent do you think that Germany was fairly treated by the terms of this settlement?

The first part. . . just asks for a list of terms, so. . . you might be able to answer it without a great deal of thought. The second part. . . is much more demanding. . . [it is a quite] difficult skill.⁴

Since moralising is 'difficult', it deserves more marks. On the assumption that the second kind of question is addressed to the more able pupils, it will have the effect of inducing those most likely to continue with historical studies to believe that such moralising is central to the work of the historian. If God is not the examiner, how will such judgements be assessed?

Lest this sort of thing is insufficient to free the pupil from concentrating on 'easy' questions of factual knowledge, 'empathy' is invoked as reinforcement. The National Criteria introduce this idea in a promising way:

. . . show an ability to look at events and issues from the perspective of people in the past.

The gloss, however, introduces a particular emphasis on what this ability involves. On the question of what Russian peasant soldiers during the first world war thought about Russia's system of land ownership, candidates are first advised to *infer* these views from 'background information' such as conditions at the front, and then encouraged to invoke their imagination:

How *might* these peasant soldiers have felt when they heard that the Tsar had abdicated?. . . What fears *might* they have had for the future?. . . All the time you are studying history you should be using your imagination *in this way*. . .⁵

Perhaps the judges of the Booker prize are to join God as GCSE examiners?

Some 'curriculum reforms' achieve the same result by changing the nature of the texts while retaining the label 'history'. Thus, emphasising the importance of relevance to current events directs attention to areas (such as the present Middle Eastern situation) on which historical scholarship is necessarily silent. This turns history into 'politics' or 'current affairs', and the pretence of introducing pupils to historical enquiry is dropped: history is simply redefined as whatever is in today's newspapers.

What history is

There is a wide variety of things that people *can* take to be history: it includes discussing their medical experiences, collecting Victoriana, tracing their family tree, comparing Mrs Thatcher with Disraeli, avowing that it is something 'they never liked at school', deploring it as a burden on present economic performance, and disputing when a particular document was written and by whom. This variety at least suggests that history 'has something to do with the past'.

Our interest in interpreting the past can be of different kinds. For example, we may want to know how it affected us: 'how did we arrive where we are?' Or we may want to read

lessons into the past, or use it as a testing-ground for the construction of general social laws: 'can we learn from our mistakes?'

The past is, of course, independent of us; it has happened, it is dead, and only Doctor Who can change it. But what we know (or think we know) about the past is an interpretation; we have to reconstruct it, remember it, be taught about it. Our interpretations may be disputed by others, and then we have to defend our account against theirs. But it is *this* approach, that is the reconstruction of the past for its own sake in the light of the evidence available to us, which characterises history as an important intellectual discipline in its own right, and best describes the practice of professional historians.

It is true that many who are regarded as historians have been concerned with starting from the present and asking how we have arrived here, or with drawing 'lessons from history' and applying them to the present or the future. It is equally true that these concerns would be regarded by many as more interesting or useful than the study of the past for its own sake. But the past regarded for its own sake, rather than a source of lessons or a prelude to our current affairs, has two advantages as a principal candidate for the label 'history'. First, it draws our attention to the change in approaches to the past which became clearly recognisable in nineteenth century Europe. Examining the entrails for the portents of the future is an age-old human activity, as is the nostalgia or personal security involved in looking at the past from the standpoint of the present. What constitutes a significant intellectual adventure of modern times is the emergence of history as a discipline distinct from these activities. To fail to recognise this sort of history as essential to the history curriculum (or, worse, to denigrate it) is to deny ourselves an appreciation of a great modern intellectual adventure.

Second, the reconstruction of the past for its own sake is the most accurate construction of what goes on, for the most part, in the history departments of higher education and the columns of the learned journals. To teach history without inculcating this fact is to fail to help pupils make sense of many of the sources and texts which they are required to read.

What do historians do?

History is the study of the past for its own sake: but how do historians proceed to do this?

History concerns itself with change over time, and *chronology* is therefore central to it: that one thing happened before another is the starting point. The importance of chronology and change over time implies two central characteristics of historical accounts. The first is that it is the viewpoint of past actors, not our own, that we are trying to present. Often, the fact that we have hindsight – that we now know what the outcome was – is a handicap rather than an advantage in reconstructing the past. We can see that the participants often had erroneous views about how things were, and our hindsight sometimes enables us to see why their enterprises failed, or turned out differently from what they had intended. But the outcome which we now know lay, for the participants, in the future. Historians have to take into account the fact that the participants were ignorant or uncertain of the outcome. Chronology requires that we treat them as they thought and behaved: hindsight does not permit us to confuse before and after.

Hindsight knowledge of outcomes is a poor guide in helping us in the crucial area of what the contemporary actors were trying to do. Our picture of their intentions has to be a picture of their world as they saw it; here, the intrusion of our own contemporary attitudes can be misleading. Chronology again requires that we recognise that the past precedes the present, and that past ideas need not resemble those of the present. The danger here is anachronism. History depends upon avoiding the imputation of views to one time which were present only in later or earlier times.

The second implication of chronology concerns the use of evidence. Here, the important distinction is between primary and secondary sources, between what was written and done then and what has been said about it since. Secondary sources later include accounts by historians themselves, but in historians' accounts primary evidence plays a central role. The evidence for a

chronological account of what happened and of what contemporary actors were trying to do is various: archaeology, documentation, oral recollections and so on. The evidence is precarious. What looks like a letter written in 1645 may turn out to be of a different date, or even a forgery. Even if genuine and accurately dated, we may still need to know more: why was it written? who read it? is it representative of wider opinion? The emphasis on primary sources is often a frustrating limitation on what historians may justifiably say; their scepticism about myth, legend, and the reliability of non-contemporary accounts – indeed all accounts – may reduce the range of acceptable evidence. Primary evidence is what has survived, and this survival is, for the most part, beyond the control of the historian: of necessity, he is ignorant about what has *not* survived.

Whatever the difficulties involved in discovering and assessing the evidence, its use by historians reveals a central characteristic of their practice: that history is ultimately the pursuit of detail. This means that history is not the application of general theories to particular questions; it is not 'applied science'. The answer to the question 'What was the local impact of the English Civil War?' is tackled not by 'applying' general theories about civil war (such as they are) but by examining the evidence about events in particular areas. Such evidence may be scarce and difficult to assess; but the direction of the enquiry is always towards finding more of it and establishing a satisfactory interpretation of what there is. The absence of satisfactory evidence constitutes, for the historian, a failure which cannot be adequately compensated by substituting conjectures or invoking general theories. History is not about what might have happened, or what we would prefer to have happened, or what 'must' have happened: it is about what *did* happen. An account of what happened has to be based on the evidence, and familiarity with the evidence and a willingness to be limited by it is what enables historians to recognise each other despite their disagreements.

Historians do, of course, make generalisations; but it is important to recognise their character. In the first place, their generalisations are trends, not laws. Historians' generalisations are statistical in the simple sense that they are summaries of a number of past events. They do not say: 'If war occurs, then

expenditure on social reform will increase'. They ask, rather, such questions as: 'Was there more social reform legislation in Britain between 1914 and 1918 than between 1906 and 1914'? In posing this question, their interest is not in confirming or refuting universal laws about the relationship between war and reform (which is what would interest the social scientist), but in learning more about Britain during the First World War or, more widely, about the impact of the war on social reform in Britain (as opposed to anywhere else).

Even when historians are making simple statistical generalisations, they are part of a practice, a community of historians, who will subject the generalisations to the evidence so as to particularise and to show how the general may conceal important differences.

An eminent historian has classified his colleagues into 'lumpers' and 'splitters'.⁶ 'Lumpers' are those whose interests lie in aggregating discrete facts or cases into general trends. 'Splitters' are suspicious of generalisations, eager to dissolve them into discrete, awkward, differences.

The logic of historical enquiry is necessarily a dialogue between 'lumpers' and 'splitters', between the desire to encompass the evidence within a wider, coherent, picture, and the desire to undermine the coherence by pointing to evidence which does not fit. 'Splitting', however, is ultimately more typical of historical enquiry. The concentration on detail is what most clearly distinguishes history from scientific theory (including social science); and 'lumping' generalisations are (because they are ultimately statistical – concerned with trends) based on the particular results of 'splitting' research.

History: disagreements and 'bias'

The belief that history is not a rigorous intellectual discipline arises not only from its practitioners' inability (unlike those of physics) clearly to show its impact on the world about us, but also from the fact that the best of historians often disagree about what happened in the past, or about how best to explain it. Moreover, it is sometimes possible to associate these disagreements with the political or moral positions of the historians involved. These observations lend plausibility to the current vogue for 'bias-spotting' and the reduction of historical scholarship to mere matters of opinion. This vogue does not distinguish between two views of history, only one of which helps us to understand it. It is helpful to be reminded that moral judgement is not the province of the historian. If he thinks that 'Ramsay MacDonald was a traitor to his party', he tells us something about himself, but nothing about MacDonald. The insidious view is that it is impossible for historians to escape from their moral or ideological blinkers, so that 'hunt the hidden agenda' becomes a substitute for the careful scrutiny of how historians debate their accounts. The indeterminacy of history also fuels the demand for 'more readable history': if historical knowledge is so insecure, why should it be so often written in a way which the 'ordinary reader' cannot understand? Why not leave the writing of history to those with the skill to write exciting tales?

Although these arguments might have to be taken more seriously if they more often came from people familiar with the appropriate disciplines (including the character of modern scientific disputes) they obviously raise important questions.

History does not have, and cannot have, the determinacy of science. But a significant part of the scepticism about history as a serious discipline arises from a combination of exaggeration and confusion. The exaggeration consists in concentrating on individual historians who display the alleged defects, while ignoring the rest; the confusion lies in mistaking the work of any particular historian for the process of historical debate itself.

History (like any other discipline) is characterised by the public criteria implicit in the way its debates are conducted rather than by the psychology or motives of the individual participants.

These criteria can be illustrated by looking at two disputes which at first sight seem likely to be affected by either 'bias' or shaky 'law-like' assumptions. The first concerns some reactions to E. P. Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters*, the second the 'cliometric' wizardry of *Time on the Cross*.⁷

Thompson is an avowed marxist, and his book is devoted to showing that in the matter of the Black Act of 1723, British political leaders (and Robert Walpole in particular) were motivated by economic self-interest, and that the impact of such legislation on those coerced by it was sufficiently harsh to cast doubt on the reality of 'liberty and equality under the law' as hallmarks of eighteenth century England. It is likely that Thompson's marxism explains his choice of subject, and possible that his account confirms what he had expected to find (although it is also possible that he embraced marxism as a result of what he learned as an historian). In addition, many of his critics are avowedly non-marxist. Yet the disagreement about Thompson's account (whether or not *prompted* by these differences) develops into a characteristically historical form: the argument is about the quality of the evidence. Anyone attending only to the *process* of the argument, and ignorant of the political stances of the participants, would not necessarily be able to infer the latter from the former.⁸

The practitioners of cliometrics are associated with that prime example of 'social science', counterfactual history. All history is written on the assumption that something else could have happened; counterfactual history may go further by giving an account of what *would* have happened if various conditions had been different. To do this, some sort of law-like causal theory has to be employed. Cliometricians also employ a battery of mathematical and statistical techniques, of a kind often associated with scientific rather than historical disciplines, to support their accounts of what happened and 'what would have happened if . . .'

But they often misunderstand their new enterprises. Although universal laws are not the coinage of history, the use of statistical techniques (where possible and appropriate) is merely an extension of the search for trends: it is an example of 'lumping'. In estimating, for example, the effects of the First World War on

British life in the post-war period, one important consideration is the number of those who died in the war, their age, occupation and so on. Information about this can be significantly improved by statistical techniques, and these techniques are not made unimportant or inappropriate by the fact that they do not or cannot answer *all* the questions we might wish to raise. Moreover, the most important questions addressed by *Time on the Cross* do not involve the telling of an 'alternative', purely counterfactual, story. Rather, they involve examining the evidence about whether North American slavery on the eve of the Civil War was inefficient and declining in profitability, whether slaves were lazy, whether slaves (and slave-owners) were sexually promiscuous, and whether the material condition of former slaves was improved in *post bellum* conditions.

If the evidence of *Time on the Cross* stands up, it undermines the view that slavery declined or was abolished because of its declining profitability, and that abolition improved the material position of former slaves. Of course, the evidence can be queried, and different questions posed ('what did contemporaries *think* about the situation?'). But the questions of *Time on the Cross* itself are addressed to what was the case at a particular time in the past. Whatever the ingenuity and plausibility of the evidence employed, the questions display no 'application of universal laws', no 'bias': they are the staple, time-bound, diet of recognisable history. In all of this, the question of whether the work is acceptable as history is independent of the motives and origins of the authors, and its likelihood of truth is independent of whether the evidence is intelligible to 'the layman'.

It is sometimes suggested that agreement by others is a proper criterion of history. But historians are not to be understood through a 'poll' which measures their agreement on particular conclusions, because history is not simply a collection of conclusions by individual historians. It is, rather, a procedure of argument between members of a common practice. The practitioners are engaged in the construction of non-anachronistic narratives based on detailed primary evidence. They often agree on which areas lack sufficient evidence to warrant confident conclusions, and on what sort of evidence would be required to settle their disagreements.

The activity of understanding history involves a knowledge of the texts which show historians at work, and of the concrete terms in which historians operating in the same area resolve (or fail to resolve) their differences. This depth and comparison has nothing to do with a priori searches for 'bias', or with woolly and abstract talk of 'methodology', or with the assumption that those who are ignorant of these details and these processes 'have a right to their own opinions' (however 'creative' such opinions may be).

The fact that 'the layman' is not in a position intuitively or immediately to form a worthwhile opinion about competing historical accounts is merely a consequence of history being a language of explanation: he is in the same position with respect to science. That history is commonly supposed to take a form which is linguistically more comprehensible than science is a case for emphasising its accessibility to those who wish to learn: it is not a basis for believing that there is nothing to learn, or that 'everyman [is] his own historian'.

What kind of history?

Once upon a time, most British children were introduced to history by looking at the British past; any wider picture (Europe, the Americas, the Empire and so on) was shaped by this starting point. There was little enthusiasm for the study of 'recent history' – especially the study of the contemporary world. Political history ('Kings and Queens and diplomacy') was a principal concern. The emphasis has now shifted away from this 'ethnocentric', 'remote' and political approach to encompassing the study of communities independently of their part in the British story. At the same time, recent events are now widely taught, and economic and (especially) social history bids to replace concentration on the political. Few of these changes are the result of considerations relevant to an education in history.

Historical study or teaching requires the choice of an aspect: no one can cover everything. We thus divide up history into periods or topics. Eighteenth century Europe, women, trade unions, transport, medicine, prime ministers and the potato are all (like any other human activity) legitimate subjects for historical treatment. From the standpoint of historical explanation, it does not matter why we choose one aspect rather than another. We may start from a general belief (that railways were central to Victorian life), or a current debate (provoking an interest in the role of women in the past), or from nostalgia (were 'the good old days' really so good?) or from any of an infinite number of motivations. What matters, however, is what happens *after* the aspect is chosen.

Suitability of a subject depends entirely upon the historical criteria of quality of evidence and susceptibility to detailed, chronological narrative. When introducing pupils to history, some topics will be ruled out by the absence of sufficient evidence, and these will include most 'current affairs'. Distance in time does not necessarily lend enchantment to the view, but it does allow the establishment of a body of serious historical knowledge and debate. Where this base is lacking, no amount of argument about the therapeutic effects of, or self-knowledge gained through, (for example) black studies or peace studies is

relevant to the merit of the topic as an introduction to what historians do. There is a rich, available literature on those British-based aspects which were once the main vehicles of an introduction to history; this foundation is often lacking in what has replaced them. For the most part, these changes in the curriculum have occurred for reasons other than their suitability for historical treatment; but those who wish education to further causes such as self-fulfilment or the creation of a multicultural society might be asked to do so under banners other than history.

The importance of emotional detachment also makes it important to be cautious about choosing topics in particular circumstances. There are many professional historians who are successful in treating historically topics which they originally chose because of emotional or personal involvement; but the case is different if we select currently highly-controversial topics as a vehicle for introducing history to children. They may well 'stimulate lively debate' (or even cause riots): but they distract attention from the *historical* character of the explanation which is being offered.

Construction of syllabuses

Much of the modern interest in social (rather than political) history arises not from the legitimate view that social history can be written, but from its potential use as a source of 'lessons for the present', reminders of 'past exploitation' or 'a field for testing theories'. In order to serve such purposes, the past has to be treated in an unhistorical manner, and aspects chosen for reasons other than suitability to historical enquiry (such as that children can 'identify' more easily with 'ordinary' people like the Tolpuddle Martyrs than with 'remote' figures like Frederick the Great). Again, such an education may well generate righteous indignation, a sense of belonging, a motive for altruistic action; but it cannot introduce anybody to history.

We ought to be suspicious of syllabus changes which occur in response to general theories about how societies work, because historians, as such, have no competence to judge their merits. Whatever part general theories may play in the historian's original choice of an aspect, they are irrelevant to defending the place of that aspect in the curriculum. An education in history requires that whatever is taught is taught with an eye to

reconstructing the past and on the basis of sources of a quality sufficient to illustrate what historical accounts are like. It is quite possible to defend the teaching of social history (for example) on the grounds that it meets these requirements. But this is not always the criterion invoked; other explanations for the emphasis on social history include the requirements of political ideology (such as 'the primacy of economic and social forces'). Such ideological considerations are irrelevant to the question of whether a particular aspect can be treated historically; but they will inevitably arise when different aspects and subjects are competing for a place in the curriculum. At this point, the authority of the teacher of history has ended.

He has no more authority (*qua* teacher or historian) to decide the weight to be given to different but equally respectable aspects than (say) have parents or politicians. To the extent that what is taught as history has been changed in pursuit of 'wider social ends', and to the extent that ideological preferences have shaped the character of the history curriculum, then to that extent have teachers exceeded their authority. On these questions, teachers and historians are (or should be) merely one element in a debate in which there is a wider public interest. They have no special, privileged status.

History and the educational system

History is an intellectual language, but it is taught in educational institutions, and these institutions are subject to external social pressures. We might imagine, therefore, that the threats to history as a subject, and some of the strange things that are done in its name, are the result of these pressures. Are not financial constraints, economic needs and changing public attitudes a major explanation of the situation? In the main, they are not: the present circumstances have been generated mainly by developments within educational institutions.

It is true that recent British governments have believed that 'relevance' – especially contribution to economic growth – is the main test of the educational system; history is one of the subjects prone to fall foul of the belief. But the will or ability of British central government to play an active role in shaping the content of the curriculum is a new phenomenon whereas the developments we have considered are long-standing. Governments have usually confined themselves to providing overall budgetary constraints and reorganising the system in the direction of 'social justice'. Financial constraints have not in the past produced a shortage of history teachers, and while 'social justice' might 'require' the virtual abolition of the grammar schools, it did not extend to instructing comprehensive schools to teach (say) more physics and less history.

British education has been remarkably free from direct government (especially central government) control. The power of universities, teachers, teachers' unions, examining boards and educational 'experts' in deciding what is taught made the British system into something resembling a rare example of workers' control.

One consequence of limited central control and the self-governing pluralism of British education is that it is somewhat misleading to speak of a 'state system'. Paradoxically, similarities of syllabus, ethos and organisation are more evident among the major public schools than within the universe of state institutions. In the latter, such consistency as there is emerges from the dwindling inheritance of older attitudes to education.

Otherwise, educational practice is the varying resultant of the role of teachers, regional examining boards, universities, the political complexion of local education authorities, the foibles of educational administrators, and the social composition of particular areas.

The role of the universities is an instructive guide to the pluralism of British education. Themselves (until very recently) a prime example of almost unfettered self-government, they affected the school curriculum mainly via faculty admission requirements. In this respect, their influence on the character of education at the earlier stages has often (and often rightly) been regarded as an obstacle to improvement. But the limitations of this influence, particularly in the area of history, are clear. The majority of children are not taught with a view to their entering higher education; the universities have increasingly withdrawn from any significant role on examination boards (thus reducing their influence over the content of the school curriculum); and individual faculty admissions requirements do not collectively amount to any significant control over their own future. For example, history departments (among others) are free to insist on proficiency in a foreign language as a condition of entry; but such departments have no control over foreign language teaching in schools, and the decline of such teaching reduces the number of applicants – unless, of course, the language requirement is dropped.

The pluralism of the system means that changes in content and methods of teaching are seldom uniform across the country; the damaging effects are usually most evident in large urban areas. Moreover, these effects on the curriculum in general and on history in particular have been the result neither of conscious central government 'planning' nor collusion between sinister interests: they are the unintended by-product of the interaction of various developments within an essentially undirected 'system'.

The teacher's proper task

What makes 'a good teacher', or what should be taught, are contestable questions. But the stimulation of an interest in history may be supposed to depend even more on teacher-pupil relationships than in those subjects where the subject matter is either more 'cut and dried' or more dependent on innate

apptitude. There are a number of ways in which a simple concern with classroom teaching has been eroded, and a number of reasons why what goes on in the name of history looks strange.

Teachers are influenced by, among other things, the climate of 'expert' or 'advanced' educational opinion and by career prospects. This opinion works, not so much by direct edicts about the curriculum as by the inculcation of assumptions about the nature and purposes of education. Teachers are relatively free to indulge in exposure to this opinion, since they themselves are assumed to be a species of expert, and outside 'interference' tends to be represented as a threat to 'academic freedom'. Academic freedom might be thought to involve such things as effective barriers to political control, and the definition of what is to count as an 'academic' question. More often, however, it is conceived as a licence to those within the educational system to surrender themselves to whatever current fashion is in the air.

'Advanced' opinion tends to emphasise the virtues of creativity in pupils, the importance of 'self-discovery' (bringing out 'whatever talents are there'), taking an interest in life outside the classroom (including the lives of the pupils), and the superiority of co-operation and equality over competition and qualitative rankings. From this standpoint, rigid structures and traditional formal examinations are an obstacle (to the reformer) and a burden (to the child). Much effort is devoted to trying to make school 'fun', and avoiding that which might appear 'boring' (either to the teacher or to the pupil or to both). Most serious subjects present a problem in this context. In some cases (such as languages) the early stages of learning involve the imbibing of information the point of which the pupil cannot, of necessity, see. In others (such as history) what is taught is partly a series of facts. Since there *are* facts, knowledge of them can be tested as right or wrong, and performances in these tests will differ.

No one would strive to make education intrinsically boring or difficult; but it is sometimes, if the subject is worthwhile, inevitably both. History – being essentially a detailed factual story – has none of the theoretical delights of mathematics to offer, and (in its early stages) is eminently appropriate for formal testing of knowledge. Those who emphasise creativity, and are hostile to the divisive nature of objective testing, are likely to be either hostile to history or to try to turn it into something else by

injecting into it an element of 'debate' or 'opinion': thus history gets turned into politics or current affairs.

But, whatever the allegedly superior interest of subjects like political studies, they have (compared with history) a number of serious educational flaws. One is that they involve no introduction to an intellectual discipline. Political studies, for example, has a subject-matter (uncertain though it is); but it has no explanatory language of its own. Insofar as its conclusions are anything more than articulate opinions they rely on disciplines such as social science, philosophy and history. The subject of politics has come to rival history in the secondary schools mainly because success is thought to be easier, because it generates lively classroom discussions, and because it requires no mastery of any discipline on the part of those who teach it. Those who have studied history can claim to *know* something about (for example) the reign of Louis XIV, or the industrial revolution, or the origins of the Second World War. What, by contrast, is *known*, after exposure to politics, which could not be found in the public media?

The assumption that a subject is popular with students because it is 'easy' (or allows the free play of opinions, or requires no mastery) is very doubtfully true. Getting things right and acquiring knowledge is an important educational step; one which, incidentally, is a source of satisfaction when the accolade of success is conferred after competition and according to impartial tests. History from this standpoint is eminently suitable as a discipline, and it is no service to those who could appreciate it to divert them to more fashionable but less rigorous subjects.

Teachers are expected not only to teach; they are also often expected to play (and sometimes gladly embrace) the parts of priest, social worker and friend. Doing more than 'mere teaching' is encouraged by some aspects of the career structure: most promotions within the teaching profession involve taking on 'pastoral' duties. Further, advanced opinion denies that 'getting on' should depend on the results of teaching. Quality of teaching is (it may be argued) impossible to assess; or, if pupil performance is the test, this may be kept secret, or frowned upon as measured by divisive tests, or derided as 'learning by rote'. There are, however, other ladders. One is to become an authority on

'curriculum reform', another is to become an administrator. Curriculum reform can be turned into a full-time occupation. Interest in it may be seen as evidence of intellectual activity, and encouraged because it demonstrates that the school or the profession or the local education authority is open to new ideas. Much of the 'reform' consists not, say, in fostering refresher courses which keep teachers abreast of intellectual developments in their subject (so improving the quality of their classroom performance) but in introducing new subjects or new examinations, or changing the content of established subjects. The emphasis is necessarily on the new, and involves the creation of a profession much devoted to pulling up plants by the roots to see how they are growing. The fluidity and uncertainty thus introduced bodes ill for a subject like history: whatever else it may be, history is not new. There is a consequent temptation to improve the image of the subject by emphasising its relevance to current social concerns, its role as a vehicle for 'creative imagination', and its awareness of 'new methodologies'. Whatever real intellectual improvements emerge from all this (such as an interest in local history or the careful attention to the uses of different kinds of evidence) are often limited in their effects by inadequate physical resources, inadequate teaching, or the imposition of yet more complicated tasks on already overworked teachers. Much is sacrificed to the gods of change and fashion. Syllabus reform becomes the tail that wags the classroom dog. The combination of the widening of teachers' roles and the kaleidoscopic fluidity of syllabus reform lead to the devotion of more resources to school administration. The school becomes a highly complex and unpredictable institution within which teaching and administration are increasingly difficult to combine: a profession of school administrators has to be created. The quality of teaching (and of the life of the teacher) suffers, and promotion increasingly depends on getting out of the classroom and into the office or the committee, or onto the new course. Good teachers are paid to leave the classroom; no one is paid more to stay in it.

History and the politicians

Direct attempts by government both local and central to control the syllabus and what goes on in the classroom are fairly recent. These interventions have fluctuating and sometimes incompatible aims, but common to them all is the desire to make the system more responsive to 'public needs' and 'social relevance'. On the one hand, 'progressives' urge the importance of educational change in opposing such evils as racial and sexual discrimination; on the other, 'practical men' bewail the (alleged) traditional indifference of British education to the technological requirements of modern industrial society. There is money to be made from responding to one or other of the sirens, and there are historians who support the idea that history can, indeed, be made relevant.⁹

What characterises history, however, as a modern intellectual discipline is precisely its escape from the idea that history can act as a guide to the future. The implausibility of relying on historians as soothsayers can be illustrated in two ways. First: economics is the social science which has, more than any other, devoted itself to discovering laws in terms of which testable predictions can be made. Given that the scientific rigour of economics has, for the most part, failed to foretell the future, why should history (which has quite different concerns) be expected to do it better? Second: adopt the following recipe. Take a historian who believes that history helps in foretelling the future, or that it makes us wise. Examine the predictions which he has made, or the political advice which he has given. Compare the prediction with the eventual outcome, or the advice with your own conception of wisdom. Adjust expectations of history accordingly.

The representation of history as a guide to statesmen is not likely to be effective even as a persuasive move. Most statesmen do not believe it, and those who do are either uninfluential or unlikely to be fooled for long. Even given any such temporary success the cost would be high: it would require leaving the archives and the classroom for the 'think-tank'. History will do best by representing itself for what it is.

So far, the 'progressives' have had the best of it, for the position is not that history is being replaced by useful, technologically relevant, 'difficult' and 'unbiased' subjects. On the contrary, mathematics and the sciences are in an even more parlous state, and languages have been even more adversely affected than history. The growth of sociology, politics, and 'current affairs', and the high proportion of school-leavers who have no qualifications of any kind are more revealing as an indication of what has gone on than any illusory conversion to relevance.

However, in central government at least, the 'practical men' are currently in the saddle. Given the political complexion of governments since 1979, there is at first sight something odd in the spectacle of libertarian rhetoricians expanding the frontiers of the state by increasing their control over education. The rhetoric is, in fact, populist rather than libertarian: the argument is that politicians have an obligation to represent the legitimate interests of the public in the content and administration of education, and central government is (at least in this respect) more representative than local government.

The idea that this intervention should be supported because it rescues history proper from the careless hands of the established 'educators' is an illusion. The intervention signals the transfer of control from the progressives to the practical men. If the former have tried to empty history of much of its intellectual content, the latter are likely to be hostile to history as such. Moreover, the transfer represents the extension of the 'relevance' criterion into the universities, who have hitherto enjoyed more freedom from public scrutiny than any other area of education. Thus, university historians, already fearful of the effects on them of the decline of history in secondary education, now face the prospect of having to justify their own pursuits. Is the idea of the university as the guardian of the community's intellectual capital, with history as one of its greatest assets, likely to impress those who have the influence and power to determine their future? Those who doubt this, and foresee a consequent 'barbaric' invasion of practical men, must however answer the following reasonable question. Why should any institution dependent on public funds claim an immunity from direction, or even scrutiny, by governments representing the taxpayer? Are they not obliged

to persuade the government that they provide value for money, and are indeed, in some sense, 'relevant'?

History and economic growth

There is, in fact, no right to freedom from public or governmental scrutiny under these conditions. But before examining the conditions more closely, we need to look further at the doctrine of relevance itself. Politicians acting under its influence are claiming that intellectual enquiry and teaching, carried on in state-sponsored institutions, should be judged and rewarded according to either or both of two criteria. The first is that it should promote the general material welfare (for example, by improving technological skills in the community); the second is that it should promote ideals of social justice. It is obvious that subjects such as computer studies, business studies, and the natural sciences are likely to do well under the first criterion. It is also easy to see that those catering for the needs of 'disadvantaged' groups, or promoting such things as peace studies, might find favour under the second. History, however, owes part of its intellectual identity to the fact that it is not science, and can serve social justice only by abandoning its concern with the past for its own sake. It is unlikely, therefore, to meet either criterion. However, governmental involvement with the vogue for technology and the pursuit of social justice raises important questions.

Technology is the star of that long-running British show 'Economic Growth'. The libretto, briefly summarised, runs as follows.¹⁰ Economic growth depends on technical progress, and technical progress depends on the educational system. In Britain, both politicians and pedagogues have been insufficiently interested in industry, science and (especially) technology. Both prefer 'the arts' to the sciences, producing people who are familiar with the date of the Norman Conquest but not with the second law of thermodynamics. Politicians have preferred immediate expenditure on social welfare at the expense of the industrial base which is the sole source of future wealth and welfare. What is required is a radical change in attitudes to education, and the investment of more resources in education relevant to industrial needs. Such investment requires governmental direction.

Each element in this script can be queried. Is there a necessary correlation between expenditure on technical education and economic growth? Has Britain favoured 'the arts' at the expense of the sciences? Is there a necessary conflict between the arts and the sciences? Is welfare expenditure necessarily incurred at the expense of education or growth? However, for our purposes the interest lies in the final assumption: that the desired educational changes require government action. This is an assumption which finds favour with a wider audience than that of businessmen understandably eager to shift the expense of 'industrial training' onto the taxpayer.

Here, it is not enough to show that private or voluntary effort in education would fall short of some desired ideal; what needs to be shown is that British governments, given the way they operate, *would do better*. It is not obvious that governments (as actually organised) are more responsive to 'the popular will' than to the teachers' lobby. In Britain, at least, state control of education has resulted in more power for those working in education rather than for parents or voters. And even if 'populist' elements were strengthened, 'the people' might not support change of the 'right' (i.e. relevant) sort. Moreover, one should be suspicious of the idea that there *is* an agreed view about education, waiting to be implemented. There may, once, have been general agreement about the content of a desirable education, and about how things should be organised and taught. If so, it no longer exists: the debate now resembles Babel more than consensus.

An interesting aspect of all this is the assumption that education (like health) is a special case. People are said to 'need' education: but they also 'need' shoes and food, and few suggest that this requires governmental ownership or even control of Dolcis and Waitrose.

There are, of course, well-established reasons why education has come to possess this special status. The first is the idea that education confers benefits not only on those who are educated, but on the community as a whole: engineering qualifications (for example) benefit those who obtain them, but the consequent industrial growth facilitated by the contribution of engineers makes us all better off. On the assumption that

private (market) or voluntary education could not take account of these wider benefits, the state has to step in to secure them. The calculation and assessment of these wider benefits is a quagmire even for economists,¹¹ but problems remain even if the existence of these benefits is conceded.

First, it has once again to be assumed that governments can and will act to promote these wider gains, rather than using their power to favour special interests. Second, the existence of communal benefits does not entail the *present* system of educational finance. Some sorts of education confer considerable monetary benefits on those who receive them; why should the taxpayer offer a subsidy approaching 100% to such individuals? Consider the present situation in higher education. If the government promotes 'relevant' subjects at the expense of (say) history, it does so by subsidising those subjects. If the government decides that X% more 'relevant' students are 'needed', it can virtually guarantee to attract that number by setting the subsidy at the appropriate level, and by reducing the number of places in history. This will be represented by the government as success in meeting the demand for relevance. But where does the 'demand' come from? Not from the taxpayer (who is not directly consulted) and not from the market. It cannot come from the market, because the subsidy system prevents any comparison by students of what they would have to pay for their education without the subsidy, and the gains they would receive (in terms of future earnings and so on) from the education. To put it a different way, there is something odd about a situation in which the government simultaneously identifies a 'demand' for 'relevant' subjects and bemoans the fact that British engineers are paid too little relative to lawyers. If the market needs engineers more than lawyers, why is this not reflected in relative earnings?

The present situation is one in which a government ostensibly committed to the sovereignty of market forces proposes to subsidise 'relevance' in a way which prevents entrants to education from making market-based calculations, and substitutes its own assessment of the educational product for market criteria. It may be that both the electorate and the market would, if invoked, prefer to switch resources out of subjects such as history; but we do not know this, and at present we have no clear way of finding out. Historians may be forgiven for thinking

that what is going on at present is a conjuring trick: the government is inventing a demand which it is then in a position forcibly to satisfy.

There is, of course, a possible source of this alleged demand for relevance in the government itself: 'the government knows best'. Education, in particular, has characteristics which make it especially vulnerable to paternalism. The first is that the purpose of education is (to some) to *change* tastes and attitudes rather than to cater for the ones that already exist. Children, being uneducated, are necessarily unable to decide whether education is good for them. It is not obvious, however, why this argument should be applied beyond the plausible case of children. It seems dangerous to argue that, insofar as students (or the public at large) prefer English or history or Fine Arts to engineering, it is the government's business to 'educate' them out of such misguided preferences. It seems preferable to operate on the basis that only children should be treated as children.

A second characteristic of education – and a basis of opposition to the idea of subjecting education to market forces – is that insofar as children are 'the consumers', it is parents (rather than children themselves) who would make the choices. This raises the possibility that parents might act in their own, rather than their children's interests. However, the fact that some parents do not sufficiently consider the interests of their children seems insufficient as a case for excluding market criteria from education. First, we can again note that the situation of some (irresponsible parents and the particular characteristics of children) are being taken to justify the same treatment for all. Second, we might not all agree that the interests of children are more likely to be safeguarded by politicians and teachers than by parents. The relevant comparison is not between the observable defects of some parents and the behaviour ideally to be expected of politicians and teachers; it is between how both the former and the latter *actually behave*. In this respect, not everyone would regard politicians or teachers as obviously superior. In the case of teachers, it is worth pointing out that the alleged decline in respect for their profession owes less to changes in their personal behaviour and character than to the disappointment of expectations about their role and capacities which were always hopelessly unrealistic.

History on the market?

Much that has happened and is likely to happen to the detriment of history proper, at all levels of education, arises directly or indirectly from the freedom extended to those within the educational system and from the question of political control. Attempts to inject into education a greater consideration of the public interest might take the forms of political accountability or exposure to market forces. Current changes place a (very limited) emphasis on the former, through such devices as an increase in community and parent participation in schools, and, negatively, through the rejection by the incumbent government (possibly influenced by the obstructiveness of their official advisers) of voucher schemes.¹²

Greater accountability through participation in educational decisions by a wider range of interested parties has the advantages of weakening the grip of organised teachers, and of subjecting local and national politicians to greater public scrutiny. In areas such as education, however, participation may mean the replacement of one unrepresentative oligarchy by another. Participation is costly in terms of money and time: as Oscar Wilde said, 'socialism does interfere with one's evenings'. Raising one's voice through participation may be most costly and least attractive to those individuals most likely to be excluded from the present system, and is in any case not easily extended to higher education.

The alternative to participation is the opportunity for 'exit' offered by the market: switching one's purchases is a specific and effective form of 'voting with the feet'. The advantages of subjecting education to the market arise not only from the shortcomings of participation but also from the absence of convincing arguments as to why education should be exempt from the constraints which apply to so many other 'needs' and activities.

Whichever alternative were to be adopted, how would history fare? Accountability through participation might provide more opportunities for persuading the community that history's intellectual claims are such as to make it an important part of a

serious education, and not something which needs to be sacrificed even if 'the needs of industrial society' are to be promoted. On the other hand, the fact that history is in a relatively healthy state in the public schools suggests that consumer choice through the market need not result in a monopoly for 'relevance'. In any event, the case for change in general is that present educational arrangements are likely to lead to a lesser place for history, without any significant indication that this will reflect more than the paternalistic whim of the educational establishment and transient politicians.

Conclusions

1. What history is, its relative place in the curriculum, and how it should be taught, are matters about which even historians disagree. Historians are not, therefore, a united body easily mobilised in their own defence. More generally, attitudes to education are intimately related to wider social concerns and are spread in complicated ways and in inarticulate forms throughout the community. There is thus no finite and easily-identifiable audience to whom a defence of history can clearly be addressed.
2. However, historians who share the assumptions and fears of this essay can reasonably be accused of not having done enough to influence public debate. Those in higher education, for example, have tended to play only a limited part in the public bodies which have shaped the content and form of history in the schools. They have grumbled about the increasing importance of subjects like politics, about the shift away from impartial examining towards internally marked course-work, and about the licence given to such things as 'empathy' in the teaching of history.

However, these tendencies are unlikely to be reversed in the absence of external pressures. Historians who exercise such pressure will face the charge of 'élitism': that the institutions of higher education are playing their old game of imposing their unworldly and unrepresentative views on the majority who operate outside them. The charge is humbug. The unease is shared by many in the schools, and the idea that education is run by bodies representative of and sensitive to wider public interests is false. Educational change in general and changes in history in particular have not been motivated by concern for the 'disadvantaged', nor has it furthered their interests (as the charge of 'élitism' implies). The new GCSE, A/S levels, and the inevitable next-step demand for the 'reform' of A levels will be represented as a broadening of the curriculum to the advantage of all, and especially of the majority who do not go on to higher education. In fact,

shortage of necessary resources and current attitudes to what should be taught and how, will be among the factors that combine to render the changes irrelevant to that majority and harmful to the quality attained by the rest.

3. The recently-expanded role of politicians (and of the central government in particular) increases the difficulty. This role is not plausibly based on either public demand or market needs, since neither have been given the opportunity to make an impact. However, the financial powers directly or indirectly exercised by governments, and the haste with which changes are being pursued, will provide an enormous incentive for those in education to fight each other or to repackage themselves in a favourable 'image', rather than to raise awkward questions about the basis of what is going on.
4. Timid steps towards a greater role for parents (for example) are inherently desirable, but are in themselves unlikely to touch the central problems of the power of government and of special interests in education. The occasional alternation of political parties in power is not a source of hope. Governments are governments first and political parties second, and in any case what is alternated is different forms of state control benefiting (in the case of education) different vested interests. Then, the simple claim that taxpayers (or their representatives) should continue to fund the existing pattern of education, without asking any questions, is both implausible and unrealistic. In these circumstances, a greater subjection of education to market forces has everything to recommend it. The outcome would then at least have the merit of reflecting the preferences of individuals, and there is no reason to suppose that history would, relatively, suffer from such a change. Those who doubt this should reflect on what has already happened and on what current governmental ambitions will entail. Classics and philosophy are two of the disciplines which have been dramatically and adversely affected by the kinds of changes we have discussed. If willingness to pay for an education in (or including) these subjects had been the rule, rather than political rationing or curriculum reform, would there have been more or fewer students of classics and philosophy?

5. Finally we have to be modest in defending history. It makes more sense to argue that everybody should have a formal education in mathematics than it does to make the same claim for history. There are no magic recipes to make history fascinating to those exposed to it, or to determine how it should be presented at each stage of education. But the least we can do is to indicate why those who wish to appreciate the nature of the accumulated intellectual capital that is European civilisation¹³ ought to be engaged with it. Those who use it as a vehicle of moral propaganda or who pursue the false gods of relevance by turning it into 'current affairs', are not merely ignorant, but are failing to give their charges the opportunity to appreciate a central inheritance. Few children will become 'professional historians', but this is not a reason for carelessness about what is taught. Imagine the reaction of biologists if the teaching of 'creationism' as biology was defended on the grounds that few of those taught would go on to become biologists or that children found the former 'more interesting' than the latter.

6. Many of the forces which are inimical to history are hostile to education as such. That education is the same as 'training', or that technology is vital because education should 'serve the needs of industrial society' are ideas which pose almost as much of a threat to science as to the arts. Some of the developments which endanger history are based on misconceptions of what history is and what it can offer; here again, modesty may be more persuasive than inflated claims. Although one may question the assumptions behind such external pressures as the demand for 'relevance', such pressures are often wrongly seen as requiring less attention to be given to subjects like history. More of the one does not necessarily depend on having less of the other, and the assumption that it does is symptomatic of the element of fashion and monomania which infects much of the current discussion.

References

1. See D.Cannadine's 1986 *Past and Present* lecture, extracts from which were printed in *The Times Literary Supplement*, November 14, 1986. Cannadine gives an unwitting clue to the origin of the troubles he outlines. He deplores the extent to which British historians have ceased to glorify the greatness of Britain and have taken, instead, to 'grubbing about in the archives'.
2. *National Criteria for the GCSE*, HMSO 1985.
3. *National Criteria . . .*, 1985.
4. N. Tate, *Countdown to GCSE: History*, London 1986, p.5
5. *Ibid.*, p.15. Emphasis added.
6. J.H.Hexter, 'The Historical Method of Christopher Hill' [in *On Historians*, London 1979.]
7. E.P.Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, London 1975; R.Fogel and F.Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 2 Vols, London 1974.
8. Extracts from Thompson's arguments with his critics are printed in the Peregrine edition of *Whigs and Hunters*, London 1977, pp.301-315. Both sides begin with flourishes of ideological rhetoric, then settle down to disputing dates, sources and probabilities. Those with a taste for irony will enjoy the fact that Fogel, joint author of *Time on the Cross*, was widely accused of defending slavery. He has, in fact, a highly radical political past.
9. See, for example, E.H.Carr, *What is History?*, London 1964.
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