

# APPROACHING THE QUESTION OF FACTS IN HISTORY

IHS: History

Lecture I

## WHY WE STUDY HISTORY?

- The past teaches us about the present
- It builds empathy
- It can be intensely personal
- It can feel like completing a puzzle or solving a mystery
- Everything has a history!

# THE QUEST OF HISTORIANS: WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PAST?

- Is there such a thing as historical truth?
- How can we get to it?
- Would a time machine help?
- Would a video recording help?

# POSITIVIST VIEW OF HISTORY

Derived from three traditions:

- 1) August Comte's positivist philosophy
- 2) The British empiricist tradition
- 3) The Rankian tradition

Together they form E.H. Carr's 'Common Sense View of History'

## AUGUST COMTE AND POSITIVIST PHILOSOPHY

- Laced by a universalism espoused by the Enlightenment tradition
- Advocated the formulation of universal laws
- Three stages through which all human knowledge progressively passes:
  - 1) The theological or the fictitious
  - 2) Metaphysical or abstract
  - 3) Scientific or positive (the age of science and knowledge)
- Knowledge is generated through observation and experience
- Not interested in individual facts but in general laws
- These general laws can be derived through the method of induction

# THE EMPIRICIST TRADITION

- Knowledge is based on experience
- The primacy of senses as the source of knowledge
- Only legitimate form of knowledge is that whose truth can be verified
- Discounts knowledge based on tradition, belief, abstraction or imagination

# THE RANKIAN TRADITION

- Leopold von Ranke: Credited with the beginning of modern historiography
- The past should be understood/studied in isolation from the present
- The historian should write about the past based on ‘sources’
- But not all sources are equal
- Emphasis on providing references
- The primacy of facts

# THE HISTORICAL POSITIVISM OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

- The Rankian call: *wie es eigentlich gewesen*
- Claiming history as a science
- Aligned with the British empericist tradition
- Facts are like sense-impressions
- Their reception is a passive act
- A common-sense view of history

## WHAT IS A HISTORICAL FACT?

- Are all facts about the past of relevance to the historian?
- Certain basic facts form the backbone of history
- Not the ones with which the historian is primarily concerned
- Who decides what is a basic fact of history?
- Can a fact from the past be promoted to a fact of history?

# HISTORIANS OF THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL WORLDS

- What survives across generations to become the facts of Antiquity?
- The preservation of the past is a selective process
- What we know of 5th century BCE Greece is a picture formed by a small group of people
- Why do we know that medieval world was deeply religious?

# THE PLIGHT OF THE MODERN HISTORIAN

- The more recent past is more knowable
- Has a dual task
  - 1) Of discovering few significant facts and turning them into the facts of history
  - 2) Of discarding many ‘insignificant’ facts as unhistorical
- Fetishism of facts based on a fetishism of documents
- Do they reveal an absolute truth?

## THREE THINGS ABOUT FACTS AND HISTORY

- There exist no pure facts
- The historian needs to have some imaginative understanding of the minds of their subject
- The historian is of their own age

# The individual, society and history

IHS History: Lecture 2

# The individual and society in history

- What came first: the individual or the society?
- Complementary not opposites
- The interdependence grows with growing complexity
- But it is always a two-way process

# The cult of individualism

- Origins traced to the Renaissance
- Later connected with the rise of capitalism and Protestantism
- Formed the basis of the philosophy of ‘Utilitarianism’
- Did not necessarily imply a revolt of individuals against society

# The discipline of history and the cult of individualism

- Common sense view of history
- History is written by individuals about individuals
- Is this too simplistic a view of history?
- Knowledge of the historian not his individual possession
- The subjects of their histories are not isolated individuals

# The historian and/in the march of history

- Both the product and spokesman of his society
- A part of the procession of history
- Their positionality determines their angle of vision of the past
- May change his position along the way

# The historian and historiographical trends

- 19th century: history as progress
- Post WW1: from a cyclical theory of history to one in which history displays no patterns at all
- “Before you study history, study the historian.”
- “Before you study the historian, study its historical and social environment”

# Understanding the object/s of the historian's enquiry

- The behaviour of individuals?
- The action of social forces?

# The great men theory of history

- Is history the stuff of individual genius and follies?
- Is the theory essentially escapist?
- Can the behaviour of men as individuals be separated from their behaviour as members of groups?
- How do we understand the rebels and dissidents in history?
- Do ‘great men’ lie outside history?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ky-MKuwaKEo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp2k7m5fej4&t=226s>

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# THE IDEA OF PROGRESS AND THE DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY

HIS LECTURE 3: HISTORY



# ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS AND THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY

- Essentially unhistorical
- History viewed as cyclical

# THE TELEOLOGICAL VIEW OF HISTORY

- The Judeo-Christian approach
- History acquires a meaning
- Loses its secular character
- It is moving in a certain direction

# THE RENAISSANCE

- Restores the anthropocentric view of the world
- Places emphasis on the primacy of reason
- A more optimistic approach than the classical one

# ENLIGHTENMENT AND TELEOLOGY

- Retained the Judeo-Christian view of teleology
- It now became secularised
- The historical process imbued with rationality
- A cult of progress reached its peak of British prosperity

## POST THE 1920S

- A bleaker picture of human destiny prevailed
- The idea of progress still at the centre of Western civilization
- Bleaker for whom?
- Is it inherently Eurocentric?
- Someone's decline could be another's rise

# DISCUSSING THREE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PROGRESS AND HISTORY

- 1) That natural evolution can be equated to historical progress
- 2) That progress has a finite beginning or end
- 3) That progress is an unbroken straight line

# THE END OF HISTORY?

- What if our systems of government are as good as it gets?
- What if human history has peaked?
- What if we are living at the end of history?

# WHAT DID FUKUYAMA MEAN BY ‘THE END OF HISTORY’?

- The unquestioned triumph of liberal democracy
- Had defeated all of its rivals
- Backed by empirical data

# WHAT IS LIBERAL DEMOCRACY?

## DEMOCRACY

- Rule by the majority

## LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

- Rule of the majority
- Protects individual liberty
- Separation of powers
- Constitutional rights
- Favour free market economies

# HUMAN NATURE, PROGRESS AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

- A natural synthesis between human nature and liberal democracy
- Influenced by Plato's conception of the tripartite soul
- The Hegelian idea of respect and recognition (based on Kojève's reading of Hegel)
- Achievable through the liberal democratic state
- Through the enshrining of human rights

# ARE LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES PERFECT?

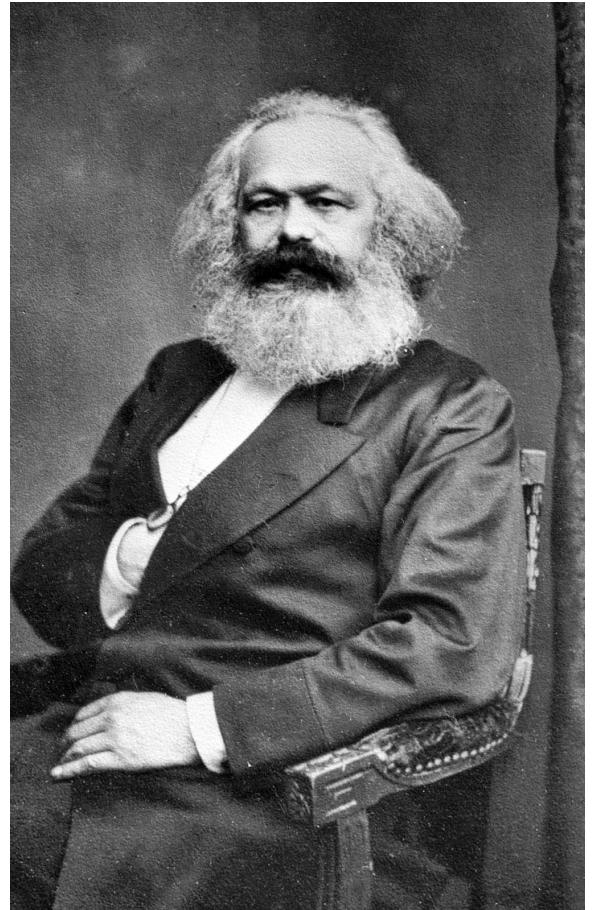
- They are deeply flawed
- The possible way out?
- Still not as secure as Fukuyama saw it to be
- Seen in the Fascistic shifts across the world
- Does it make us too comfortable?

# Ways of Looking at the Past: Part 1

IHS History: Lecture 4

# Who is Karl Marx and why is he so important?

- German born (1818-1883)
- Philosopher, economist, historian, political theorist, journalist, sociologist
- Occupied with understanding and explaining the capitalist mode of production
- Became its most foundational critics



# The Theory of Alienation

- Discussed in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*
- At its most abstract it means surrender of agency
- Four aspects:
  - 1) From the product of labour
  - 2) From the activity of labour
  - 3) From one's own specific humanity
  - 4) From others, from society

# Historical Materialism

- Aims to understand society as a product of particular material conditions
- A materialist conception of history
- Production and the exchange of things produced: the basis of all social structure
- Determines the nature of social relations in all societies
- The difference between different stages in history?
- Production and exchange

# How is historical change explained?

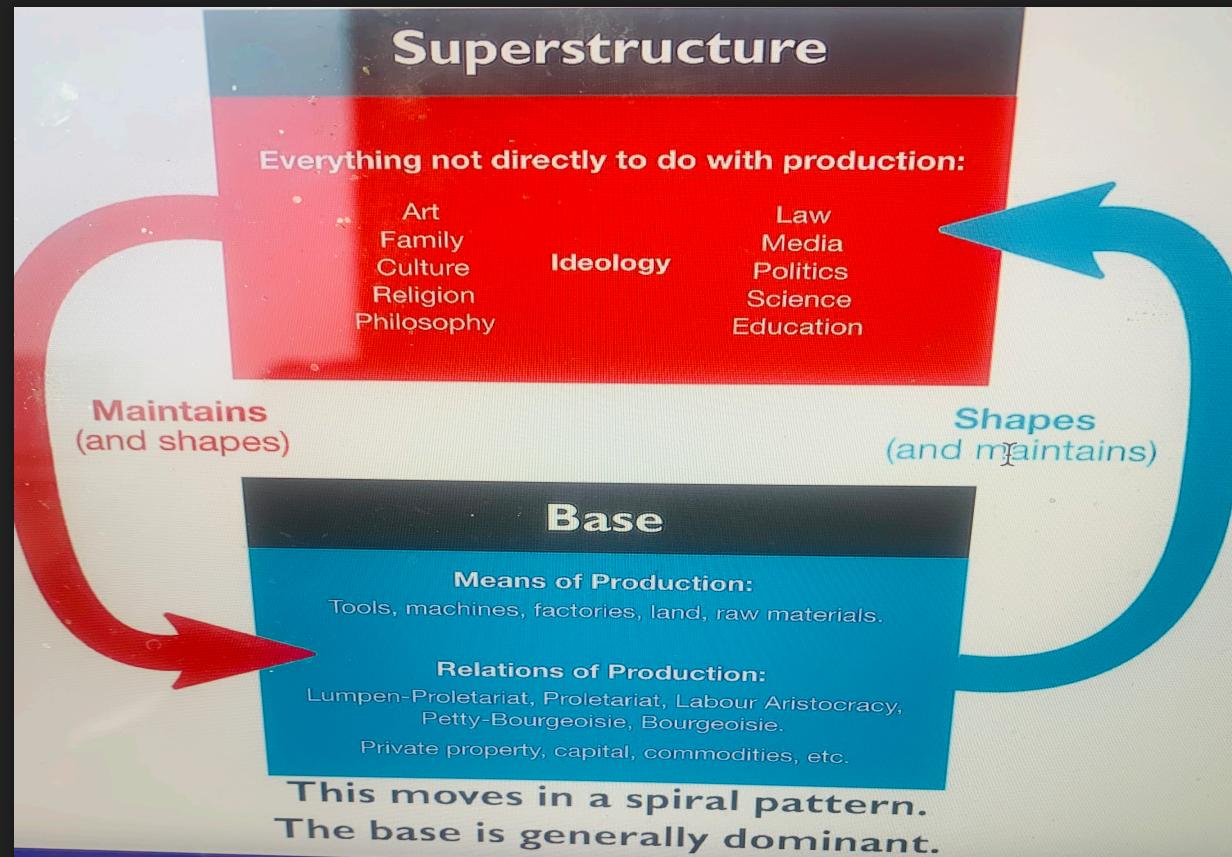
- Each stage of historical development is defined by a particular mode of production
- How does one transition into the other?
- Can be explained through 'dialectical materialism'

# Discounting the ‘great men’ theory of history

*“The final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men’s brains, not in man’s better insight on eternal truth and justice but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought not in the philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch”*

- Friedrich Engels

# Base and Superstructure

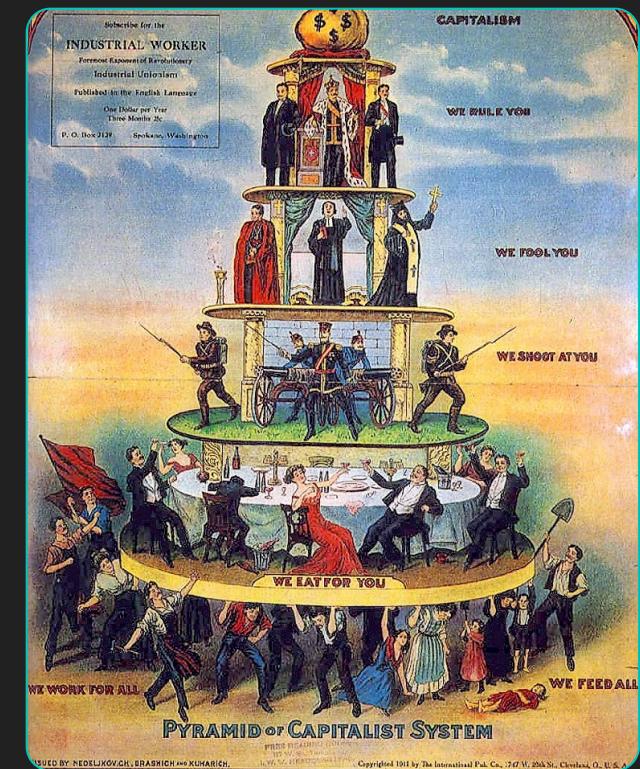


# The realization of historical progression

- From slavery to feudalism to capitalism
- Result of the contradictions between each historical epoch being resolved
- Through:
  - 1) The development of the society's productive forces
  - 2) Transformation of the relations of production through **CLASS STRUGGLE**

*"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle"*

- Karl Marx



# The nature of all modes of production

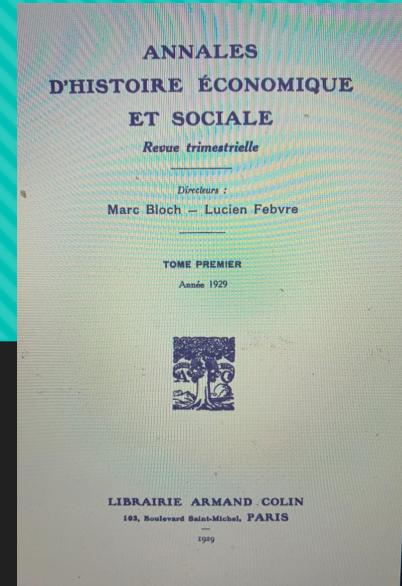
- The fraught co-existence of the exploiters and the exploited
- The struggle between them drives social historical change

# Accounting for roadblocks

- History is not linear as this makes it appear
- There exist setbacks and regressions
- Evident in the historical record of the 20th century
- The defeat of communism and the perseverance of capitalism
- The contradictions still exist and will continue to propel society towards the next stage of historical development

# The French Histographical Revolution/rebellion

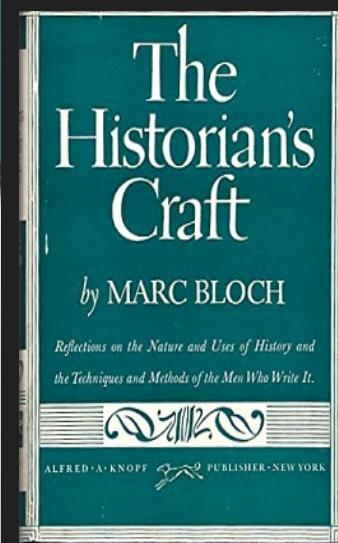
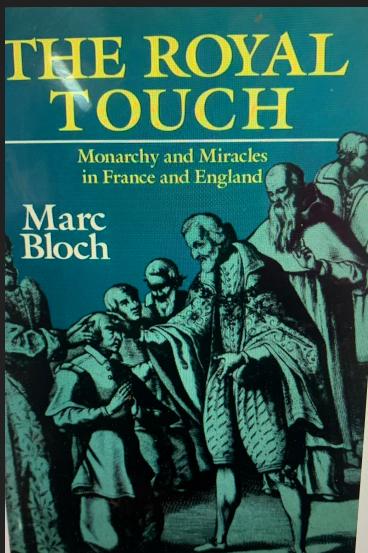
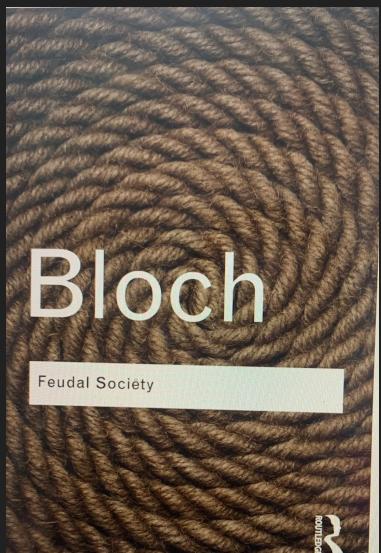
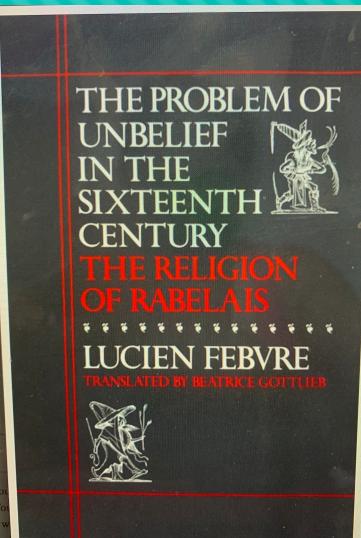
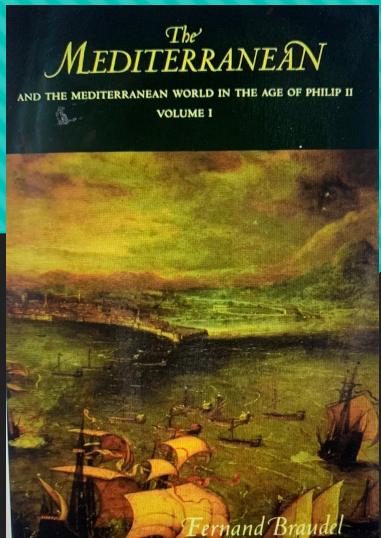
- Founded by Marc Bloc and Lucien Febvre
- Journal founded in 1929 (Annales: Economic and Social History; in 1946 it became Annales: Economies, Societies and Civilizations)
- What was it a rebellion against?
  - 1) Rankian history
  - 2) Marxist historiography



# The main historiographical interventions

- Incorporating methods of all the social sciences
- Elevates the discipline of history above all the others
- Unfolding the layers of a society or region over a long span of time: The *Longue Duree*
- The writing of a ‘total history’

# Some seminal works



*The Royal Touch* : Marc Bloc (1923)

*Feudal Society*: Marc Bloc (1939)

*The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century:  
The Religion of Rabelais* by Lucien Febvre

*The Mediterranean*: Fernand Braudel (1949,  
revised in 1966)

*The Historian's Craft* by Marc Bloch (1953)

# Themes of interest

- The question of belief
- Geography
- Emotions
- Climate and environment
- Folklore
- The question of notions : around youth, childhood, old age

# Ways of Looking at the Past: Part 2

# Postcolonialism

- An actual historical period and a way particular way of thinking about the world
- Decolonisation did not end the hegemony and dominance of the former colonial powers
- This is made apparent in the world around us both directly and indirectly

# What is postcolonial theory?

- To understand and highlight the continuity of the impact of the colonial encounter
- Emphasis on ‘reading from the margins’
- A postcolonial reading of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* by Edward Said
- Synchronising domestic authority with international authority
- A normalisation of colonial rule
- The critique is not of the novel but of colonialism itself
- The novel is best appreciated when read through a postcolonial lens

# A world divided into "us" and "them"

- Understanding 'Orientalism' (Edward Said, 1978)
- An institutionalisation of the study of 'other/ed' cultures
- Orientalism both a field of knowledge and a field of power
- The establishment of Western hegemony over 'Oriental' knowledge
- The creation of stereotypes and their subsequent transformation into historical "facts"
- The idea was to "*emplot* Oriental history, character and destiny" into a Western storyline
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QYrAqrpshw>

# Spot the commonality

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjdjDz8jhN4>
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZ\\_8fsG8Q1A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZ_8fsG8Q1A)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hb3gdUrlC4Q>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkV-YFTEy9o>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YykjpeuMNEk>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2q5n--XMTU>

# Subaltern Studies

## The historical Backdrop

- In the wake of a growing crisis of the Indian state in the 1970s
- A precarious nation state flailing to hold on to its dominance
- Sharpening of social and political inequalities and conflicts
- State challenged by different social and political movements
- Responded with repression: But not only repression
- coupled with patronage, money and populist rhetoric and slogans
- These measures secured the state's dominance but corroded the authority of its institutions

# Subaltern Studies: The Historiographical Backdrop

- An embattled nationalist historiography
- Faced a relentless attack by the "cambridge school"
- Marxist historiography posed a challenge to both but was riddled issues of its own
- Their claim to represent the history of the masses remained debatable

# Enter Subaltern Studies . . .

- Accused the colonialist, nationalist and marxist interpretations of robbing common people of their agency
- A new approach to restore history of the subordinated
- Started by an editorial collective of six scholars (later joined by more)
- Inspired from social and cultural history

# WHAT IS SUBALTERN STUDIES?

- A key movement within postcolonial studies in the 1980s
- Who is the ‘subaltern’ in ‘subaltern studies’
- Comes from Antonio Gramsci’s use of the term in his prison diaries
- The Subaltern Studies historians’ use of the term presented a point of departure from that of Gramsci’s
- Analyses the binary relationship of the subaltern and the ruling classes
- Studies the interplay of dominance and subordination in colonial systems