Historical Pathways

The working title of this book is *History’s Pathways*. The “pathways” glyph works well as metaphor in characterizing the philosophy of history that you will find here. Paths are created by purposive agents, going somewhere with an understanding of the topography. Pathways become roadways, and they become systems of constraint and opportunity. And they sometimes become the elements or segments of larger systems with long historical and human consequences. They illustrate the meaning of “path-dependence”; once the pathway exists, other approaches become less likely. And the metaphor illustrates as well the perpetual interaction of agent and structure that I emphasize; the plasticity of social entities, the contingency of their specific properties, and their constraining power influencing human choices.

Pathways also invoke other important historical tropes—the importance of organized states, the buzz of economic activity and transaction, the transmission of ideas and practices across space (and therefore across time). All this occurs along a road system.

The metaphor is intended to suggest two distinct ideas: that many historical structures are literally like road systems, built up contingently over time; and that historical change takes the form of an unfolding path of contingency through a series of branching nodes, each marked by choice and contingency. The “pathway” that led from the Ancien Régime to the French Revolution involved French society and its actors passing through a series of branching possibilities.

And the institutions of the French monarchy had accreted over time, leading to a “filigree” of elements put in place by artful and opportunistic actors over time—without a grand plan. In short—this maze of institutions resembles a medieval town's road system.

The term functions as a metaphor when we use it to characterize history; the heart of the metaphor is a path through a tree of branching possibilities. And it is not a perfect metaphor—because a historical pathway crosses time rather than space, and it is therefore impossible to retrace our steps. So a road network has a different topology than a tree of “possibility space”.

But both illustrations of pathways contain the same key elements: contingency to start, contingency to continue—but some degree of “momentum” once we've started going down the road.

The problem of history and historical knowledge

We think we know what we mean when we talk about “knowledge of history,” “explaining historical change,” or “historical forces and structures.” But—we do not! Our assumptions about history are superficial and fail to hold up to scrutiny. We often assume that history is an integrated fabric or web, in which underlying causal powers lead to enduring historical patterns. Or we assume that historical processes have meaning—with the result that later events can be interpreted as flowing within a larger pattern of meaning. Or we presuppose that there are recurring historical structures and entities—“states,” “cultures,” and “demographic regimes” that are repeatedly instantiated in different historical circumstances.
I do not say that these assumptions are all wrong. I say that they are superficial, misleading, and simple in a context in which complexity is the rule. Take the idea of recurring historical structures—to which we will return in chapter 00 below. Is there some state “essence” possessed in common among the Carolingian state described by Marc Bloch, the theatre state of Bali described by Clifford Geertz, and the modern Chinese party state described by Vivienne Shue? If so, what is this set of essential properties that states have? If not, what alternative interpretation can we provide to “state talk” that makes coherent sense?

Or take the idea of historical causation: “The French Revolution was caused by the fiscal crisis of the Ancien Regime.” Perhaps this is true. But what does it mean? How do fiscal crises bring about revolutions? What do we know about “causal mechanisms” in historical circumstances such that we can assign rigorous and useful meaning to the causal proposition?

And what about the idea that large historical configurations have “meaning”? “All history is the unfolding of human freedom; so specific episodes can be interpreted in terms of their contribution to the saga of freedom.” Meaning to whom? Inherently? Participants assign meanings to many things, as do those who follow (including historians). But is there any rigorous basis for attributing meaning to a congeries of events?

This book intends to raise fresh questions about the nature of historical knowledge. And it proposes to begin to answer these questions—and discover new ones as well—through careful attention to the best and most innovative historians writing today. As critical minds cope with the intellectual challenge of offering concrete historical explanations, they are implicitly compelled to deal with these conceptual complexities. And so we can tease out new answers to these questions.

The position I will take advocates that there is indeed a rigorous interpretation to be offered for historical knowledge. It is an interpretation that does without teleology; that emphasizes causal mechanisms; that emphasizes conjunction and contingency; and that offers a nuanced understanding of “large historical structures.” Recurring ideas in the chapters that follow will emphasize contingency, conjunction, and meso-history, and we will make every effort to draw lessons from best historical practice.

What is the “new” philosophy of history?

This book falls within what I would like to call a “new philosophy of history.”

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important, and because philosophy has made very little progress in this field in decades. This book will attempt to lay out the lineaments of a “new” philosophy of history—one informed by the best current philosophical thinking and the best current historical writing.

The philosophy of history is one of the genuine backwaters of philosophy, without significant new developments in 50 years (Gardiner 1952, 1974), (Walsh 1968), (Carr 1962), (Gallie 1964), (Hook 1955), (White 1969). Kant, Hegel, and Marx constituted one important strand of thought within the philosophy of history—the strand that asks “what is history about?” This approach we might call “substantive philosophy of history”; it is about the metaphysics of history. It asks questions such as these: what is the inner meaning of history? Is there a grand story that is played out through “accidental” historical developments? Is history intelligible? Is there an underlying “reason” in history? Hegel answered the question in one way—that history is the unfolding of human freedom (Hegel 1975). Marx answers the question in another way—that the underlying driver in historical change is the tension between the forces and relations of production, or class struggle. Other great thinkers have turned their minds to these sorts of questions—or example, Montesquieu (Montesquieu et al. 1989; Montesquieu and Lowenthal 1965). This family of approaches to the philosophy of history is broadly speaking “metaphysical”; these philosophers ask questions about the being of history, its fundamental nature.

A second, and more compelling, strand within the philosophy of history can be referred to as “epistemology of historical knowledge.” This approach converges with the most abstract end of the discipline of historiography; it has to do with historical methodology and inference. What can we know about the past? What are the chief types of evidence and inference through which we arrive at justified beliefs about the past? What are some chief barriers to knowing the past? Weber, for example, put it forward that all representations of the past unavoidably represent a construction based both on contemporary evidence and contemporary analytical assumptions (Weber 1949, 1975, 1977). So there is no single or unified answer to the question, what was the Roman republic? Instead, there are related families of answers that differ in terms of the ways in which the question is formulated and the assumptions we make about what is most important. The past is recreated by each generation of historians.

Within this epistemological approach to the philosophy of history we can distinguish approaches that are, broadly speaking, more empiricist and more rationalist; those that view the past as an ordinary object of empirical investigation, versus those who view the past as an object of rational reconstruction and understanding.

There is a third important strand of thinking within the philosophy of history that differs from both those surveyed to this point. On this approach, there is a bundle of middle-level conceptual questions about the past, and the constitution of the past, that are appropriately addressed by a philosophical perspective. What is causation in history? What is the role of the individual in history? Is historical change necessary or contingent? Does history fall into discrete “periods” or “regions”? This set of questions bears some similarity to the first approach (the metaphysical approach), in that it asks substantive questions about historical structures and causes. And it has something in common with the epistemological approach as well, in that it is intended to shed light on the nature of the phenomena concerning which we are attempting to arrive at beliefs or interpretations. We might call this approach one of “middle level metaphysics.”
The approach that I am taking in this body of work asks abstract questions about historical processes and historical knowledge, but it does not derive primarily from the research traditions of the traditional philosophy of history. Instead, it takes its inspiration from the philosophy of science. I take the view that historians are attempting to provide rationally justified knowledge about the past. 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 descriptions of these events; and answering questions about the causes and effects of these events. 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, the ways in which evidence, theory, and inference can lead to discoveries within historical disciplines; and to identify some of the conceptual and methodological difficulties that arise in the practice of historical investigation.

We have learned much from the philosophy of science, philosophy of biology, and philosophy of the special sciences, about how to pursue questions like these. These disciplines have shown that philosophy of science can be pursued in a top-down way, or it can be pursued from a bottom-up way; and it can be pursued in a fashion that combines both approaches. This course will follow the combined strategy. We will consider some of the best thinking that philosophers have done in relation to the defining questions of the philosophical study of history. We will consider some strong examples of historical inquiry and explanation in contemporary historiography. And we will attempt to construct a credible basis for formulating and extending a theory of historical knowledge based on these approaches.

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 may be flawed or partial. 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.

**Key questions for “new” philosophy of history**

Some of the questions I am interested in probing include—

- What is history—a stream of events, a set of interlocking processes, a narrative, a set of actors with overlapping influences?
- What is historical causation? Are there social mechanisms that explain historical change?
- Is there such a thing as “historical necessity”? What would this be? Is there “inevitability” or “necessity” in history? What is the scope of contingency in historical change?
- What is a historical narrative?
- Are there generalizations in history? Are there social laws? Are there large recurring factors in history that play an important explanatory role in many distinct settings?
• What range of interpretative “under-determination” exists in historical inquiry?
• Is there such a thing as “objective historical knowledge” or “factual historical knowledge”?
• What assumptions do historians make about the nature of structures, entities, and processes in historical phenomena (modes of production, economic systems, revolutions, riots, wars)?
• What is the relationship between agency and structure in historical explanation?
• How do ideas and mentalités play in historical change?
• How do comparisons function in historical writing?
• Is there an important role for comparative method in historical inquiry (e.g. economic development in Western Europe and East Asia)?
• Can we give a middle-range description of the logic of historical assertions and inquiry?
• What is a historical process?
• What can comparative historical research tell us about large historical change?
• Are there grounds for defining the scope of historical analysis—period, region?
• Are there historical epochs?
• What is the role of theory and hypothesis in historical analysis? How do social science and social theory play roles in historical explanation?
• How do historical events and structures hang together—what constitutes the unity or identity of a complex historical event (French revolution, White Lotus rebellion)?
• Are there similar large historical processes in separate regions?
• What is the relationship between the micro and macro levels of historical inquiry?
• What is a “social structure” and how does it acquire causal powers?
• Do “perspective” and “orientation” play a role in historical interpretation and analysis?
• What are the dimensions of uncertainty in historical research and inquiry?
• What is bias? Interest, situation.
• What issues arise in linking available historical evidence to historical interpretations?

Conjunctural contingent meso-history

There is a body of work in history and historical sociology in which it is possible to identify the strands of a new paradigm of historical inquiry—what might be called “meso-history.” This work provides examples of strong, innovative macro-explanations that give more compelling and nuanced expression to this approach to historiography than past macro-history. I characterize this paradigm as “conjunctural contingent meso-history” (CCM), and I argue that this approach allows for a middle way between grand theory and excessively particularistic narrative (Little 2000); http://www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~delittle/v2.PDF. This approach highlights three large ideas:
The paradigm recognizes historical contingency—at any given juncture there are multiple outcomes that might have occurred. It recognizes the role of agency—leaders, inventors, engineers, activists, and philosophers are able to influence the course of development in particular historical contexts. It recognizes the multiplicity of causes that are at work in almost all historical settings—thereby avoiding the mono-causal assumptions of much previous macro-history. And it recognizes, finally, that there are discernible structures, processes, and constraints that recur in various historical settings and that play a causal role in the direction and pace of change. It is therefore an important part of the historian’s task to identify these structures and trace out the ways in which they constrain and motivate individuals in particular settings, leading to outcomes that can be explained as contingent results of conjunctural historical settings. This approach recognizes an important role for social theory within the historian’s practice, while at the same time emphasizing that the notion of historical inquiry as no more than applied social theory is one that trivializes the problems of explanation and interpretation that confront the working historian.

**What is distinctive about a "new" philosophy of history?**

The central impulse here is to discover issues, puzzles, difficulties, challenges within the writings of excellent historians that can be treated in detail, and perhaps given some order that permits some fresh answers to the foundational question, what is history and historical knowledge?

**References**


