Introduction

This book addresses the role of history in the humanities and social sciences. Its purpose, however, is not narrowly conceived as a study of relationships between discrete subjects understood in terms of the contemporary division of academic labour. The volume does not ask how history as a discipline within a faculty ought to relate to other forms of inquiry in the human sciences. Its concern is less with the university subject than with historical consciousness more generally. The chapters in the book variously explore the role of historical knowledge in the fields of economics, anthropology, political science, political theory, international relations, sociology, philosophy, law and literature. Many of these disciplines had their roots in historical study, only later to develop into purely analytical or positivistic modes of investigation. Three examples will serve to illustrate the point: legal scholarship in the sixteenth century was regarded as dependent on historical information; politics in the eighteenth century was seen all round as involving historical judgement; and sociology, even at the end of the nineteenth century, was cultivated by many as a branch of historical science. It would be easy to multiply such cases. Each of these activities was distinct from history as a discipline, yet they were all nonetheless historical in character.

This pervasive historicism declined in the course of the twentieth century. The decline began with a perceived crisis. Ernst Troeltsch explicitly broached the problem in his 1922 essay 'Die Krisis des Historismus', which argued that the nineteenth-century ambition to reconstruct the world in terms of the developmental specificity of its components had an inevitably relativising impact on the judgement of values. The historicist vision, he noted, located all reality 'in the flow of becoming', emphasising particularity over universality, and subjecting truth to historical determination.[1] The only solution, Troeltsch argued, was to regard the cumulative fate of the West as offering a historical benchmark. He had

[1] Troeltsch 1922, p. 573. See also Troeltsch 2008 [1922].

already arrived at this conclusion twenty years earlier, when he recognised that the historical study of Christianity from Spinoza to David Strauss had progressively undermined its claim to universality.[2] But it was during and after the 1920s that more widespread debate ensued, eliciting arguments from all sides, including from Mannheim, Hintze, Heidegger, Heussi, Arendt and Leo Strauss.[3] In the aftermath of the crisis, the central importance of historical sensibility within the humanities and social sciences was steadily challenged. The shift coincided with the rise of American power to pre-eminence after the Second World War, the newfound prestige of US research universities, and the gravitational pull of statistical, analytical and scientistic methods on a substantial proportion of the professoriate. Viewed within a long-term perspective, this amounted to a sudden reversal of an established trend.

This book explores what is lost by misusing or disregarding historical understanding in the pursuit of knowledge about society, politics and culture. Such a rendering of accounts must begin by asking what it means to examine a subject historically. This Introduction lays the groundwork for that enterprise by outlining the emergence of historical mindedness in the aftermath of the scientific revolution, between the Enlightenment and the early twentieth century. In his great work of 1748, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu declared that 'laws should be so appropriate to the people for whom they are made that it is very unlikely that the laws of one nation can suit another'.[4] This amounted to claiming, as Montesquieu went on to make plain, that for laws to be effective they had to conform to the nature of the government under which they operated and the animating principle that gave a regime its momentum. This meant that in the case of a monarchy, for example, legal provisions should be compatible with the type of administration and with the principle of 'honour' that Montesquieu believed made it function in the way it did. More than this, a system of laws should be attuned to a people's economic way of life, their political values, their physical environment, their manners and their forms of worship. A state, in other words, was a product of its historical conditions. It followed that the science of politics, at least in part, depended on historical understanding and judgement.

It is true that politics for Montesquieu was not exclusively a matter of adjusting laws and legislation to prevailing attitudes and institutions. There was also the issue of the fundamental values against which

[2] Troeltsch 1902.
[3] Mannheim 1968 [1924]; Hintze 1927; Heussi 1932. For Heidegger see Bambach 1995; for Arendt and Strauss see Keedus 2015.
[4] Montesquieu 1989 [1748], p. 8.

contingent arrangements had to be estimated. From Montesquieu's perspective this meant that law ought to be evaluated by reason in accordance with transcendent norms of justice: 'relations of fairness' (*rapports d'équité*) were necessarily prior to 'the positive law that establishes them'. Even the Creator's decrees had to accord with 'invariable' rules.[5] Montesquieu's historicism, therefore, did not entail an endorsement of relativism. To that extent his aims were continuous with mainstream Christian thought. Nonetheless, *The Spirit of the Laws* did mark an epochal shift in political understanding. Montesquieu dedicated just one brief chapter in the first book of his *magnum opus* to an examination of the laws of nature. The remaining thirty books were concerned with civil laws and their manifold relations situated in comparative and historical contexts.

A glance at the great natural law texts of the seventeenth century underscores the major shift in approach. Hobbes, whose humanist training inspired him to translate Thucydides early in his career, largely excluded empirical analysis from *Leviathan*. He conceded that prudence, which formed part of politics, was grounded on the experience of the past. However, true wisdom, which begins with definitions, involved pure rational appraisal, or the 'summing up of the consequences of one saying to another'.[6] In the preceding generation Grotius had confined his use of historical data to illustrating the laws of nations recorded by ancient authorities. His primary goal was to examine fundamental rights as 'Mathematicians consider figures abstracted from Bodies'. In pursuit of that objective, he generally endeavoured to withdraw his mind 'from all particular facts'.[7]

Set alongside these exercises in mathematical reasoning, the eighteenth century signalled a clear break with earlier traditions of political philosophy. Even so, one has to be careful not to overdraw the contrast. For instance, the ancient historians regarded their works as offering instruction in practical principles. Over a millennium and a half later, but in much the same spirit, Machiavelli commended the study of the past as a guide to the present, complaining in the preface to his *Discourses* that the example of the Romans was 'sooner admired than imitated'.[8] Again in this vein, Bodin insisted that history presented the surest method of acquiring 'reliable maxims'.[9] However, during the Enlightenment a change of emphasis becomes apparent. By mid-century the utility of

[5] Montesquieu 1989 [1748], p. 4.
[6] Hobbes 2012 [1651], I, p. 58.
[7] Grotius 2005 [1625], I, p. 132.
[8] Machiavelli 1989 [1521], I, p. 190.
[9] Bodin 1945 [1566], p. 9.

history no longer consisted in a record of achievements to be imitated. Instead, inspecting the past aided the discovery of regularities that could assist judgement. For that reason, history did not merely yield exemplary episodes; rather, it uncovered the conditions that structured possibilities. In Hume relations between property, government, law, the sciences, commerce, mores and opinion constituted an object of systematic study. Writing just six years before Montesquieu, he made clear that social science relied on general principles. That implied uncovering the underlying causes of phenomena. While chance for Hume played a definite role in human affairs, many outcomes in social life came about for ascertainable reasons: patterns could be seen to emerge 'from certain and stable causes'.[10] Society and politics were historically relative.

In much the same way that Hume examined the systematic interconnections that determined relations between society and government, Adam Smith analysed the factors that conditioned the growth of opulence in the *Wealth of Nations*. This involved explaining fluctuations in national riches, which depended in turn on the extent of the division of labour, the proportion of the population engaged in work, and the quantity of capital available to sustain employment. These interdependent variables relied in turn on the accumulation of stock. How they operated was then shaped by the way in which industry was applied either in cultivating the agriculture of the countryside or the manufactures of the towns as policy and circumstances have varied across time, although Smith concentrated on the particular transition from the Roman Empire to the states of modern Europe.[11] Only on the basis of comprehensive analysis of this kind could the causes of the wealth of nations be determined. There was yet another consideration that Smith included in his account: the role of theory in formulating policy. His example of a scheme of false assumptions that had guided the approach of sovereigns was the 'mercantile system', which he explicated in Book IV of the *Wealth of Nations*. The 'sophistical' precepts of balance-of-trade theory had governed the management of European empires since the discovery of the New World.[12]

From the perspective advanced by Smith, history was not simply a product of human needs. Rather, any arrangement concerned with the supply of necessities and the creation of luxuries was governed by the conception of how the system ought to operate. On this reckoning, a

[10] Hume 1985 [1742], p. 111.
[11] Smith 1976 [1776]. These various factors are analysed respectively in Books I, II and III.
[12] Smith 1976 [1776], I, p. 433.

crude assessment of the relative impact of thought and material circumstances on the historical process was intrinsically simplifying and would inevitably lead to facile conclusions. The crucial factor in Smith's analysis of economic improvement was the role played by the division of labour. This emphasis had three important consequences. First, it revealed Smith's awareness of the pivotal significance of the peculiar human aptitude for barter in driving change: an animal, by contrast, can plead but not bargain. Second, since the practice of exchange gave rise to coordinated action it was amenable to causal analysis. Smith contrasted causal relations with 'accidental' concurrences which he illustrated with the example of two greyhounds pursuing their prey down a racetrack: their behaviour was symmetrical although they did not directly collaborate. Finally, the scale of change brought about by the division of labour was wholly unintended: the benefits it generated were 'not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends the general opulence to which it gives occasion'.[13] This insight involved a philosophical thesis that transformed the nature of historical explanation. From Vico to Hegel, the doctrine of unintended consequences exercised a powerful influence on how social processes were understood.[14] It provided the basis for the notion of a 'spirit of the age' which linked intentions with predictable outcomes in the absence of design. If not properly understood, the idea is liable to be mistaken for a piece of empty metaphysics, as it often is in commentaries on Hegel.

Truth, Hegel argued in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, is only the process of its own becoming. Knowledge, he thought, was not a matter of specifying an object in order to grasp its abstract identity but rather the progressive recognition of its meaning through its development.[15] The role of philosophy in bringing about this outcome was likewise viewed by Hegel as historical in nature. It was constructed out of the materials of its age and so could not be regarded as feeding on a timeless constant. Yet while philosophical effort was relative to its epoch, it also pressed forward into the future. In addition, the stages in its forward movement should be grasped on their own terms rather than as a series of dispensable preparations: as Hegel noted in his 1801 study of Fichte and Schelling, philosophy was no more an overture for what was to come than Sophocles was a prelude to Shakespeare.[16] Reason, we might say, unfolded out of the past, carrying what it accumulated as it advanced by its own labour. There is

[13] Smith 1976 [1776], I, pp. 25–6.
[14] Hirschman 1977, pp. 17 ff.
[15] Hegel 2018 [1807], p. 18.
[16] Hegel 1977 [1801], p. 89.

a sense in which this historical vision of philosophy amounted to a thoroughgoing critique of Kant. When, in the final chapter of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant surveyed the history of metaphysical thinking, he claimed to see nothing but 'ruins' as he looked backwards.[17] The implication was that philosophy must always begin anew rather than reflecting constructively on its course. However, at the same time, Kant presented his thought as a period-specific response to a crisis of reason that drove philosophy to seek 'satisfaction'.[18] As some scholars have noted, a basic impulse of Hegel's project was to make good on Kant's demand for reason to be gratified.[19] It follows that, at least in some sense, even Kant was not exempt from a historical conception of his own practice.

By the end of the eighteenth century most subjects had become eligible for historical investigation. For example, Germaine de Stäel related national literatures to prevailing social and political conditions whilst also examining their reciprocal influence on manners. She contrasted the experience of France with that of England. Because English liberty favoured commerce, the national culture was utilitarian in character. Correspondingly, the world of letters – including philosophy and works of imagination – was geared towards practical application. French thought, by comparison, was divorced from public power. Its function was consequently to refine attitudes rather than serve government. Its chief achievement, de Staël went on, had been to alleviate the burden of social distinctions without challenging their existence: literary elegance 'obscures all differences without destroying any'.[20] Three aspects of de Staël's reasoning deserve to be singled out. First, it was focused on explaining a particular occurrence – the role of literature in England by comparison with France. Second, the form of analysis employed involved accounting for the object investigated by situating it within a nexus of relations. Finally, both the object and its nexus were viewed dynamically. As with Montesquieu and Hegel, understanding was inferential, holistic and developmental. Moreover, describing change included reference to the operation of reciprocal influences: in Montesquieu, for instance, manners impacted on laws, which shaped manners in turn.

Collingwood took this approach to be characteristic of historical thinking as such which he believed had become the distinguishing feature of Western civilisation since the eighteenth century.[21] He contrasted history with mathematics and physical science as forms of knowledge whose era

[17] Kant 1998 [1781], A852/B880.
[18] Kant 1998 [1781], A855/B883.
[19] Pippin 1989.
[20] De Staël 1800, II, p. 8.
[21] Collingwood 1993 [1946], p. 208.

of dominance had passed. Historical reasoning, he claimed, occupied a position in his own time analogous to the role played by physics in Locke's day or mathematics in the age of Plato. He illustrated this change by differentiating how Greek thought in the fourth century BCE conceived of the polis from how city-states came to be understood during the Enlightenment and beyond: 'The political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle teaches in effect that city-states come and go, but the idea of the city-state remains for ever as the one social and political form towards whose realization human intellect, so far as it is really intelligent, strives.'[22] Among the moderns, on the other hand, the form of the city-state was itself a temporally specific phenomenon. It was a relative rather than a universal ideal whose conditions of existence had now passed. This fact shows that particulars are not simply examples of ideas; ideas themselves could take different historical forms. This conclusion applied to all human artefacts – to every product of labour, in the language of Hegel and Marx – ensuring that the science of human nature must be historical. This did not rule out discovering patterns of behaviour or recurrent habits and dispositions. A social type, such as a feudal baron, exhibited predictable features. Nonetheless, those features were conditioned by the environment that produced the type: 'In order that behaviour-patterns may be constant, there must be in existence a social order which recurrently produces situations of a certain kind.'[23] What historical awareness foregrounds, however, is that social orders are perpetually modified.

In developing the doctrine of historicity, Collingwood drew explicitly upon an idealist heritage that encompassed Bradley and Oakeshott in England, Dilthey, Windelband and Rickert in Germany, and Croce in Italy. The key precursor of this tradition was of course Hegel, whose own roots were traceable to an Enlightenment historicism developed between Montesquieu and Rousseau. The rise of this species of sensibility amounted, Friedrich Meinecke argued, 'to one of the greatest intellectual revolutions that has ever taken place in Western thought'.[24] What is striking in this verdict is that for Meinecke as much as Collingwood the transformation under review was a consummation: the historical approach represented a culmination that they believed would endure. It is also notable that for both of them historicism was a single package, although in actual fact the term includes a diversity of meanings.[25] Historical sensibility did not assume a specific shape.

[22] Collingwood 1993 [1946], pp. 210–11.
[23] Collingwood 1993 [1946], p. 223.
[24] Meinecke 1972 [1936], p. liv. See also Toews 2004.
[25] Iggers 1968, rev. ed. 1983; Beiser 2011.

Meinecke's conclusion was based on an argument ultimately drawn from Savigny. In his 1814 contribution to debate about legal codification in Germany, *Of the Vocation of the Age for Legislation and Jurisprudence*, Savigny declared that a 'historical spirit has been everywhere awakened'.[26] He cited Justus Möser and Gustav Hugo as predecessors in creating the relevant climate in which this sensibility could prosper.[27] But what exactly did he think the historical approach involved? In considering relations between history and the human sciences, there is a danger of treating historical study as if the purpose of the enterprise were self-evident. However, the very subject matter of history has been variously understood since the eighteenth century. For many, like Ranke, it is concerned with the life of the state; for others, like Buckle, it charts the course of civilisation; and for still others, like Lamprecht, its focus is on society. In each case it was far from certain what the object under examination was. Equally, the rationale of history has been disputed. While Ranke, again, believed that the historian could serve statecraft without confusing that role with the vocation of the politician, he also thought that the study of historical particulars revealed individual instances of the divine will: 'In power itself a spiritual essence manifests itself.'[28] The nature of historical causation has likewise proved contentious, as illustrated by Burkhardt's critique of mono-causal explanation in favour of the idea of 'reciprocal influence' operating between culture, religion and the state.[29]

These debates are not confined to professional historians, but are relevant to the study of society more generally. The problem of delimiting the subject matter of a discipline and isolating the objects of analysis within it is shared across the humanities and social sciences. So too is the question of how to determine relations of causation, how controversial issues can be treated impartially, and how empirical description can inform our choice of values. Prominent figures in the late nineteenth century such as Comte and Spencer opted to circumnavigate the most difficult aspects of these problems by investigating society on the model of the natural sciences, thus bucking the trend that Meinecke and Collingwood thought they had identified. From this perspective, events were best explained 'nomothetically', in Windelband's phrase – by abstracting from particulars with a view to subordinating individual cases under general causal laws.[30] Many others, however, persisted with the historical approach,

[26] Savigny 1831 [1814], p. 22.
[27] Savigny 1831 [1814], p. 31.
[28] Ranke 2011, p. 6.
[29] Burkhardt 1979 [1905].
[30] Windelband 1894.

endeavouring to develop a science of discrete entities – establishing what an item was and how it came about – without invoking law-like causal regularities. To many the individualising method still seemed salutary since the components that made up the human sciences – objects such as torts, prices, rights, tribes, money, constitutions and genres – were in essential respects unlike the bodies of classical mechanics or the particles of modern physics. With rapid progress in the biological sciences through the nineteenth century, analogising across the natural and the human worlds looked promising. The idea of a social organism began to thrive, as did the concept of political evolution. But still, to most observers, humanity seemed crucially different from the rest of the plant and animal kingdom since freedom, morality and reflexivity were regarded as distinctive features of human life.

Questions surrounding freedom, morality and reflexivity raised their own peculiar difficulties. But there were two more immediate dilemmas thrown up by the historical method. First, there was what looked like the simple empirical question of how one could identify relevant particulars: in seeking to account for wealth creation by observing the indeterminate mass of economic reality, where was one to begin? The sheer scale and complexity of the whole world of experience was too vast to form the subject matter of coherent empirical analysis. Second, there was the historical question proper: how does one construe the process of change to which empirical data is subject? If nomological explanation was not applicable in the cultural realm, the manner in which social events conditioned one another still had to be analysed. These quandaries became prominent during the so-called *Methodenstreit* waged between the German historical school of economics and Austrian economic theorists at the end of the nineteenth century. The leading document in that dispute is Carl Menger's *Investigation into the Method of the Social Sciences with Special Reference to Economics*. Menger accepted that the accumulation of statistical information, which he associated with German historical economists from Roscher to Schmoller, yielded relevant forms of explanation in economics, usually based on inductive inference. Yet Menger also wished to defend the utility of what Schmoller, in responding to Menger, had branded the hypothetico-deductive method.[31] Scholler's characterisation did not capture Menger's actual procedure. In his own words, what Menger wished to justify was the role of abstraction in reflecting scientifically on economic behaviour. He believed that social scientists did not merely collect data. They also focused on empirical 'forms' or

[31] Schmoller 1888 [1883].

'types' – such as exchange, price, supply and rent.[32] Economists were interested, that is, not solely in concrete particulars, but also in general phenomena which could be analysed and even explicated in mathematical languages.

It might seem as if this amounted to a plea on Menger's part for theory in place of history. This, however, is only a partial reading. Menger, as a working economist, was certainly concerned with economic theory, but he was also interested in economic change. He was preoccupied, therefore, not only with formal abstractions but with the appropriate relations between them: with, for example, 'the effect on prices of the increasing or decreasing of supply and demand, the effect of population increase on ground rent', and so on.[33] Underlying this focus was a theoretical reliance on 'atomism' in economic analysis, by which Menger meant a commitment to methodological individualism.[34] This formed the basis of his view that numerous social institutions – such as language, money and the state – were not products of deliberate design but emerged as unintended consequences of self-interested pursuit.[35] Here, in short, was a theory of historical change. In advocating it, Menger identified his project with Burke, and still more boldly with Hugo and Savigny – thus employing the founding figures of historical jurisprudence for his own purposes, and reclaiming them in the process from their customary association with German historicists such as Schmoller.[36]

From the point of view of this discussion the achievement of Menger was twofold. First, while advocating a pluralistic approach to economic research, he defended the aspiration to pursue the 'exact' analysis of economic behaviour by the use of ideal abstractions. But second, he also retained the ambition to account for change within an economy. What interested him most, of course, were theoretical adjustments – how demand, for example, affected supply *in principle* – rather than individual, concrete change. What he lacked, therefore, was a theory of historical causation, which remained a problem in the field of technical economics, and naturally in the social sciences more broadly. Although Max Weber's academic formation was within the German historical school, his debt to the Austrians is obvious. Writing to Lujo Brentano on 30 October 1908, he argued that Menger had largely been right in his

[32] Menger 2009 [1883], p. 35.
[33] Menger 2009 [1883], p. 42.
[34] Menger 2009 [1883], pp. 90 ff.
[35] Menger 2009 [1883], pp. 131 ff.
[36] Menger 2009 [1883], pp. 172 ff.