Historical Causation: Is One Thing more Important than Another?

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As teachers and lecturers in history we frequently ask our students to account for certain events or trends: Why did the Peasants' Revolt occur in 1381? Why was the Bohemian peasantry enserfed in the seventeenth century? Why did war break out in Europe in 1914? Almost as frequently as such questions are set, they are answered in the form of a list of causes of the event or trend at issue, to which is appended the inevitable conclusion: 'thus a number of factors have to be taken into account.' Students soon discover, however, that their teachers are unlikely to be satisfied with such 'shopping-lists' of causes and that the good student is expected to rank such causes in some hierarchy of importance. As E. H. Carr put it, the historian deals with a multiplicity of causes but the 'true historian', confronted with such multiplicity, will feel a professional compulsion 'to establish some hierarchy of causes' which would permit the ultimate, or primary, cause of the *explanandum* to be identified. All historical arguments thus revolve 'round the question of the priority of causes'.[1]

My aim here is to show that though Carr's position is so familiar among historians as to constitute the orthodoxy of the profession, it is beset by a number of problems and that, in explaining historical events, all we can say is that 'a number of factors have to be taken into account.' In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that historians cannot relegate philosophical problems, such as those about causation and explanation, to some separate, auxiliary discipline called the 'philosophy of history'. Rather, philosophical issues lie at the centre of many seemingly empirical historical debates. In order to make this case I will consider two apparently competing modes of historical explanation: the Marxist

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[1] E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth, 1970) [hereafter Carr, *What is History?*], pp. 89–90; R. F. Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation in History* (1989) [hereafter Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation*], pp. 142–3; N. Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), p. xvii. For a critique of Carr, see G. Leff, *History and Social Theory* (1969), pp. 66–7.

approach (historical materialism), which posits a universally valid hierarchy of causation; and the approach shared by both Weberian sociology and orthodox historiography, which assumes that hierarchies of causes exist but that they are historically specific. I will argue that, although they are seemingly opposed, both of these accounts of causation in fact share a common weakness: the claim to be able to rank causes in some order of importance. This weakness can be overcome if we adopt the theory of causation set out by John Stuart Mill. Finally, I argue that, despite recent claims to the contrary, Mill's theory does not mean that we have to lapse into a post-modern scepticism about historical causation.

I

At the heart of Marx and Engels's account of social structure and of historical change is the claim for a hierarchy of social factors which is not specific to particular circumstances but which enjoys a general historical validity. This hierarchy of factors was often presented in terms of the metaphor of 'base and superstructure', in which the state and ideology are seen as a 'superstructure' which 'corresponds to', 'expresses' or 'reflects' society's 'economic base'. It is this hierarchy of social forces which, 'for better or worse, gives Marxism its distinctiveness as a theory of the social world and history'.[2] An immediate problem is that Marxists have been unable to agree on whether it is society's productive forces (its specific forms of tools, raw materials, labour power and technological knowledge) or its relations of production (its class and property relations) which enjoy an ultimate social primacy. The important point for our purposes is that, whether society's productive forces, its relations of production or a combination of the two is seen as the most fundamental factor, some particular element of the social structure is said to enjoy

[2] T. Lovell, *Pictures of Reality* (1980), pp. 27–8. See K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works* (44 vols., London, 1975–89) [hereafter Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*], v. 32–5, 53–4, 63–74; K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1971), pp. 20–1; G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford, 1978), ch. 6. For further references see S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History: A Critical Introduction* (Manchester, 1987) [hereafter Rigby, *Marxism and History*], chs. 2, 3, 9, and *Friedrich Engels and the Formation of Marxism: History, Dialectics and Revolution* (Manchester, 1992) [hereafter Rigby, *History, Dialectics and Revolution*], chs. 4, 9. See also B. Croce, *Historical Materialism and the Economics of Karl Marx* (New Brunswick, 1981), pp. 17, 77–8; C. Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 286–7; R. Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', *New Left Review*, 82 (1973), 7; S. H. Rigby, 'Making History', *History of European Ideas*, xii (1990), 829; G. Hellman, 'Historical Materialism', *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, ed. J. Mepham and D. Hillel-Ruben (3 vols. Brighton, 1979), ii. 148–50, 161; V. Kiernan. 'Problems of Marxist History', *New Left Review*, 161 (1987), 107; G. McLennan, 'Richard Johnson and his Critics: Towards a Constructive Debate', *History Workshop*, viii (1979), 162.

[3] Rigby, *Marxism and History*, chs. 3, 4, 8; R. Hilferding, 'The Materialist Conception of History', *Modern Interpretations of Marx*, ed. T. Bottomore (Oxford, 1981), 125–37; R. Mishra, 'Technology and Social Structure in Marx's Theory: An Exploratory Analysis', *Science and Society*, xliii (1979), 132–57; R. H. Hilton, 'Introduction' to T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 7–9.

a generally valid explanatory primacy in bringing about social change.[3]

A classic instance of the Marxist claim for a hierarchy of causes which applies to a wide variety of specific historical circumstances is provided by Brenner's account of the divergent social and economic evolutions of England, France and eastern Europe in the late medieval and early modern periods. Brenner rejects neo-Malthusian/Ricardian attempts to explain the emergence of specific class structures in these three areas in terms of the rise and fall of population. Indeed, Brenner argues that, far from population having an explanatory primacy in economic development, 'we may ask if demographic change can be legitimately treated as a "cause", let alone the key variable.'[4] For Brenner, it is particular class structures which create specific forms and paces of productive development and determine society's political institutions.[5] Since specific relations of production are, in turn, the historically specific outcome of particular class struggles (e.g. the lord–serf relations created in late medieval and early modern eastern Europe were brought into being by the defeat of relatively weak peasant communities by the landlord class), it is class struggle which is the prime mover of historical change and economic development. It is the social struggles which establish specific class structures which have to be placed at the 'centre' of, and which provide the 'key' to, long-term economic development in late medieval and early modern Europe.[6]

An immediate problem with the explanation of the emergence of particular property relations in terms of the divergent outcomes of class struggle is that, as Brenner himself realizes, this outcome is itself in need of an explanation.[7] Yet in order to offer such an explanation of the outcome of class struggle Brenner is repeatedly obliged to invoke a variety of phenomena which are not simply the product of property relations but constitute autonomous variables in their own right. As a result, his analysis, in practice, embodies a historical pluralism familiar from non-Marxist historiography.

A number of examples can be cited to illustrate this problem. For instance, Brenner explains the defeat and enserfment of the east European peasantry in the two centuries after 1400 as the outcome of their relative weakness, which was produced by the lack of common-field agriculture and the absence of strong communal institutions. This situation was, in turn, the product of the evolution of east-Elbian Germany

[4] R. Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe', *Past and Present*, 70 (1976) [hereafter Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure'], 32, 39 and 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 97 (1982) [hereafter Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots'], 17.

[5] Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', 31–2; R. Brenner, 'Dobb on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, ii (1978), 131–9.

[6] Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', 47; R. Brenner, 'The Origins of Capitalist Development', *New Left Review*, 104 (1977), 25–92; Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots', pp. 16–18, 78; R. Brenner, 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', *Analytical Marxism*, ed. J. Roemer (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 23–53.

[7] Brenner, 'Agrarian class structure', p. 52.

'as a colonial society'.[8] Here it is particular productive forces (the work relations of common-field agriculture) and political conquest which enjoy pride of place in explaining the outcome of this particular class struggle. The impact of plague in late medieval Europe provides a second example of a factor which, although central to Brenner's explanation of economic development, cannot be seen as simply the product, expression or reflection of society's property relations. As Brenner's own analysis shows, plague could have a considerable impact on late medieval seigneurial revenues and, consequently, on the landlords' attempts to extract feudal rent from the peasantry and on the intensity of class struggle. Yet, while Brenner attempts to argue that the impact of plague was related to economic variables such as malnutrition, he is also obliged to admit that 'plague struck fiercely in certain places and on certain occasions where there appears to have been no particular sign of malnutrition'. Certainly, as the example of England proves, plague could strike at all social groups, including the wealthiest in society, and remained virulent even in an era of high living standards for peasants and labourers. Once the autonomous role of plague is admitted, we are again faced with an explanatory pluralism which poses a challenge to Brenner's own explicit claims for the primacy of class structure.[9]

The third, and perhaps the clearest, example of the multiplicity of causes implicit in Brenner's analysis is his account of the rise of the absolutist state. For Brenner, the rise of absolutism is to be explained in terms of internal social change. He claims that the absolutist state 'came to *express* a transformed version' of the feudal system in which the feudal rent previously paid to private landlords was centralized in the form of taxation paid to the state. For Callinicos, Brenner's analysis of absolutism offers a complex historical analysis which nevertheless seems to show the utility of Marx and Engels's claims for the historical primacy of society's economic base. The problem is that Brenner himself emphasizes that the security of tenure enjoyed by the French peasantry, which in his view provided the social basis of absolutism, was to a large extent itself the product of the actions of the state. Yet if this is the case, the absolutist state did not simply 'express' prior change in social relations: rather, it was an active historical agent which helped to bring such change about in the first place. If 'strong peasant property and the absolutist state developed in *mutual dependence* upon one another', then

[8] Ibid., pp. 57–8.

[9] Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots', p. 63; J. Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy 1348–1530* (1977), pp. 21–6; J. Hatcher, 'Mortality in the Fifteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., xxxix (1986), 23–38; A. E. Nash, 'The Population Pattern of Wiltshire Lords of the Manor 1242–1377', *Southern History*, ii (1980), 31–43.

why should we ascribe a primacy to either of these interacting forces?[10]

The implication of these examples is not that Brenner is wrong to stress the need for an awareness of the role of property relations and class struggle in determining long-term economic development. The problem is simply that, whatever the explanatory role of such property relations and class struggles, these factors in turn require an explanation. We are thus condemned to historical analyses invoking a multiplicity of causes and involving an infinite regression of causation, a situation which excludes any possibility of ascribing ultimate, or universal, social primacy to any one of our interacting variables. There is thus a contradiction between the structural primacy of the relations of production set out in Brenner's explicit claims and the pluralism at work in his actual historical analysis. This is not to criticize Brenner's analysis from the outside, as do those historians who seek to defend population-based accounts of economic change. Rather, it is to lay bare the explanatory logic implicit in his own historical narrative. As Kitching says of Marxist historical scholarship, 'Engaging in a professional practice which is more sophisticated than its theorization is in fact very likely to coexist with a trained inability to either recognize or express that sophistication formally or explicitly.'[11]

A likely response to such criticisms is that Marxism is not a monocausal or reductionist account of historical change and that Marx and Engels themselves were well aware of the reciprocal action of technology, class, politics and ideology in historical explanation. Marxists, just like any other historians, are therefore quite entitled to posit a multiplicity of historical causes while retaining a belief that 'one thing might just be more important than others.' Thus, though they initially seem to be opposed, both Marxism, with its generally applicable hierarchy of causes, and orthodox, non-Marxist historiography, with its historically specific hierarchy of causes, face the common problem of how to assess the relative importance of causes. How does orthodox historiography address this problem?[12]

II

The classic alternative to historical materialism's claims for the necessary primacy of the economic 'base' is that offered by Weberian

[10] Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', 68–72; Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots', 81; A. Callinicos, *Making History* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 158–72 (emphases added). Other Marxists have placed great emphasis on foreign diplomacy and warfare in the emergence of the absolutist state. See P. Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1979), pp. 29–33, 38–9, 102, 202; D. Parker, 'French Absolutism, the English State and the Utility of the Base–Superstructure Model', *Social History*, xv (1990), 287–301; Rigby, *Marxism and History*, pp. 264–8.

[11] G. Kitching, *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis* (1988), p. 225.

[12] Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, v. 53; K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1975), pp. 390–401, 435, 441–3; N. Geras, 'Seven Types of Obloquy: Travesties of Marxism', *The Socialist Register* (1990), ed. R. Miliband, L. Pantich and J. Saville, 9–11.

sociology. For Weber, society is best conceptualized not as a hierarchy of levels, but rather as a number of 'dimensions' of power and social stratification, none of which enjoys any necessary primacy. Thus, even if we confine ourselves to the economic transformations of society, 'it is not possible to enunciate any general formula that will summarize the comparative substantive powers of the various factors involved in such a transformation or will summarize the manner of their accommodation to one another.' For Weber, it is quite possible that 'the emergence of economic power may be the consequence of power existing on other grounds.'[13] This approach to social stratification has recently been defended by Mann and Runciman, who see social structure in terms of a number of overlapping and interacting sources of social power (economic, political, military and ideological), none of which enjoys any necessary social primacy. Primacy in any particular historical situation can be established only by empirical investigation, rather than by means of a universally applicable model of social structure.[14]

It is this approach, where hierarchies of causes are seen as historically specific, which we as historians frequently recommend to our students. Thus, for Lander, the causes of Cade's rebellion (1450) were, unlike those of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, 'more political than economic'. As Carr pointed out, that the attempt to establish such hierarchies of causes generates historical debate can certainly be seen in the case of the 1381 revolt itself. We are told, for instance, that although the revolt undoubtedly had political aspects, it was 'largely economic in origin', and that it was rural social conditions rather than political and fiscal demands which were 'most keenly resented' by the rebels. Alternatively, other historians argue that it would be wrong to place 'an undue emphasis on economic causes': religious and moral ideas were 'in themselves' a source of unrest, while without a deep-seated political malaise 'it remains very doubtful whether a general revolt would have resulted.'[15]

Nevertheless, although the obligation to rank causes in some order of importance may seem 'obvious' and 'common sense' to many historians, such hierarchies involve a number of philosophical difficulties. After all, if we say that any particular *explanandum* is the product of a number of factors then each of those factors (or equivalent ones) is *indispensable* for the *explanandum* to occur. Yet if this is the case, how can we claim that there is a hierarchy of causes at work? How can we say that one

[13] R. Collins, *Weberian Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 34; M. Weber, *Economy and Society* (2 vols., Berkeley, 1978), i. 577, ii. 926.

[14] M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1986–), i. ch. 1; W. G. Runciman, *A Treatise on Social Theory* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1983–) [hereafter Runciman, *Treatise*], ii. 12–17. Mann distinguishes political and military power, Runciman merges them under the label of 'coercive' power.

[15] J. R. Lander, *Conflict and Stability in Fifteenth-Century England* (1971), p. 72; A. Harding, 'The Revolt against the Justices', *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge, 1984), p. 165; M. Mollatt and P. Wolff, *The Popular Revolutions of the Late Middle Ages* (1973), p. 201; M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (1972), p. 154; M. McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1971), p. 422.

cause is 'more indispensable' than another? It was this problem which led Weber to argue that it was impossible to quantify the relative importance of causes; we cannot, for example, conclude that religious change was more decisive than economic change (or vice versa) in explaining the rise of capitalism.[16] As Runciman has argued, it is possible to pick out specific historical factors as the most significant causes of a particular *explanandum* 'only in a sense defined by a chosen set of initial conditions and constraints'.[17] For instance, if we take English reverses in the Hundred Years War in the years after 1369 as a given, as an initial condition, we might then select the high levels of taxation which such defeats brought about as the 'main' cause of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. If, on the other hand, we take it as a given, as a background condition, that late medieval warfare was financed by taxation, we will be likely to see the reverses which called such unpopular taxation into being as the ultimate cause of the revolt.[18] The problem is that, neither in our daily lives nor in our practice as historians, do we have any agreed criteria by which to distinguish 'causes' from the background 'conditions' to be taken as given, which would allow us to resolve such debates about the relative importance of causes. Yet if this argument is accepted, doubt is cast not only on historical materialism's claims for a generally valid hierarchy of causation but on *any* attempt to establish an objective hierarchy of causes, even of the historically specific kind favoured by non-Marxists. In order to justify this argument more fully, we need to consider the work of those philosophers who have discussed the problem of distinguishing 'causes' from 'conditions'.

III

The problem of distinguishing causes from conditions, in order to establish some hierarchy of explanatory factors, was addressed as early as 1843 in John Stuart Mill's *A System of Logic*. Mill argued that the cause of any phenomenon was, philosophically speaking, 'the sum total of the conditions positive and negative taken together; the whole of the contingencies of every description, which, being realised, the consequent invariably follows'. The real cause of any phenomenon 'is the whole of these antecedents', so that, in terms of strict logic, we have 'no right to give the name of cause to one of them exclusively of the others'. Thus there is no scientific ground 'for the distinction between the cause of a phenomenon and its conditions'. But if this is the case, it is not possible to claim an explanatory primacy for any one of these conditions,

[16] E. Fischoff, 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism', *Social Research*, ii (1944), 63.

[17] Runciman, *Treatise*, i. 193.

[18] For the sake of simplicity, this example omits all of the other factors which we would have to rank in terms of their importance as causes of the 1381 revolt: feudal class relations, the Black Death and subsequent plagues, the landlords' assertions of their manorial rights after 1349, state labour legislation to keep down wages, the political troubles of the 1370s, the minority of Richard II, the unpopularity of Gaunt, anticlericalism, etc., etc., etc.

since 'there is hardly any of them which may not, according to the purpose of our immediate discourse, obtain that pre-eminence'.[19]

In practice, of course, we do not (and cannot) explain a phenomenon by enumerating all the conditions which are necessary for it. Thus, although my being born was a condition of my writing this article, we would not normally refer to it as the 'cause' of my doing so. In our everyday lives, we do tend to 'single out one only of the antecedents under the denomination of Cause, calling the others merely Conditions'. In Collingwood's view, Mill believed that the condition which was singled out as the cause was the result of arbitrary selection. In fact, although Mill did refer to such selection as 'capricious', he also went on to argue that which 'condition' we refer to as 'the cause' depends upon the '*purpose* of our immediate discourse'. In practice, such purposes often lead us to distinguish causes from conditions by choosing, as the cause of a phenomenon, 'the one condition which came last into existence'. We thus tend 'to associate the idea of causation with the proximate antecedent *event*', rather than with any of the preceding, persistent *states*.[20]

Thus we tend to say, to give the simplest of examples involving only two causal factors, that 'the bottle broke because the stone hit it.' Yet, as Ryle has pointed out, we could, with equal validity, say that 'the bottle broke when the stone hit it because it was brittle.'[21] In the former case, it is the stone hitting the bottle which is seen as the 'cause' of its breaking, while its brittleness is regarded merely as a 'condition'; in the latter case, the stone hitting the bottle is relegated to the 'occasion' of the bottle's breaking, while its brittleness is foregrounded as the 'cause'. The problem is that we possess no single criterion which obliges us to accept a particular alternative from these competing hierarchies of explanation: the concept of cause is not a unitary one.[22]

In practice, as Gorovitz has argued, we tend to identify as causes those conditions which constitute the 'differentiating factor' in a particular situation. But in this case, which condition we see as the differentiating factor in a particular situation will, naturally, depend upon what we contrast that situation with. If we assume that bottles are brittle, then the differentiating factor is that *this* bottle has been hit by a stone; the stone here is presented as the 'cause' of the bottle breaking not because it enjoys any real causal primacy but simply because we have taken it as a given, as an initial condition, that bottles are brittle, and contrast this

[19] J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic* (1970) [hereafter Mill, *Logic*], pp. 214–17. For accounts of Mill's theory see J. Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (1973), pp. 292–6; A. Ryan, *J. S. Mill* (1974), pp. 74–9; J. Skorupski, *John Stuart Mill* (1989), pp. 175–7; A. Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (1987), pp. 41–50; H. L. A. Hart and T. Honoré, *Causation in the Law* (Oxford, 1985) [hereafter Hart and Honoré, *Causation*], pp. 15–22.
[20] R. G. Collingwood, 'On the So-Called Idea of Causation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, xxxviii (1937–8), 91 and *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1940) [hereafter Collingwood, *Metaphysics*], pp. 301–2; Mill, *Logic*, pp. 214–16; Hart and Honoré, *Causation*, p. 18.
[21] G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1963), pp. 50, 88–9, 113–14.
[22] Hart and Honoré, *Causation*, pp. xxxiii, 28, 33–4.

bottle with a bottle which has not been hit by a stone. Alternatively, if we took it for granted that people throw stones at bottles (which does, after all, seem to be the case) then we might take the brittleness of the bottle as the differentiating factor to explain why *this* bottle broke when some other bottle remained intact. In other words, the question 'Why did this bottle break?' can be read in two ways: either as 'Why did *this* bottle just break?' ('Because it was brittle, unlike that bottle over there'); or 'Why did this bottle *just* break?' ('Because, unlike five minutes ago, it has had a stone thrown at it.') In reality, *both* of these conditions (the brittleness of the bottle and a stone being thrown at it) were indispensable if the outcome we are seeking to explain (the bottle breaking) was to be brought about. As Seignobos put it, 'all causes are of equal value'.[23]

It follows that the standard of comparison we adopt to differentiate causes from background conditions is not arbitrary, but neither is it simply a product of the objective nature of the processes we are studying. It is determined, as not only Mill but, more recently, writers such as Gardiner, Dray, Hart and Honoré, Putnam and Garfinkel have emphasized, by 'the field of inquiry involved, and of the interests and purposes of the speaker'.[24] Whether we see the bottle's brittleness or the stone hitting it as the 'primary' cause of its breaking depends not upon the event *per se* (the bottle broke as a result *both* of its being hit with a stone *and* of its brittleness) but upon our interests: do we, for example, want to know why this particular bottle broke (it had a stone thrown at it) or are we interested in why bottles break in general (because they are brittle)?

Philosophically, it may be useful to distinguish between, on the one hand, the objective *causation* of the bottle's breaking and, on the other, our subjective *explanation* of it. Objectively, the cause of the bottle breaking was the plurality of conditions which brought this event about. In practice, however, the position, or 'knowledge institution', of specific observers will lead them to prioritize certain factors within their explanations as the 'causes' of the bottle breaking, while relegating

[23] Quoted in P. Veyne, *Writing History* (Manchester, 1984) [hereafter Veyne, *Writing History*]; see pp. 92–2, 101. See also S. Gorovitz, 'Causal Judgements and Causal Explanations', *Journal of Philosophy*, lxii (1965), 701–2; Hart and Honoré, *Causation*, pp. 33–5; F. Dretske, 'Contrastive Statements', *Philosophical Review*, lxxxi (1972), 411–37.

[24] P. Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (Oxford, 1961) [hereafter Gardiner, *Historical Explanation*], pp. 10–11, 99–112. See also W. Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (Oxford, 1957) [hereafter Dray, *Laws and Explanation*], pp. 98–101; Hart and Honoré, *Causation*, pp. 35–7; H. Putnam, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London, 1979), pp. 41–4; H. Putnam, *Philosophical Papers* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1975–83) [hereafter Putnam, *Philosophical Papers*], iii. 211–15; A. Garfinkel, *Forms of Explanation: Rethinking the Questions in Social Theory* (New Haven, 1981) [hereafter Garfinkel, *Forms of Explanation*], pp. 3–5, 21–34, 138–45, 156–174; R. J. Anderson, J. A. Hughes and W. W. Sharrock, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Beckenham, 1986), p. 171; Collingwood, *Metaphysics*, p. 304.

[25] M. Brodbeck, 'Explanation, Prediction and "Imperfect" Knowledge', *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. H. Feigl and G. Maxwell (Minneapolis, 1962), iii. 239; Putnam, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 215; F. L. Will, *Induction and Justification* (1974), pp. 24, 273–5. The inhabitants of Will's 'knowledge institutions' are rather less constrained than the prisoners of a Kuhnian paradigm; see ibid., pp. 294–5.

others to the status of background 'conditions'.[25] Thus one could imagine that historians in different 'knowledge institutions' might not be content simply to offer a 'shopping-list' of causes of why our bottle broke. Instead, they would take heed of Carr's advice and seek to establish a hierarchy of causes, initiating a grand debate 'round the question of the priority of causes', even though, in reality, they were in total agreement about the 'facts' of the case (the bottle was brittle; a stone was thrown at it; it broke).[26]

In practice, Mill's 'total cause' is an impossible ideal of explanation since it leads to a 'bad infinity' of explanatory factors.[27] After all, even if we could temporarily agree that one factor, such as the stone being thrown, was the 'real' cause of our bottle breaking, we would, in turn, be required to explain how this cause had come into being: how the stone was formed, why someone was in the mood to throw it, and so on. Our prime cause would then cease to be simply an explanation and would, in turn, itself become an *explanandum*. Mill himself compounded this problem even further by including in the sum total of conditions needed to explain an event all the 'negative' conditions which are needed to bring it about, e.g., our stone-thrower had not broken his arm the day before and thus been prevented from throwing the stone; he was not short-sighted; and so on.[28]

If, however, Mill's theory seems to condemn us to an infinite regression of explanation then, *in practice*, how far we regress down the causal chain which produces each of the conditions needed to bring about a particular event will be determined, as Mill himself put it, by what we think we can take as 'understood without being expressed'.[29] Our choice of certain conditions as givens and of others as 'key' causes does not depend upon their inherent properties. It is determined by our own purposes and by the knowledge we can assume on the part of the audience we are addressing. Thus we often emphasize one condition as the 'cause' of an event since it fills in a 'blank spot' in our knowledge, and relegate the other causes, with which we and our audience have become familiar, to the status of background conditions. Since our audience is likely to assume that bottles are brittle, this condition can be given secondary status in our explanation, whereas the fact that one particular bottle has had a stone thrown at it is likely to come as news to them and will thus be stressed in our explanation.[30] Thus, all explanation is 'interest-relative' so that, in Garfinkel's words, 'the art of

[26] Carr, *What is History?*, pp. 89–90.
[27] Garfinkel, *Forms of Explanation*, p. 143; K. R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (1969) [hereafter Popper, *Historicism*], p. 150; Veyne, *Writing History*, pp. 92, 169–70.
[28] Mill, *Logic*, pp. 214–18.
[29] Gardiner, *Historical Explanation*, pp. 104–5; Popper, *Historicism*, p. 151; Mill, *Logic*, p. 215.
[30] Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation*, p. 162; A. Heller, *A Theory of History* (1982), pp. 159–60; Gardiner, *Historical Explanation*, p. 112; C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 208–11.

explanation is the art of throwing away almost all the data and forgetting almost all the conditions.'[31]

IV

That we, as historians, have no agreed criteria by which to distinguish 'causes' from 'conditions' which would allow us to resolve our debates about explanatory primacy can clearly be seen if we turn our attention away from the limited charms of broken bottles to Brenner's infinitely richer analysis of social change in late medieval and early modern Europe. Traditionally, such social change has been seen as the outcome of demographic change. For example, the end of serfdom in late medieval England is usually presented as a consequence of the massive decline of population of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, particularly in the period after the Black Death. This decline caused a serious shortage of tenants and gave the peasants the upper hand over their landlords in determining levels of rent and manorial obligation. In this case, population change is identified as the condition 'which came last into existence' and, as a result, is presented as the 'cause' of peasant freedom.[32]

Yet if we look at the example of seventeenth-century Bohemia, we find that, as Klima has shown, the very similar circumstances of population decline caused by the Thirty Years War produced an offensive from the landlords which led, ultimately, to the enserfment of the peasantry.[33] Brenner's argument is that if the same population trend can be followed by very different social results (peasant freedom in England, enserfment in Bohemia), it may be doubted whether demographic change can be treated as the primary historical cause of such results. Whether the landlords' logic (a scarcity of tenants requires serfdom and high levels of surplus-extraction) or the peasants' logic (a scarcity of tenants should mean low rents and peasant freedom) prevails is determined by the differentiating factor of the relative strengths of landlord and peasant in their class struggle. The effects of population change are mediated by existing property relations and by the class struggles resulting from them. In this analysis it is the strength or weakness of the peasantry which is perceived as the key cause of peasant freedom or enserfment.[34]

In fact, what such examples reveal is that it is only when we take a

[31] Garfinkel, *Forms of Explanation*, p. 172; Putnam, *Philosophical Papers*, iii. 211–15; Dray, *Laws and Explanation*, p. 98; Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation*, pp. 159–64; M. Scriven, 'Causes, Connection and Conditions in History', *Philosophical Analysis and History*, ed. W. H. Dray (New York, 1966), pp. 254–8.

[32] M. M. Postan, 'Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England', *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, ed. M. M. Postan, H. J. Habakkuk, E. E. Rich *et al.* (8 vols., Cambridge, 1963–89), i. 565–70, 587–91, 595–8, 608–10.

[33] A. Klima, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Bohemia', *Past and Present*, 85 (1979), 52–3.

[34] Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', 39.

mass of conditions as given, as (in Mill's terms) 'understood without being expressed', that it is possible to refer to any particular conditions as enjoying a primacy. Thus, if we take the strength of the English peasant community and its ability to assert its interests as a given, we can then explain its victory over the landlords in terms of the differentiating factor of the new condition of population decline. If, on the other hand, we take the Thirty Years War and the subsequent 40 per cent population decline as given, we can then legitimately see the weakness of the Bohemian peasantry as the differentiating factor which explains its enserfment. Any ascription of explanatory primacy to certain factors in any historical situation necessarily involves treating other factors as givens, as background conditions. If, as Carr maintained, most historical debates are about ranking causes in a hierarchy of importance, it must be concluded that, even in the event of complete agreement as to the 'facts' of any particular situation, such debates are impossible to resolve given the absence of shared criteria for distinguishing causes from conditions. In such cases, debate is not generated by any genuine disagreement about historical reality but rather by a failure to make explicit those conditions which we have taken as given in order to distinguish other conditions as the key causes.

For Brenner, a 'comparative' historical approach is vital because it is only by this means that we can identify the differentiating factor which has explanatory primacy.[35] The problem with this argument is that, as we saw above, which factor we select as the 'key', differentiating one in any particular situation will depend upon what we contrast that situation with. For example, if we asked: 'Why was the Bohemian peasantry free in 1600 and enserfed by 1700?' we would probably take the existence of a weak peasantry as a background condition, and would thus, like Klima, present population decline as the key factor since it was the one which 'differentiated' the situation in 1700 from that in 1600. In history, as in our daily lives, we frequently take persistent states as givens and identify those events (in this case, the rapid decline in population) which interfere with such states as 'causes'.[36]

If, on the other hand, we assumed that our audience was situated within a 'knowledge institution' which made it more than aware of the impact of population change in history, we would be likely to ask: 'Why did population decline in Bohemia result in enserfment when it produced peasant freedom in England?' We would then, like Brenner, be likely to emphasize the structural balance of forces between landlord and peasant as the vital, differentiating condition between the two

[35] Ibid., pp. 39, 47.
[36] W. H. Dray, *Perspectives on History* (1980), pp. 80–1; Hart and Honoré, *Causation*, pp. 16, 29.

countries.[37] Nevertheless, in terms of the logic set out by Mill, we would have to say that the Bohemian peasantry was enserfed as a result of population decline, which generated a landlords' offensive in response to the economic difficulties caused by such decline, *and* because of the peasantry's inability to resist such an offensive. Both of these conditions were necessary in order for *this* enserfment to come about; both conditions had a real, objective existence even if no historian had ever looked for them. The *apparent* disagreement between Klima and Brenner arises because Klima uses the *event* of population decline to explain enserfment in the sense that 'the stone hitting the bottle explains why it broke', whereas for Brenner 'the bottle breaking when the stone hit it is explained by the brittleness of the bottle', i.e. by the preceding *state* of the existence of a weak peasantry. In fact, such disagreement dilemma only arises because objective causal primacy (which, we have argued, does not exist in reality) has been confused with the ascription of explanatory primacy for subjective analytical purposes. Such explanatory primacy, it should be emphasized, is not some inherent property of the causal factors under discussion but is rather the product of the interests and position of the historian.

Given this account of causation and explanation, it may be useful to distinguish two conflicting versions of the 'Brenner thesis': a 'strong' version and a 'dilute' one. The 'strong' version of the Brenner thesis illegitimately ascribes a causal primacy to class structure and even denies that demographic change was a genuine 'cause' of economic change on the grounds that different socio-economic outcomes resulted from similar demographic trends.[38] The 'dilute' version impressively demonstrates that demographic trends acquire their significance for long-term economic change 'only in connection with' specific forms of class structure.[39] It is this latter argument which represents Brenner's crucial contribution to our understanding of medieval and early modern Europe. It is this filling-in of historical 'blank spots', at which Brenner himself has been so successful, rather than the construction of hierarchies of causes, which is the real task facing historians.

V

One does not normally think of John Stuart Mill as one of the precursors of post-structuralism; yet, in Keith Jenkins's recent *Re-Thinking History*, Mill's account of causation, though unattributed, is invoked to buttress a post-modern scepticism about the possibility of achieving

[37] In terms of 'contrastive statements' (see note 23 above), we could see Klima's question as: 'Why was the peasantry enserfed in Bohemia *in the late seventeenth century*?' – i.e. stressing the contrast with 1600 – whereas Brenner's question is: 'Why was the peasantry enserfed *in Bohemia* in the late seventeenth century? – i.e. stressing the contrast with the effects of population decline in late medieval England.

[38] Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', 39.

[39] Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots', 16.

historical knowledge about the reality of the past. Much of Jenkins's case about the impossibility of ever really knowing the past relies on arguments drawn from Marx's account of ideology as the expression of competing material interests fused with a Kuhnian belief in the 'incommensurability of paradigms'. But as a further reason for scepticism about historical knowledge and about the possibility of arriving at valid historical explanations, Jenkins cites the problem addressed by Mill of how we are to weight the various factors which are said to explain any particular event. He rightly concludes that even if we could ascribe explanatory primacy to one factor, which is itself unlikely, we are immediately confronted with the problem that any one historical event, such as the French Revolution of 1789 or the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, is the product of 'an infinite chain' of causes, 'spreading backwards and outwards'. Yet we have no logical or definitive cut-off points for this chain of causation, a problem which, for Jenkins, throws doubt on the validity of the explanations offered by historians.[40]

In fact, in history, as in the natural sciences, how far we pursue any one of the multiple chains of causation which produce a particular historical event will be the product, first, of the existing state of knowledge in a particular field; secondly, of our own particular expertise; and thirdly, of the knowledge which we can take for granted on the part of our audience. For instance, I might believe that the 1381 revolt had a number of causes, some of which were economic, and yet, because of my personal familiarity with medieval legal history or because I feel that the economic origins of the revolt have already been sufficiently analysed by historians, still prefer to examine the role which popular hostility to the legal system played in producing the revolt. Similarly, if I could assume that my audience possessed a knowledge of the medieval political system, I might claim that the 1381 revolt was provoked by the poll tax granted in the parliament of 1380, whereas if I were addressing a non-specialist audience I might have to go further back down the explanatory chain and explain how the English parliament had come to have the right to grant taxation. To another audience, I might even have to explain what a medieval parliament was in the first place, and so on. But none of this offers grounds for an epistemological scepticism about the events or causes of the 1381 revolt: the existence of parliament and the granting and collection of the poll tax were real events which are knowable by historians. The real problem in explaining the 1381 revolt is not philosophical but rather the practical one of the relative scarcity and biases of our sources.

In other words, Mill's account of explanation does not, in practice, commit historians or scientists to regressing to the Big Bang in order to

[40] K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (1991), pp. 19, 51–3, 64. For Kuhn, see A. F. Chalmers, *What is this Thing Called Science?* (Milton Keynes, 1986), pp. 96–7; for a critique of Kuhn's views see I. Lakatos, *Philosophical Papers*, i: *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes* (Cambridge, 1989), ch. 4.

explain any particular event, nor does it involve a nihilism or a relativism in which any explanation is as good as any other. Thus, to return to the examples given above, if we said that our bottle was really broken because the man who threw a stone at it was called 'Smith', or that the 1381 revolt occurred primarily because the poet John Gower had recently started writing his *Vox Clamantis*, we would be illegitimately privileging as the key cause of these events factors which were not even conditions. Causes, in the sense of multiple conditions, objectively exist in the real world and are knowable by scientists and historians. Philosophical problems only emerge, as we have seen, when we decide we have to rank such conditions in a hierarchy of importance.

VI

Historical materialism's claims for the universal primacy of the economic 'base' have been attacked by its most sophisticated critics on the grounds that since, in reality, base and superstructure 'interpenetrate' (i.e. the so-called economic base includes politics, laws and ideas as constitutive elements), it is illegitimate to derive the latter from the former.[41] Yet, as Godelier has shown, Marxism can successfully meet this challenge by redefining the 'base' in terms of all of those elements which function as part of society's relations of production. Certainly, in Brenner's work, feudal relations of production necessarily involve 'extra-economic' forms of coercion, such as the political-legal powers of the landlords enshrined in serfdom and the manor.[42]

In fact, rather than being sunk by the problem of the *interpenetration* of base and superstructure, historical materialism actually comes to grief on the far more straightforward problem of their *interaction*. The infinite regression and plurality of historical causes involved in such interaction necessarily undermines the hierarchy of causation of which the metaphor of base and superstructure was intended to convince us. As Brenner's sophisticated historical studies emphasize, Marxists have, in practice, easily avoided the danger of the Scylla of reductionism, upon which Marxism's critics have usually seen it as foundering; yet this danger has only been avoided at the expense of being drawn into the Charybdis of pluralism. I have argued here that there is no way in which Marxism can successfully navigate between these two fates.

[41] H. B. Acton, *The Illusion of the Epoch* (1955), pp. 164–8, 177, 258; J. Plamenatz, *Man and Society* (2 vols., 1963), ii. 283–9, 345. For discussion of their views see G. A. Cohen, 'On Some Criticisms of Historical Materialism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, xliv (supplement, 1970), 121–4; S. Lukes, 'Can the Base be Distinguished from the Superstructure?', *The Nature of Political Theory*, ed. D. Miller and L. Siedentop (Oxford, 1983), 103–19; C. Lowe, 'Cohen and Lukes on Rights and Powers', *Political Studies*, xxxiii (1985), 296–303; Rigby, *Marxism and History*, pp. 188–92.

[42] M. Godelier, 'Infrastructures, Society and History', *New Left Review*, 112 (1978), 88–90 and *The Mental and the Material* (1988), p. 208; Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', 35–6; K. Marx, *Capital* (3 vols., Harmondsworth, 1981), iii. 926–7; Rigby, *Marxism and History*, pp. 192–4; Rigby, *History, Dialectics and Revolution*, pp. 173–7.

The usual alternative to historical materialism's claims for the universal primacy of society's productive forces or of its class structure is the claim that such primacy is historically specific. Here, however, I have argued that our ascription of historical primacy, whether universal or specific, will depend not upon historical reality but upon our own particular context and purposes.[43] If causation exists objectively, in the real world, then the explanatory accounts with which we make sense of such causation are necessarily, whether in history, in science, or in everyday life, more partial and pragmatic affairs.

[43] Gardiner, *Historical Explanation*, p. 105.