

Introduction

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will find the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
And Babylon, many times demolished
Who raised it up so many times? In what houses
Of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?
Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished
Did the masons go? Great Rome
Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom
Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in song
Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis
The night the ocean engulfed it
The drowning still bawled for their slaves.

The young Alexander conquered India.
Was he alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Did he not have even a cook with him?
Philip of Spain wept when his armada
Went down. Was he the only one to weep?
Frederick the Second won the Seven Years War. Who
Else won it?

Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for the victors?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the bill?

So many reports.
So many questions.

'Questions from a Worker who Reads' by Bertolt Brecht

The questions raised in Brecht's poem are crying out for answers. Providing them should be the task of history. It should not be regarded as the preserve of a small group of specialists, or a luxury for those who can afford it. History is not 'bunk', as claimed by Henry Ford, pioneer of mass motor car production, bitter enemy of trade unionism and early admirer of Adolf Hitler.

History is about the sequence of events that led to the lives we lead today. It is the story of how we came to be ourselves. Understanding it is the key to finding out if and how we can further change the world in which we live. 'He who controls the past controls the future,' is one of the slogans of the totalitarians who control the state in George Orwell's novel *1984*. It is a slogan always taken seriously by those living in the palaces and eating the banquets described in Brecht's 'Questions'.

Some 22 centuries ago a Chinese emperor decreed the death penalty for those who 'used the past to criticise the present'. The Aztecs attempted to destroy records of previous states when they conquered the Valley of Mexico in the 15th century, and the Spanish attempted to destroy all Aztec records when they in turn conquered the region in the 1620s.

Things have not been all that different in the last century. Challenging the official historians of Stalin or Hitler meant prison, exile or death. Only 30 years ago Spanish historians were not allowed to delve into the bombing of the Basque city of Guernica, or Hungarian historians to investigate the events of 1956. More recently, friends of mine in Greece faced trial for challenging the state's version of how it annexed much of Macedonia before the First World War.

Overt state repression may seem relatively unusual in Western industrial countries. But subtler methods of control are ever-present. As I write, a New Labour government is insisting schools must stress British history and British achievements, and that pupils must learn the name and dates of great Britons. In higher education, the historians most in accord with establishment opinions are still the ones who receive honours, while those who challenge such opinions are kept out of key university positions. 'Compromise, compromise', remains 'the way for you to rise.'

Since the time of the first Pharaohs (5,000 years ago) rulers have presented history as being a list of 'achievements' by themselves and their forebears. Such 'Great Men' are supposed to have built cities

and monuments, to have brought prosperity, to have been responsible for great works or military victories—and, conversely, ‘Evil Men’ are supposed to be responsible for everything bad in the world. The first works of history were lists of monarchs and dynasties known as ‘King Lists’. Learning similar lists remained a major part of history as taught in the schools of Britain 40 years ago. New Labour—and the Tory opposition—seem intent on reimposing it.

For this version of history, knowledge consists simply in being able to memorise such lists, in the fashion of the ‘Memory Man’ or the *Mastermind* contestant. It is a *Trivial Pursuits* version of history that provides no help in understanding either the past or the present.

There is another way of looking at history, in conscious opposition to the ‘Great Man’ approach. It takes particular events and tells their story, sometimes from the point of view of the ordinary participants. This can fascinate people. There are large audiences for television programmes—even whole channels—which make use of such material. School students presented with it show an interest rare with the old ‘kings, dates and events’ method.

But such ‘history from below’ can miss out something of great importance, the interconnection of events.

Simply empathising with the people involved in one event cannot, by itself, bring you to understand the wider forces that shaped their lives, and still shape ours. You cannot, for instance, understand the rise of Christianity without understanding the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. You cannot understand the flowering of art during the Renaissance without understanding the great crises of European feudalism and the advance of civilisation on continents outside Europe. You cannot understand the workers’ movements of the 19th century without understanding the industrial revolution. And you cannot begin to grasp how humanity arrived at its present condition without understanding the interrelation of these and many other events.

The aim of this book is to try to provide such an overview.

I do not pretend to provide a complete account of human history. Missing are many personages and many events which are essential to a detailed history of any period. But you do not need to know about every detail of humanity’s past to understand the general pattern that has led to the present.

It was Karl Marx who provided an insight into this general pattern. He pointed out that human beings have only been able to survive on

this planet through cooperative effort to make a livelihood, and that every new way of making such a livelihood has necessitated changes in their wider relationships with each other. Changes in what he called 'the forces of production' are associated with changes in 'the relations of production', and these eventually transform the wider relationships in society as a whole.

Such changes do not, however, occur in a mechanical way. At each point human beings make choices whether to proceed along one path or another, and fight out these choices in great social conflicts. Beyond a certain point in history, how people make their choices is connected to their class position. The slave is likely to make a different choice to the slave-owner, the feudal artisan to the feudal lord. The great struggles over the future of humanity have involved an element of class struggle. The sequence of these great struggles provides the skeleton round which the rest of history grows.

This approach does not deny the role of individuals or the ideas they propagate. What it does do is insist that the individual or idea can only play a certain role because of the preceding material development of society, of the way people make their livelihoods, and of the structure of classes and states. The skeleton is not the same as the living body. But without the skeleton the body would have no solidity and could not survive. Understanding the material 'basis' of history is an essential, but not sufficient, precondition for understanding everything else.

This book, then, attempts to provide an introductory outline to world history, and no more than that. But it is an outline which, I hope, will help some people come to terms with both the past and the present.

In writing it, I have been aware throughout that I have to face up to two prejudices.

One is the idea that the key features of successive societies and human history have been a result of an 'unchanging' human nature. It is a prejudice that pervades academic writing, mainstream journalism and popular culture alike. Human beings, we are told, have always been greedy, competitive and aggressive, and that explains horrors like war, exploitation, slavery and the oppression of women. This 'cave-man' image is meant to explain the bloodletting on the Western Front in one world war and the Holocaust in the other. I argue very differently. 'Human nature' as we know it today is a product of our history, not its cause. Our history has involved the moulding of different human

natures, each displacing the one that went before through great economic, political and ideological battles.

The second prejudice, much promulgated in the last decade, is that although human society may have changed in the past, it will do so no more.

An adviser to the US State Department, Francis Fukuyama, received international acclaim when he spelt out this message in 1990. We were witnessing no less than 'the end of history', he declared in an article that was reproduced in scores of languages in newspapers right across the world. Great social conflicts and great ideological struggles were a thing of the past—and a thousand newspaper editors and television presenters agreed.

Anthony Giddens, director of the London School of Economics and court sociologist to Britain's New Labour prime minister, repeated the same message in 1998 in his much hyped but little read book, *The Third Way*. We live in a world, he wrote, 'where there are no alternatives to capitalism.' He was accepting and repeating a widespread assumption. It is an unsustainable assumption.

Capitalism as a way of organising the whole production of a country is barely three or four centuries old. As a way of organising the whole production of the world, it is at most 150 years old. Industrial capitalism, with its huge conurbations, widespread literacy and universal dependence on markets, has only taken off in vast tracts of the globe in the last 50 years. Yet humans of one sort or another have been on the earth for over a million years, and modern humans for over 100,000 years. It would be remarkable indeed if a way of running things that has existed for less than 0.5 percent of our species' lifespan were to endure for the rest of it—unless that lifespan is going to be very short indeed. All the writings of Fukuyama and Giddens do is confirm that Karl Marx was right about at least one thing, in noting that 'for the bourgeoisie there has been history and is no more'.

The recent past of our species had not been some smooth upward path of progress. It has been marked by repeated convulsions, horrific wars, bloody civil wars, violent revolutions and counter-revolutions. Times when it seemed that the lot of the mass of humanity was bound to improve have almost invariably given way to decades or even centuries of mass impoverishment and terrible devastation.

It is true that through all these horrors there were important advances in the ability of humans to control and manipulate the forces

of nature. We have a vastly greater capacity to do so today than a thousand years ago. We live in a world in which natural forces should no longer be able to make people starve or freeze to death, in which diseases which once terrified people should have been abolished for ever.

But this in itself has not done away with the periodic devastation of hundred of millions of lives through hunger, malnutrition and war. The record of the 20th century shows that. It was the century in which industrial capitalism finally took over the whole world, so that even the most remote peasant or herder now depends to some degree on the market. It was also a century of war, butchery, deprivation and barbarity to match any in the past, so much so that the liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin described it as 'the most terrible century in Western history'. There was nothing in the last decades of the century to suggest things had magically improved for humanity as a whole. They saw the wholesale impoverishment of the former Eastern bloc, repeated famines and seemingly endless civil wars in different parts of Africa, nearly half Latin America's people living below the poverty line, an eight year war between Iran and Iraq, and military onslaughts by coalitions of the world's most powerful states against Iraq and Serbia.

History has not ended, and the need to understand its main features is a great as ever. I have written this book in the hope that it will aid some people in this understanding.

In doing so, I have necessarily relied on the efforts of numerous previous works. The section on the rise of class society, for instance, would have been impossible without the writings of the great Australian archaeologist V Gordon Childe, whose own book *What Happened in History* bears reading over and over again, even if it is dated in certain important details. Similarly, the section on the medieval world owes a big debt to the classic work of Marc Bloch and the output of the French Annales school of historians, the sections on the early 20th century to the works of Leon Trotsky, and on the later 20th century to the analyses of Tony Cliff. Readers with some knowledge of the material will notice a host of other influences, some quoted directly and mentioned in the text or the end notes, others no less important for not receiving explicit acknowledgement. Names like Christopher Hill, Geoffrey de Ste Croix, Guy Bois, Albert Soboul, Edward Thompson, James McPherson and D D Kosambi spring to mind. I hope my book will encourage people to read their work. For readers who want to

follow up particular periods, I include a brief list of further reading at the end of the book.

Dates are not the be-all and end-all of history, but the sequence of events is sometimes very important—and sometimes difficult for readers (and even writers!) to keep track of. For this reason, there is a brief chronology of the major events in a particular period at the beginning of each section. For a similar reason, I include at the end of the book glossaries of names, places and unfamiliar terms. These are not comprehensive, but aim to help readers of any one section to make sense of references to people, events and geographical locations dealt with more fully in others. Finally, I owe thanks to many people who have assisted me in turning a raw manuscript into a finished book—to Ian Birchall, Chris Bambery, Alex Callinicos, Charlie Hore, Charlie Kimber, Lindsey German, Talat Ahmed, Hassan Mahamdallie, Seth Harman, Paul McGarr, Mike Haynes, Tithi Bhattacharya, Barry Pavier, John Molyneux, John Rees, Kevin Ovenden and Sam Ashman for reading all or parts of the manuscript, noticing numerous inaccuracies and sometimes forcing me to reassess what I had written. None of them, needless to say, are responsible either for the historical judgements I make at various places, nor for any factual errors that remain. I owe special thanks to Ian Taylor for editing the manuscript, and to Rob Hoveman for overseeing the production of the final book.