CHAPTER 1

Going forward by looking back: the rise of the longue durée

The discipline of history holds particular promise for looking both backwards and forwards. After all, historians are masters of change over time. Over at least the last five hundred years, historians have among other things spoken truth to power, they have been reformers and leaders of the state, and they have revealed the worst abuses of corrupt institutions to public examination.[1] 'The longer you can look back the further you can look forward', said a mid twentieth-century master of political power who was also a prolific historian, Winston Churchill.[2]

Historians' expertise in long-term change gives them powers of contextualising events and processes that strike others as perhaps too ancient to be subject to question, too vast for curiosity to query. For historians, however, the shape of manners and the habits of institutions appear otherwise. Preferences and habits alike change from generation to generation; they are reformed entirely over the course of centuries.[3] Historians focus on the question of how: Who did the changing, and how can we be sure they were the agents? These analytics of causality, action, and consequence make them specialists in noticing the change around us.

Historians have special powers at destabilising received knowledge, questioning, for instance, whether the very concepts they use to understand the past are of themselves outdated.[4] Historians learn how to argue about these changes by means of narrative, how to join explanation with understanding, how to combine the study of the particular, the specific, and the unique with the desire to find patterns, structures, and regularities: that is, how to join what the German philosopher of the social sciences Wilhelm Windelband called the 'idiographic' and the 'nomothetic', the particularising

and the generalising tendencies in the creation of knowledge that Windelband associated with the humanities and the sciences, respectively.[5] No historian would now seek laws in the records of the past but we do hope to attain some level of generality in our attempts to place events and individuals within broader patterns of culture. By combining the procedures and aspirations of both the humanities and the social sciences, history has a special (if not unique) claim to be a *critical human science*: not just as a collection of narratives or a source of affirmation for the present, but a tool of reform and a means of shaping alternative futures.

In the last generation, historians have thought a great deal about another element of their studies: space, and how to extend their work across ever greater expanses of it, beyond the nation-state that has been the default container of historical study since the nineteenth century and outward to continents, oceans, inter-regional connections, and ultimately to encompass the whole planet as part of 'world' or 'global' history. The attempt to transcend national history is now almost a cliché, as most historians question the territorial boundaries of traditional historical writing. Much more novel, and potentially even more subversive, is the move to transcend conventional periodisations, as more and more historians begin to question the arbitrary temporal constraints on their studies. *Transnational* history is all the rage. *Transtemporal* history has yet to come into vogue.[6]

Time, in all its dimensions, is the special province of the historian. 'In truth, the historian can never get away from the question of time in history: time sticks to his thinking like soil to a gardener's spade', wrote Fernand Braudel in the 1958 article in the historical journal *Annales* where he launched the term '*longue durée*'.[7] Braudel was a profound thinker about the many kinds of time – the multiple temporalities, as some might say – human beings inhabit. His aphorism captures something indispensable about the work of historians that is less central to the work of their fellow humanists and social scientists. Historians can never shake off the element of time. It clogs and drags our studies, but it also defines them. It is the soil through which we dig, the element from which history itself springs.[8]

The term *longue durée* came out of crisis, a 'general crisis of the human sciences', as Fernand Braudel put it. The nature of the crisis was in some ways familiar in light of twenty-first-century debates on

the future of the humanities and social sciences: an explosion of knowledge, including a proliferation of data; a general anxiety about disciplinary boundaries; a perceived failure of cooperation between researchers in adjacent fields; and complaints about the stifling grip of an 'insidious and retrograde humanism' (*un humanisme rétrograde, insidieux*) might all have contemporary parallels. Braudel lamented that the other human sciences had overlooked the distinctive contribution of history to solving the crisis, a solution that went to the heart of the social reality that he believed was the focus of all humane inquiry: 'the opposition between the instant of time and that time which flows only slowly' (*cette opposition . . . entre l'instant et le temps lent à s'écouler*). Between these two poles lay the conventional time-scales used in narrative history and by social and economic historians: spans of ten, twenty, fifty years at most. However, he argued, histories of crises and cycles along these lines obscured the deeper regularities and continuities underlying the processes of change. It was essential to move to a different temporal horizon, to a history measured in centuries or millennia: 'the history of long, even of very long duration' (*l'histoire de longue, même de très longue durée*).[9]

The ambition of Braudel and many of the historians of the *Annales* group who followed him in his quest was to find the relationship between agency and environment over the *longue durée*. This built upon a tendency visible within histories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – and, indeed, long before – to presume that the work of the historian was to cover hundreds of years, or at least a few decades. In the quest to make those earlier endeavours even more rigorous, indeed falsifiable, through the acquisition of quantitative fact and the measured assessment of change, conceptions of the *longue durée* were not unchanging. For Braudel, the *longue durée* was one among a hierarchy of intersecting but not exclusive temporalities that structured all human history. He had classically described these time-scales in the Preface to his masterwork, *La Méditerranée et le Monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949), as the three histories told successively in that work: an almost unmoving one (*une histoire quasi-immobile*) of humans in their physical environment; a gently paced (*lentement rythmée*) story of states, societies, and civilisations; and a more traditional history of events (*l'histoire événementielle*), those 'brief, rapid, nervous oscillations'.[10] Appropriately, many

of the features of the *longue durée* remained stable in Braudel's accounts: it was geographical, but not quite geological, time; if change was perceptible at this level, it was cyclical rather than linear; it was fundamentally static not dynamic; and it underlay all other forms of movement and activity.

Braudel ranged *l'histoire événementielle* against the *longue durée* not because such history could only treat the ephemeral – the 'froth' and 'fireflies' he notoriously disdained in *La Méditerranée* – but because it was a history too closely tied to events. In this respect, it was like the work of contemporary economists who, he charged, had harnessed their work to current affairs and to the short-term imperatives of governance.[11] Such a myopic form of historical understanding, tethered to power and focused on the present, evaded explanation, and was allergic to theory: in Braudel's view, it lacked both critical distance and intellectual substance. His solution for all the social sciences would be to go back to older models and problems, for example, to the treatment of mercantile capitalism by Marx, the 'genius' who created the first true social models on the basis of the historical *longue durée* (*vrais modèles sociaux*, *et à partir de la longue durée historique*). In short, even fifty years ago, Braudel himself was already recommending a return to the *longue durée*.[12]

By 1958, Braudel's increasingly adversarial relationship with the other human sciences, not least the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, impelled him to include a wider range of *longue-durée* structures. The term '*longue durée*' was new in historical parlance when Braudel adopted it as a term of art in his germinal article but it was not entirely novel: nineteenth-century French historians of property law had treated it over the *longue durée*, medical treatises had spoken of chronic diseases as being of long duration, sociologists studying long-term unemployment (*chômage de longue durée*) and economists tracing economic cycles were quite familiar with the phrase.[13]

Braudel's adoption of the term followed these earlier usages in tracing not the unchanging and immobile background conditions but also now the *longues durées* of culture such as Latin civilisation, geometric space, or the Aristotelian conception of the universe, which joined physical environments, enduring agricultural regimes, and the like. These were human creations that also exhibited change

or rupture in moments of invention and supersession by other worldviews or traditions. They lasted longer than economic cycles, to be sure, but they were significantly shorter than the imperceptibly shifting shapes of mountains and seas, or the rhythms of nomadism and transhumance. These not quite so long *durées* could be measured in centuries and were discernible in human minds not just in natural landscapes and the human interactions with them.

Braudel admitted that his earlier reflections on the *longue durée* arose from the depressing experience of his wartime captivity in Germany in 1940–5. They were in part an attempt to escape the rhythms of camp life and to bring hope by taking a longer perspective – hence, paradoxically, his frequent use of the imagery of imprisonment in his accounts of the *longue durée*.[14] When he theorised the *longue durée* in 1958, he had come to believe that it was fundamental to any interdisciplinary understanding and that it offered the only way out of postwar presentism. His immediate motives were as much institutional as intellectual. Not long before the article appeared, Braudel had assumed both the editorship of *Annales* and the presidency of the famed VI[e] Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, both in succession to Lucien Febvre after his death in 1956. He had to justify not merely the existence but the primacy of history among the other social sciences, particularly economics and anthropology. In this competitive context, where prestige and funding were at stake as much as professional pride, he had a 'trump card . . . which allowed him to claim for history the role of unifier of the human sciences in opposition to mathematics'.[15]

This agenda also dovetailed neatly with the rise in France of futurology – the forward-looking counterpart to the *longue durée* – which Braudel's friend Gaston Berger was promoting in his capacity as director general of Higher Education at the same time as he was supporting the VI[e] Section and engaged in creating the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme that Braudel would soon lead. On both sides of the Atlantic at this time, the future was as much an object of interest as the past and, indeed, the prospects for the two – in terms of funding, prestige and institutional viability among the human sciences – were tightly connected with each other.[16] Modern history had been forged to tell the revolutionary nation-states of nineteenth-century Europe where they were heading; in the twentieth century,

modern history was being reforged to tell the world what would come after the nation disappeared.

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This historical orientation towards practical action and the future is hardly a recent feature of historical writing. Indeed, it has been characteristic of large swathes of the western historical tradition since classical times. The idea that history is 'philosophy teaching by examples' is ancient; the aim for history to provide pragmatic counsel to its readers is equally enduring. The Greek historian Thucydides, for example, began his history of the Peloponnesian War between the Athenians and the Spartans with the notion that his history should be useful, and that it would be useful because human nature itself was unchanging: the evidence of the past could therefore be certain to prove helpful to the future. The Roman historians may have been less convinced of the durability of human nature in a corrupted world, but their works were often political in at least two senses: that they sought to offer moral instruction to those who held official responsibility and that they were often composed by men of politics reflecting on their own action or their countrymen's in retirement or retreat from political or military office.

History in this sense was what the orator and philosopher Cicero termed *magistra vitae*: a guide to life.[17] It retained that aspiration and that authority until at least the early nineteenth century – a 2000-year period in which the past was deemed an invaluable guide to the future. And it did so not least because the Romans told long-term histories of their commonwealth (often couched in terms of moral decline) and they were followed by church historians such as Eusebius and St Augustine who told the story of the unfolding continuity of a community of faith, in Augustine's case as the story of a city paralleling Rome, the *City of God* (*Civitas Dei*) – the invisible church of all Christian believers – on its pilgrimage through a corrupting world. In the European Middle Ages, the histories of specific communities – religious, like abbeys, or secular, like towns – could be told over long stretches of time as the micro-history of a relatively small place or population extended over decades or more often centuries along the timeline of cumulative annals.[18]

What we think of as modern western historical writing began with the desire to shape the present and the future derived from classical

models. The civil histories of the Renaissance and the mirrors for princes written by counsellor–historians such as Niccolò Machiavelli drew on examples from the past – often the Roman past, as in Machiavelli's *Discourses Concerning Livy* – as guides to political action in both princely and republican regimes, written either for the ruler (as Machiavelli's *Prince* was) or for citizens to digest (as Machiavelli's *Discourses* were). Many of these histories told the stories of the founding and the fortunes of particular cities and then grew to encompass early national communities and then histories of Europe, its empires, and ultimately, by the eighteenth century, the history of the whole world.

In the nineteenth century, especially in the aftermath of the French Revolution, history-writing became an increasingly important tool of political debate, with leading politicians in both France (for example, François Guizot, Adolphe Thiers, and Jean Jaurès) and Britain (Thomas Babington Macaulay and Lord John Russell, for instance) writing histories of their own revolutionary pasts to shape their national futures. It was also in this century that 'The old tradition of "pragmatic history" . . . could be refurbished to support the idea that history was useful in the education of statesmen and civil servants', even 'a school of statesmanship', in the words of Cambridge's late Victorian Regius Professor of History, J. R. Seeley.[19] Their visions of the past as advisor to future policy were accepted programmatically by the institutions of government, finance, and the military, such that history texts like Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (1890) could become the textbook on military strategy in naval colleges in the United States, Germany, and Japan, assigned in classrooms over decades to come.[20] Out of these matrices emerged other long-range inquiries into the past: for example, the broad sweeps of the *Annales* School, and the engaged historiography of reformers across much of the twentieth century. It is to these developments that we now turn, to illustrate the rise of the *longue durée* before we describe its retreat and return in subsequent chapters.

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Long-term visions of the past remained bound up with policy-making and public conversations about the future, and that was a motive to go long. Like Alfred Thayer Mahan before them,

historians of the 1960s and 1970s could depend upon policy-makers as an audience, and that was a rationale for staying general. Indeed, in at least one major subfield – military history – historians remain attached to the military schools and naval colleges that commission them to instruct future generals in strategy and international relations.[21] Military history remains for this reason one of the last outposts of long-term history in a short-term world.[22] Readers who care about the future may thrive on the particular detail of individual biography or battles, but generals and other strategists need the big picture on changes that take centuries to be fully expressed. It is little coincidence, then, that military writings were among the earliest sources of counterfactual thinking in the eighteenth century as strategic thinkers gamed out multiple possibilities, or that the earliest counterfactual novel in 1836 was about Napoleon and the 'conquest of the world'.[23]

Reformers and revolutionaries also need the big picture. Generation upon generation of political reformers capitalised upon history to revisit the past, some of them radicals for whom the alternatives and counterfactuals of the past gave reason for the revolutionary reconception of institutions of democracy, race, and property ownership. In a tradition that stretched back to Karl Marx, twentieth-century historians around the world continued writing about the changing nature of states, bureaucracies, and popular movements, making daring predictions about the long-term sweep of events. Economic inequality and the role of the state were the focus of one of the most ambitious attempts to look backwards and see forwards ever created. Marx's version of the history of class conflict is well known, but we have forgotten many of the historians who came after him, and who thought that the history of inequality clearly demonstrated the duty of reformers to amend government in economic systems that provided limited opportunity for the poor. For example, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, radical designers of state socialism in the late nineteenth century, turned themselves into historians in order to change the institutions around them. In eleven volumes of history on English government and its past, the husband–wife team reviewed the long history of institutions as a roadmap to future reform, demonstrating historical continuities of care of the poor and responsibility for roads from the Tudor past

up to the recent present when, as they understood it, capitalism had led to the abnegation of mutual responsibility between rich and poor.[24] The books were a work of intense archival and secondary reading, still impressive enough to Gertrude Himmelfarb to make her wonder decades later 'how they had time left for meetings'. Their books formed a major strain of influence of the Fabians over political education and political movements not only in Britain but also around the world.[25]

This programme of history provided the blueprint and understanding for a government appropriate to a changing Britain. As the Webbs understood it, the message of history was that responsibility between the classes was a constant of ethical societies, but that in every generation institutions had to be reinvented by concerned parties. Those reinventions, as they understood it, tended to take the form of cooperation between larger and larger regional entities, so that the shape of government tended to expand, first from local government to regional government, and then from regional government into national and international government, extending the benefits of democracy from isolated locales to the whole world.

The Webbs' political reasoning, like that of many of their contemporaries, was steeped in an understanding of historical change. The progressive thinking of Comte, Spencer, and Darwin suggested to them the importance of evolution over time to institutions, cultures, and organisms alike, while legalist influences like Theodor Mommsen, Henry Maine, and J. F. McLennan taught them about the historical reality of irreconcilable conflict between interests warring over institutions, and the way that successive generations of reform had changed the law itself, abolishing slavery, bride kidnapping, and female infanticide.[26] Yet to these formal understandings of the influence of the past on the future, Sidney Webb added his own historical understanding of the importance of social movements and ethical awakenings, which he referred to as the 'organic changes' of political life.[27] In this view of history, knowing the past was not only useful for predicting the future; it was also a necessary precondition of making ethical decisions about how to conduct a society.

Driven by their understanding of history to pursue a better world, the Webbs' historical exercises were paired with active political life.

Both husband and wife were engaged in pamphleteering, campaigning for office, and meeting with other Fabian socialists to urge on such revolutionary programmes as the provision of clean water, free of charge, to poor households across London. Sidney Webb sat as an MP for Seaham, was elevated to the Lords, and served as Secretary of State for the Colonies and Secretary of State for the Dominions in Ramsay MacDonald's second Labour government. Perhaps most influential was their design for the 'London Programme', that plan for extending government to design all aspects of London's housing, transport, and water – amenities that are today all but taken for granted as part of the modern city.[28] It was an ethical understanding of the city, built on a deep encounter with history, that allowed the Webbs and their friends to convince Londoners that a city water supply that served only the few was no way to run a town.[29]

By the twentieth century, the *longue durée* (although generally not, of course, under that name) offered a canonical tool for writing revisionary history in the service of reform. While the Webbs targeted the reform of municipal and national government, their success inspired historians with even bigger targets in mind. R. H. Tawney, a historian of peasant experience in early-modern England, became one of the intellectual bridges between the West and China. Having researched the fifteenth-century struggles between export-oriented pastoralists and sustenance-oriented poor farmers Tawney began, by the 1920s, to consider the struggle for farmland as an international experience of poor peasants around the globe. Armed with a deeper understanding of economic history, he began to understand the precedents for modern struggles against landlordism in the age of advanced capitalism and international land reform.[30]

Indeed, Tawney's career exemplifies the activist agenda of long-term thinking by historians of that generation. Sent to China by the Institute of Pacific Relations in 1931, he authored an agrarian history of China that sounded strangely similar to his histories of Britain, wherein the drama between landlord and peasant comprised the ultimate pivot of history and signalled the immediate need for rational land reform.[31] In this way, history allowed Tawney's arguments, so pertinent to the era of the People's Budget and Land Reform in Lloyd George's Britain, to be generalised around the world. A universal truth of class dynamics around land, narrated as a *longue-durée* history

seen through lenses ground by Marx and the American political economist and land-tax reformer Henry George, could be brought to bear on specific national traditions and its truth tested and persuasively argued for in different regions. Such applications were very different from those Braudel would later condemn among his own contemporaries for being excessively presentist, uncritical about power, and evasive about fundamental questions of causation and explanation. Long-range history was a tool for making sense of modern institutions, for rendering utopian schemes comprehensible, and for rendering revolutionary programmes for society thinkable.

The *longue durée* also appealed to those with no desire to speak to institutions, but much interest in political change. Eric Hobsbawm's many publications of the 1950s and 1960s contextualised international peasant land grabs, Marxist movements, squatters, and anarchist travellers in a long line of what he called 'primitive rebels'. The argument refuted the claim that these disorganised bands of students – whether the American Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or Algerian, Palestinian, or Cuban postcolonial movements – were historical failures, because they lacked a disciplined relationship with an international Marxist body. Instead, Hobsbawm showed, spontaneous popular movements demanding an extension of the enjoyment of democracy to the many and criticising the limits of capitalism had heralded revolutions since early in the modern period, coming directly out of the people's common sense rather than from any particular party or doctrine. By implication, popular movements of the postwar world should receive the same credit, whether or not they allied with an already tempered view of constitutionality, American, Soviet, or European style.[32]

Hobsbawm remained through the 1970s and 1980s a theorist of long-term political change, arguing forcefully for the liberating use of history as a set of past precedents for present change. He looked approvingly to the American Lewis Mumford and other historians of urban clearance, who were then drawing parallels between the forced evictions typical of slum clearance in the Victorian era, and modern slum clearance in the era of highway building. At the same time, he argued equally forcefully against using reductionist historical narratives for political purposes, for instance conservative movements that looked back naively to a more moral age.[33]

The use of history to advise contemporary politics exemplified by Tawney, the Webbs, and Hobsbawm was far from unique. Reformed versions of national history, offering a new vision of belonging and reform to match progressive politics, were appearing all over the world. In the United States, Charles Beard and Arthur Schlesinger, Sr pursued *longue-durée* histories of American identity, rethinking America not in terms of racial centrality but in terms of racial pluralism. The wider swathe of American historians affiliated with the project of reform and left-wing political critique includes notably the history department of the University of Wisconsin in the 1950s, where Merle Curti penned *longue-durée* histories of passive resistance, peacemaking, and democracy.[34]

In Britain, radical historians reconsidered the importance of urban planning on behalf of the poor in light of the seizures of land from the peasantry in early modern Europe. Other historians joined the modelling of government reform as inspiration for future reformers. The original sin of capitalism, as understood by historians like John and Barbara Hammond, W. G. Hoskins, Maurice Beresford, and Karl Polanyi, needed to be corrected, and their understanding of the past helped them to recommend the provision of welfare, health care, parks, and housing as necessities of life that capitalism had taken away from the poor and that government should again provide.[35]

In the postcolonial world, too, looking back to history was a natural precondition of looking forward from 1920 to 1960. New national histories, notably those of C. L. R. James and V. D. Savarkar, emerged to explain the long trajectory of thwarted rebellions that led up to national independence, and to target particular egalitarian reforms, for instance the redistribution of land, as a criterion of fulfilling this legacy. In Ghana and Delhi, even prime ministers became historians (in Trinidad and Tobago, a historian – Eric Williams – later became prime minister), as a sense of the deep past helped to orient and give confidence to those governing new nations, and to establish a sense of constitutional continuities with western traditions working alongside historical particularisms inherited from centuries of ethnic struggle.[36]

Historians were not the only ones who looked back to look forward. There were political theorists, like Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, who wove evidence gathered from the centuries

into newly robust theories of democracy.[37] Lewis Mumford, the journalist of urban planning, found it necessary to refashion himself into a *longue-durée* historian in order to explain the dangers of suburban sprawl or slum clearance in the era of the interstate highway system – contemporary politics that he illuminated with the history of Victorian slum clearance and progressive movements. His macrocosmic surveys, particularly *Technics and Civilization*, included entire theories of industrialisation, mechanisation, the isolation of the working class, and time discipline that anticipated the influential theories of Michel Foucault and E. P. Thompson much later.[38]

All of these individuals looked into the past with the expectation of better understanding the future on behalf of a mass public readership and direct influence on political policy. Beard's and Schlesinger's textbooks were assigned across the United States and went into multiple editions.[39] Mumford's publications stretched into the hundreds, often in short articles in *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, and *Harper's Magazine*. He became one of the major figures in the American debates over race and urban clearance, denouncing the slum clearance policies of Robert Moses in New York City and providing an intellectual framework for the activism associated with Jane Jacobs.[40]

These debates made for a climate where disciplinary historians understood themselves as working in part for an audience of civil servants and social scientists who used historians' *longue-durée* perspective as material for public reform. From Tawney in the 1930s through to the 1980s, professional historians writing about land issues, in both the West and in India, entered the *longue durée* to engage this material and raise larger questions about institutional actors and public purposes. Their scholarly work constituted a conversation between disciplinary history and the institutions of international governance, ranging over centuries with the help of close readings of particular documents, events, and characters, leaning heavily on the work of other scholars in the field. For scholars who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s *longue-durée* history had been a tool for persuading bureaucrats and making policy.

Professional historians could expect an influence on policy that few historians today enjoy, whether they worked with officials or popular movements. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr worked closely on

questions of policy with American president John Fitzgerald Kennedy. William Appleman Williams, author of several extensive histories of American international relations, drew from his *longue-durée* studies a critique of the dangers of America's Cold War entanglements, and shared these with the public through a series of essays urging Americans to take political action, published in *The Nation* and as separate volumes that were widely read, praised, and denounced across the academy. (He refused a post in the Kennedy administration.)[41]

The institutions of international development looked to history to supply a roadmap to freedom, independence, economic growth, and reciprocal peacemaking between the nations of the world. For example, John Boyd Orr, founding director of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, began his career by publishing a retrospective history of hunger that began with Julius Caesar's conquest of Britain and ended with improving relationships between farm labourers and landlords with the Agriculture Act of 1920.[42] By the 1960s, economic historians like David Landes had retooled the study of the history of the Industrial Revolution to support Green-Revolution-era development policies, promising a future of abundant riches on the back of a history of constant invention.[43] And in the 1970s, theorists of land reform like the agrarian economist Elias Tuma and the British geographer Russell King turned to *longue-durée* history, synthesising the work of historians as they consulted for the organs of international policy by contextualising present-day land reform in light of centuries of peasant struggle for participation in agrarian empire dating back to ancient Rome.[44]

There was plenty of *longue-durée* history of land policy for them to work with. As the founders of the United Nations debated appropriate interventions in the Global South to put the world on a peaceful path to world order, followers of Henry George, who were still numerous on both sides of the Atlantic, turned to the *longue durée* to offer an account of history that read landlord monopoly as the signal crime in modern history and popular ownership of land as its necessary antidote. Georgist histories appeared in the 1940s and 1950s, establishing narratives of the American agrarian tradition since Thomas Jefferson. Georgist historians laboured to make clear the tide of abuses by landlords and the necessity of populist government

holding these land grabs at bay. In this vein, Alfred Noblit Chandler published his *Land Title Origins, A Tale of Force and Fraud* (1945), a history of the expanded powers of capitalists over land that traced the problem to the railway barons who were George's contemporaries and to their power over state-funded public colleges in the United States – the so-called 'land-grant' colleges funded by the Morrill Act of 1862.[45] Similarly, Aaron Sakolski published *Land Tenure and Land Taxation in America* (1957), in which he offered an intellectual history of America based on the long story of successive amendments to property law, pointing to a long history of debates over the history of ownership in land through Henry Maine, Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, F. W. Maitland, Paul Vinogradoff, Max Weber, and G. R. Geiger.[46] Ultimately, he reasoned, the injunctions about land were the reflection of a conception of justice, and that justice had at its core a set of spiritual and religious values where participatory access to land was the direct reflection of a doctrine that valued every human, rich and poor alike. Sakolski wrote, 'The early Christian church fathers were imbued with the ancient Hebrew traditions, and their concept of justice as related to landownership followed along the same lines'.[47] All the way back to biblical times, moral precedents could be found for challenging the accumulation of capital among landed elites, and these precedents were now packaged to promote legal action on the national and international scale.

The classical *longue durée* of social historians like Tawney, who used their sense of the deep past of institutions and movements to persuade their readers about the need for social change, was being appropriated into what might be called a 'dirty *longue durée*' in the hands of think-tanks and NGOs. In this dirty *longue durée*, non-historians dealt with an impoverished array of historical evidence to draw broad-gauge conclusions about the tendency of progress. They rarely acknowledged secondary sources or earlier traditions in thinking about the period or events in question. Typically, they dismissed Marxist or other leftist perspectives out of hand, offering an interpretation of history that vaguely coincided with free-market thinking, faith in technological progress, and the future bounty promised by western ingenuity. There are older precedents, of course, to the dirty *longue durée*, bound up with popular history in its role in popular instruction, going back at least to Charles Dupin's

Commercial Power of Great Britain (1825) and extending through the popular histories of technology of the 1850s, for example.[48]

That history can be used to promote a political bias is nothing new. Yet political and institutional conditions must align for any new genre to come into being. In the postwar United States, with the expansion of NGOs, the broadening of American hegemony and institutions of transnational governance like the United Nations and the emergence of the World Bank, the conditions were set for a wide class of consumers of *longue-durée* history, hungry for instruction about how to manage tremendous questions like famine, poverty, drought, and tyranny. As baby-boomer historians later retreated from direct engagement with these issues into the micro-history of race and class, long-term history became the domain of other writers without the historian's training – some of them demographers or economists employed by the Club of Rome or the Rand Corporation, others psychologists, biologists, self-proclaimed futurologists, or historical amateurs writing for a popular audience in the era of the alleged 'population bomb' and 'limits to growth'.[49] Dirty *longue-durée* history blossomed, but historians were not the ones with their hands in the dirt.

International governance's demand for useful historical stories incentivised the production of impossibly inclusive large-scale syntheses. The demands for historical understanding, and indeed the leaps of rationality and abstraction executed with historical data, grew larger and larger. The most fantastic of these claims were made by the physicist turned systems-theorist and futurologist, Herman Kahn, who promised to settle debates about resource use, environmental catastrophe, and consumption by examining long-term trends in world history. Kahn and his collaborators charted streamlined historical data on population growth since 8000 BCE against prophecies of future technological improvement and population control, and concluded by foreseeing a post-industrial world of 'increasing abundance'.[50]

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Taking these earlier examples of *longue-durée* historical writing with future-oriented intent into account, it remains to talk in more general terms about ways that thinking about our past can help us

talk about our future, especially in the support of these modest purposes that we define as the public future. There is a long line of thinking about how history can help – some of it from ancient theology and political philosophy, which sought to use the examples of great lives to instruct future leaders; some of it from Marxism's dedication to using history to help the struggling masses. These traditions have a great deal to offer – an insistence on free will and the possibility that destiny is unfixed; proof of the power of counterfactual thinking to destabilise the seeming inevitability of current institutions, values, or technologies; and utopian histories about traditions that represent a better world than the one we have now.

What follows is a set of suggestions about how knowledge of history can help anyone – a member of an institution, an educated reformer, or a radical struggling to represent the voices of those traditionally excluded from power – to think with history about their options. What we offer is history where thinking about the future is no longer left to experts, be they experts in International Relations, economics, or climate science; where remaking the future is once again something within the purview of anyone who can read and talk about stories from the past. On that basis, we wish to recommend three approaches to historical thinking, in public and ethical terms, about the shaping of our shared future. Those means are a hard-headed discourse about destiny and free will, the power of counterfactual thinking, and utopian thought.

1 THINKING ABOUT DESTINY AND FREE WILL

How do societies actually change their ways without collapsing? What about 'reform'? Is the amassing of raw data and abstract models the only way that individuals can use to reshape the civilisation around them? Can a civilization on a path to resource exhaustion, poisoning its own air and water, turn back and decide to divert its resources to sustainable futures for all? Or do the laws of economics portend despair for the masses and survival only for the few?

Insofar as both climate science and economics have often left us with a vision of the world in which alternative futures are scarce or non-existent, history's role must be not only to survey the data about responsibility for climate change, but also to point out the alternative

directions, the utopian byways, the alternative agricultures and patterns of consumption that have been developing all the while. As the cultural geographer Mike Hulme puts it, in many climate debates, '[h]umans are depicted as "dumb farmers", passively awaiting their climate fate. The possibilities of human agency are relegated to footnotes, the changing cultural norms and practices made invisible, the creative potential of the human imagination ignored.'[51] Climate change, evolutionary anthropology, and economics may well paint a self-portrait of the species as a victim of its selfish genes, of DNA that instructs us towards greed and exploitation no matter what, but history and anthropology are always reminding us of the variety of human values and forms of mutual aid.

In asking questions such as these, climate science is on the verge of rediscovering these alternative ways of thinking about the future. In the climate debates of the last decade, at issue has been, as the Australian environmental historian Libby Robin argues, the notion of 'past changes with increasing present effects'.[52] That is, climate scientists and policy-makers have clashed over the problem of separating out original causes that set into gear a pattern of consequence, from primary and final causes. In order to understand long-term change, whether of the climate or political regimes, scholars necessarily need to understand different time-scales, actors, periods, and events in their complex relationships with each other; that is one of history's primary capabilities as a field. By implication, environmental discourse is about to land squarely in the domain of history, if indeed it has not done so already. If we really want to understand long-term sustainability, we need to look at the past. Thousands of civilisations before ours have questioned hierarchical arrangements, often successfully. Knowledge of the past is therefore a source for understanding the extent to which we have free will in the future.

2 COUNTERFACTUAL THINKING

When we talk about sustainable economies, what we often care about is reversibility: Could we have turned back the path to climate change if we had banished the steam engine? Could we support any major part of the world on a Victorian economy connected by

wind-powered vessels and efficient train-lines? Would we have to reconsider cattle farming itself to develop a sustainable agricultural ecology? How far back in time is far enough to save the planet? An index of past mistakes likewise informs the economists' question of whether economies formed around other principles than the ones that informed the twenty-first-century United States could continue to grow. Could societies like Bolivia that protect or nationalise their water supply ever compete with a free-trade world dominated by private interests? Would the super-efficient, nationalised bureaucracies of nineteenth-century civil services be able to compete with modern globalised economies? How far back would we go, if we wanted to find the origins of our current discontent, both to save our oceans and to protect the rights of poor people to food and water?

These questions are no idle speculation in the age of sustainability. Rather, scientists like geneticist Wes Jackson, whose Land Institute in Kansas has investigated principles of sustainable and responsible farming for the last three decades, have concerned themselves fastidiously with counterfactual history as the means to sketching a path forward.[53] In his reflective essays about the path to founding a sustainable agriculture, Jackson describes how mathematicians who worked with the Land Institute pored over cycles of broadening counterfactual questions about the scale of commodities networks necessary for there to be a tractor on his farm. What if there were no state-provided highways upon which to bring a bolt for the tractor? What if there were no aeroplanes with which to assemble the global board of the company that built the tractor in the first place? Would tractor-based farming still be possible in a post-carbon world?

These concerns are of immediate applicability to scientists whose stated goal is to assemble the materials for a form of farming that could feed our cities past the age of carbon crisis, into a world of rapidly changing weather, transport, and supply chains. They represent a form of inquiry with which historians are extremely familiar: counterfactual logic. Counterfactual thinking is the kind of work historians do when they speculate about what might have taken place had Napoleon not lost the battle of Waterloo, or the conditions that would have had to be in place for the First World War never to have happened. It can be a parlour game – as Voltaire mischievously asked, would the world have been different if Cleopatra's nose had

been shorter? – but it informs all historical thinking about causality and, therefore, responsibility.[54] In the age of sustainability, counterfactual thinking is everyone's business. It is a form of historical logic as necessary for the inventor or entrepreneur who wants to build a climate-resistant tractor as it is for the geneticist designing farming practices for a sustainable world.

In public and in print, specialists in sustainability have unknowingly become historians. The major abstract concerns of climate scientists and the policy specialists who responded to them were questions over periodisation, events, and causality; they were problems in the philosophy of history. We are in a world that more and more looks to history to make sense of the changing nature of world events. But what if protecting the planet requires rejecting prosperity?[55] That line of thinking would require a very different theoretical toolset than the one that currently dominates corporations and policy. Moreover, a true sustainability will involve unthinking the power of terms like 'improvement', 'development', and 'growth', which modern capitalism has inherited from the last two centuries of its historic development, and which are embedded in all economists' definitions of success.[56]

Similarly, historical cases can help us pinpoint how long ago policy-makers gave up on creating a more sustainable world. Paul Thompson has traced accounts of sustainable policy-making through international consortiums of the 1980s and 1990s, zeroing in on the 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future*, as a key event that defined the position of the United States and the Global South as a 'prisoner's dilemma', where the United States could hardly be expected to act, given the indeterminacy of India's and China's positions on global climate change.[57] For policy-makers or entrepreneurs who truly want to find a way out of global gridlock, who take scientists' warnings at their words, these histories create imperative lists of the cognitive pollutants with which generations of bad policy have befouled public discourse. Without removing those impediments – discounting the 'green-washing', overcoming the 'prisoners' dilemmas', recognising that sustainability may not really be able to serve not only the planet and the people but also prosperity – there may be very little pragmatic future for climate activists.

With knowledge of these events, institutions, and discourses, however, the possible future of action becomes wider again. These stories are therefore vital for our time; they illustrate how important narrative history is for clear thinking about the future. They also raise important questions about the kind of story-telling that we most need right now.

3 UTOPIAN THINKING

Limited numbers of historians have been engaged on a project documenting these alternatives, for micro-history made the documenting of the victim under mainstream society the rule, not the documenting of alternative utopias.

The *longue-durée* utopian tradition is a rich one. Lewis Mumford's *The Story of Utopias* (1922) narrated the history of utopian thinking from Sir Thomas More to nineteenth-century fantasy writer H. Rider Haggard, and the tradition can be traced even further back, to Plato, and forward to much of contemporary science fiction. These texts, from the sober to the absurd, Mumford argued, pointed not least to the primary source of thinking about the reform of cities, and one of the major intellectual sources to contribute to the rise of urban planning in the late nineteenth century.[58] Later, Wes Jackson's *New Roots for Agriculture* (1980) articulated a tradition from the ancient world through the transcendentalists and modern soil science warning about the consequences of agriculture out of touch with natural cycles, mapping upon those failures the rise of new agricultural practices around factory farming and top-down management, and documenting the rise of an alternative movement of organic farming.[59] These stories bring up to date institutional struggles about how societies confront ecological problems: they bring climate change down from the spectre of an incontrovertible force making war upon our selfish genes, irreconcilable with the structure of our DNA itself, and put climate change and sustainability back in the realm of human institutions, which can be faced in terms of social and political reform.

Thus in our time, the possibility of conceiving of a reform tradition is of vital importance for sustained engagement with agriculture and climate change at any level other than that of professional economics or climate science. For scientists in the 1980s and 1990s who wished to rethink the consequences of the Green Revolution, new *longue-durée*

histories of patriarchy and ecology coming out of the history of science were of immense inspiration; centuries-long revision of the tradition of Francis Bacon up to factory farming reverberates through the works of dissident scientists who have come to represent important voices in thinking through a future built around organic farming. More recently, a revival of the utopian tradition in *longue-durée* history has pointed to the rise of state-sponsored research on permaculture in Australia, where constraints over water made alternative agriculture a focused subject of legislation and research from above already by the 1930s.[60] Those alternatives, first blooming thirty years ago, have today proliferated into a rich set of science and alternative institutions to support intensive, sustainable small farming of a kind that could be reproduced, with proper adaptation to local conditions and institutions, across the globe.

Some of the stories that give grist to the mill of alternative agriculture are built out of a series of short excavations in the archives of industrial agriculture and national governments. But many more trace a history of ideas over generations, proving to contemporary activists that their dissident views in fact represent a long tradition of contestation. *Longue-durée* histories of local farming that suggest the threats and risks characteristic of other places and times are easy to come by. Other *longue-durée* research into alternative forms of capitalism includes the remarkable story of the world worker–cooperative movement, its successes and suppression in foreign policy, again a *longue-durée* history which ends up highlighting forgotten varieties of capitalism as possible viable alternatives for a more democratic and sustainable future for our own time.[61] Those proliferating pasts and alternative societies point us to a horizon of alternative and proliferating possible futures. In conversations such as these, history speaks to economics and climate science about the diversity of past responses and future possibilities. In the context of a deep past, conversations about a deep future may once again become possible. To know how they might be possible – and what resistance they might face – we need to know more about the retreat of the *longue durée* among historians in the late twentieth century.

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Long-term argumentation is a very different mode of engagement with stories than is a long-term survey. The inquiry has to be scaled

over the length of that set of developments, rather than taking one diagnostic slice, as has tended to happen in the world of the micro-history. We need a careful examination of these events, building upon existing micro-historical studies towards the pinpointing of particular turning-points and watersheds in history, moments of revolution that destabilised institutions, climates, and societies. This long-term history needs to benefit from micro-history's refinement of the exemplary particular, those short moments in history during which the structures of power, hierarchy, and imagination are revealed.

This process of temporal refinement has been under way for some time, however. Many history professors find themselves at some point in the business of constructing long-term surveys of time in the form of our syllabi. In departments of History, these surveys have names like 'World Civilization' or 'American History, 1760–1865'. In the form of books, surveys often take the form of disjointed chapter-length examinations of discrete periods that have little to do with one another. But there is such a thing as understanding these turning points afresh. Already in 1987, William H. McNeill proposed that the major turning-point of globalisation happened around 1000 CE, when new trade routes coalesced into a deeper pattern of exchange.[62] In the decades since then, world historians have been comparing and analysing nuanced dates for establishing histories not only of globalisation, but also of racialised thinking and racism, of class consciousness, of peacemaking, and of democracy, to name but a few.[63] All of these refinements to our understanding of watershed moments are built upon a deep foundation of micro-historical research.

Indeed, the number and variation of turning-points and eras that historians have proposed suggest, as Jürgen Osterhammel conjectures, that 'the sense of epochs has been steadily weakening'.[64] The horizontal chronology of one age following the next is being succeeded, in terms of how we think about time, by a topological flow of 'multiple modernities', intersecting and weaving, in which the forces of causation, according to Manuel De Landa, may be conceptualised as different elements – rock, water, and air – all changing, but some changing faster than the others.[65] The challenge that history faces, insofar as history is the natural arbiter of big-picture stories about time, is to rewrite the histories of climate and inequality,

the very stories that give our civilisation nightmares, in terms of a comprehensible knowledge grounded in data and described by overlapping flows of materiality, construct, and cause.

Stories with a long-term argument can have the powerful effect of banishing myths and overturning false laws. This, and not the mere appreciation of antiquities, is the reason that universities have history departments and the reason for history's classical mission as *magistra vitae*, the teacher of all aspects of life. We must use the past in the indispensable work of turning out the falsehoods established in the past, of making room for the present and the future, lest those mythologies come to dominate our policy-making and our relationships.

Longue-durée history allows us to step outside of the confines of national history to ask about the rise of long-term complexes, over many decades, centuries, or even millennia: only by scaling our inquiries over such durations can we explain and understand the genesis of contemporary global discontents. What we think of as 'global' is often the sum of local problems perceived as part of a more universal crisis, but the fact of aggregation – the perception that local crises are now so often seen as instances of larger structural problems in political economy or governance, for example – is itself a symptom of the move towards larger spatial scales for understanding contemporary challenges. Those challenges need to be considered over longer temporal reaches as well. In this regard, the *longue durée* has an ethical purpose. It proposes an engaged academia trying to come to terms with the knowledge production that characterises our own moment of crisis, not just within the humanities but across the global system as a whole.