

who suffered (and still suffer) ‘uneven development’ further afield. Rather than leading to more guilty navel-gazing this should encourage Scots (and others) to absorb the lessons of the past and get on with forging the multicultural present, itself one positive outcome of that compromised history. It’s ironic that just when the ramparts around Blunkett’s ‘fortress Britain’ rise higher by the month, Jack MacConnell’s ‘Fresh Talent’ programme solicits foreign immigrants to settle in Scotland, part of a bid to staunch that continuing national trend – the haemorrhage of population. Maybe that will kill several birds with one stone: a recent survey shows that devolution is surprisingly popular amongst Scotland’s ethnic minorities.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Nigel Leask is Regius Professor of English Language and Literature at Glasgow University. He has published extensively on Romantic literature, on travel writing, and on Orientalism. He is currently working on a book on Robert Burns and the ‘dark side’ of the Scottish Enlightenment.

doi:10.1093/hwj/dbi022

The Poverty of Historical Idealism *by A. W. Carus and Sheilagh Ogilvie*

Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History*, University of Chicago Press, 2004; xxii + 326 pp.; hbk \$40; ISBN 0-226-23910-1.

That historical explanation cannot deal in absolutes and cannot adduce sufficient causes greatly irritates some simple and impatient souls. They suppose that, since historical explanation cannot be All, it is therefore Nothing; it is no more than a consecutive phenomenological narration. This is a silly mistake.

E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (1978)¹

Historical materialism played an important role in the profession of history over much of the twentieth century. Even where it was most vehemently rejected, it was a fruitful irritant. It gave historians a framework and a programme, a way of thinking about their task, to work within or to react against, a challenge that toughened the minds of even the most tradition-bound antiquarians. Historical materialism (in which we include more than just Marxism) was the main repository of what one might call ‘historical *structuralism*’, the idea that an understanding of history consists in identifying the underlying or *fundamental* features of large impersonal structures (societies, economies, cultures, institutions) of which more obviously visible and intuitively comprehensible processes such as political events,

intellectual debates, legal systems, or mentalities (however defined) were *surface* manifestations.² The task, in other words, was to show how the impersonal structures constrained or shaped these more immediately accessible phenomena. Though there are still a few historians working in this tradition, the discipline as a whole, especially in the US but increasingly in Britain and Europe as well, has left it behind.

For all its undoubted benefits to history over the past several generations, however, materialism also had its costs, and historians' disenchantment with it was quite understandable. Meanwhile, though, the discipline remains unclear about its task. The 'linguistic turn', contrary to its philosophical origins,³ has become an idealistic turn among historians. By 'idealism' we mean an attitude that regards a realm of articulate thought or discourse – rather than social or economic relations – as constitutive of the environment in which humans live (in contrast to materialism, which regards social and economic relations as constitutive, while thought and discourse merely express or reflect those relations). Under this very broad definition, a wide spectrum of idealisms can be envisioned, from a purely methodological idealism at one end to an eliminativist or reductionist insistence on treating the natural and social phenomena – states, institutions, demographic and economic processes – visible to us through the discourse of past societies as part of the discourse itself.⁴ This latter position is inherently unstable, as it forces into prominence the question what 'discourse' consists in (or more specifically, how 'meaning' is possible). It is a perennial temptation – one that, we think, historical idealism must firmly resist if it is to become viable in the long term – to answer this question by saying that meaning is conferred on physical (visible or audible) signs by subjective consciousness: meanings are 'in the mind'. History, in this view, can only be the study of subjective mental states.

* * *

The Limits of History takes this tendency to an extreme, and illustrates its pitfalls. Fasolt proposes, by investigating the history of our concept of 'history', to reveal that concept as the artifact of an ideology, and so to raise even more dramatically the question of what history could be *about*. History has no object, in this view. Fasolt does not, however, engage with recent discussions of such questions, and skips lightly over the last few centuries of reflection about social science, focussing instead on an event he calls 'the historical revolt', which he regards as the key turning point where the 'history' ideology had its origins. So for him, subsequent discussions pale to insignificance beside this fundamental divide.

The 'historical revolt', Fasolt says, was the use of history by early modern humanists to discredit something he calls 'medieval universalism', the idea that the emperor and the pope ruled the entire world. 'History jumped on the scene of European mental life with the force of a revolution against a specific form of governance'. (p. 16) Though they were not uniformly conscious of the fact, Fasolt says, the bearers of the 'historical revolt' were in alliance with the forces creating modern nation states, with their free and equal citizenries, out of the remnants of imperial authority. They succeeded in this by 'destroying belief in the temporal unity of the period since the birth of Christ'. (p. 19) By invoking history, they were ingeniously able to relegate 'medieval universalism' to a *past*, a realm of time they invented called the 'dark ages' or 'middle ages'. 'That was a blow from which the authority of pope and emperor was never to recover.'⁵ The 'historical revolt', then, was a liberation movement; 'history put human beings in charge of their own affairs

and gave them the liberty to differ... history was a challenge thrown in the face of tradition and authority, ... a knowledge ... that actually fostered liberty' (p. xiv) by challenging the claims of empire and papacy to universal rule.

Fasolt sets subsequent developments aside because, in his view, the 'historical revolt' has embedded itself in our collective consciousness at a deeper level than more recent discussions of historical or social science method acknowledge. (p. 38) We moderns who live under the shadow of the 'historical revolt', he says, fail to recognize that history rests on a sleight of hand. We are 'in the grip of a picture', as Wittgenstein would have put it, and Fasolt wants to help us escape from this distorting picture. The basis of the distortion lies in a basic cognitive strategy that, in Fasolt's view, has characterized the procedure of historians ever since the 'historical revolt'. First, history imposes on the flux of its limitless and chaotic material a distinction between the past and the present. The past is fixed and finished, the present is malleable and still with us. But, Fasolt claims, this distinction has no basis. When we actually try to investigate the past, we find that there is ultimately no matter of fact about what actually happened. We are faced with ineluctable limits to historical knowledge, and these limits are not just fortuitous, peculiar to certain cases, they are limits in principle. One significant casualty is the standard historical requirement that we avoid anachronism and place historical events in the context of their time and place. This requirement leads only to an infinite regress, since it is impossible to determine the relevant context for any particular event. Without a secure distinction between past and present, everything is a potential context for everything else. So our attempt to know the past, and to place past events and processes in their historical context, is ultimately a form of propaganda, a form of influencing the present by other means. It is 'politics', according to Fasolt. The past is just as malleable as the present, therefore, and the distinction between them on which all history is based cannot be maintained.

Fasolt reaches these wide-ranging conclusions not by general arguments but by means of an extended historical example, to which he devotes most of the book: the career of Hermann Conring, a legal scholar and historian in mid seventeenth-century protestant Germany and a key protagonist, in Fasolt's view, of the 'historical revolt'. Conring wrote two different versions of a book on the political status of the Holy Roman Emperor. The earlier one was used by a student as the basis for a disputation. When it was later published without Conring's authorization, he repudiated it as pirated because of a politically embarrassing passage, and wrote a new version under a different title. Fasolt goes to great lengths to establish that it is impossible to know 'what Conring really thought', that is, which of the two versions he really intended. Fasolt then also claims that this uncertainty generalizes to a systematic impossibility of knowing the intentions behind *any* piece of text that has come down to us from the past.

Moreover, the historical revolt, as represented by Conring, did not in Fasolt's view establish itself by argument, or by demonstrating its inherent superiority to 'universalism'. It won the day, rather, simply by changing the subject and begging the question. Fasolt seeks to show this by examining Conring's arguments against a text embodying 'medieval universalism', the twelfth-century commentaries on Roman Law by Bartolus of Sassoferrato. Bartolus, Fasolt claims, makes equally good sense in his intellectual context as does Conring within the changed parameters of the 'historical revolt' he helped to initiate. Conring's historical arguments do not, then, amount to a *justification* of the 'historical revolt' against 'medieval universalism'.

By a leap of generalization, Fasolt claims that we are *never* able to use history itself to show that the 'historical' framework of thought (that of Conring) is in any sense 'better' or 'more true' than the pre-'historical' or non-'historical' one of Bartolus. The question, Fasolt says, is impossible to adjudicate, for there can be no standpoint outside the 'historical' and the 'universalist' frames of mind. They are 'incommensurable' like Kuhn's paradigms or Wittgenstein's forms of life. We live in our own, 'historical' form of life, but we should not delude ourselves that it offers any greater insight into an ultimate reality than does the 'universalist' form of life.

Given the nature of Fasolt's undertaking, we have to judge its success on two levels. First, the particular historical example and its appropriateness for the purpose; and second, its success in its larger role of displaying the limits of history.

* * *

The example chosen is, for Fasolt's larger purpose, unfortunate. To demonstrate the 'limits of history', he seeks to show that there are limits to the extent we can trace the subjective inner thought process that resulted in a written text (or in a difference between two written texts). Attempts to look into the inner lives of past human beings are hardly uncommon among present-day historians. Fasolt rightly says that it is impossible for such attempts to succeed. But this has nothing to do with any putative 'limits of history' (even limits of intellectual history), as Fasolt maintains. It is, rather, a simple consequence of certain very basic considerations about how a language can convey meaning, which form Wittgenstein's main argument in the *Philosophical Investigations*. The meanings of words, according to this argument, derive from their use in the practical life of the society in which the language is embedded. Meanings of words and sentences are not 'in the head', they are not private and subjective, but public artifacts whose objectivity can be established by reference to their range of possible uses within that society or user community.⁶ So there are limits beyond which the historical investigation of subjective experience cannot penetrate. The impossibility of establishing what Conring 'really thought' is a rather trivial example of this. But it has no bearing whatever on the historical investigation of anything *other* than subjective experience. Fasolt evidently thinks it does; indeed he rests his entire case on this opinion.⁷ It is not clear whether this indicates a confusion (we return to this possibility the next section) or a positive belief, on Fasolt's part, that subjective experience is ultimately the only possible subject of history.

This idea has dire consequences for historical practice. It can make history prone to a wilful self-mutilation, a suffocating narrowness. Fasolt claims, as we saw, that the choice of relevant context for any given historical inquiry is arbitrary; in principle everything is a context for everything else. Nonetheless, he claims to have put Conring's work 'into the context of its time and place'. (p. 92) But apart from biographical details about Conring's personal and scholarly life, this context turns out to be only one of words and ideas, not any wider material (economic, social, political) context. Such narrowness has long been endemic in intellectual history. But Fasolt surely owes us at least an excuse for adhering to it in favour of the new departures, since the 1960s, that have led intellectual historians to widen their scope somewhat. Typical of this movement (though not typical enough) was the career of Peter Laslett, whose curiosity about the nature of the society at issue in the writings of Locke and Filmer led him to initiate the gigantic task, still in progress, of uncovering the ordinary life of the vast majority of English people who had until

then been left out of history altogether. A similar effort had already begun in France, and it has since spread to many other places, including Germany.⁸ Most intellectual historians, even when attracted to idealism, have followed in Laslett's footsteps at least to the extent of taking this wider context into account.⁹ Fasolt does not.

This failure to consider any broader context not only gives Fasolt's account of Conring a dry, scholastic stuffiness, it undermines some of his central claims about Conring's career, and thus, by extension, his wider claims about the supposed 'historical revolt'. Even the immediate political context is left out. Fasolt can hardly get by, of course, without some definite assumptions about the nature of the Holy Roman Empire, the subject of the Conring texts he discusses. But on this issue he is surprisingly willing to embrace an existing historical consensus. He refers to a 'shift in scholarship' of 'recent decades', thanks to which we now know that the Holy Roman Empire was, in fact, a Good Thing:

The flippant dismissal of the Holy Roman Empire as neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire, so popular ever since Voltaire gave it currency, has yielded to new respect for a body politic that managed to secure a good measure of protection to smaller imperial estates, helped to keep a decent peace in Europe from the Peace of Westphalia to the Napoleonic Wars, and allowed the Enlightenment to flourish in the Germanies. Contrary to lingering fragments of once common wisdom, the Holy Roman Empire enjoyed real political vitality. (p. 132)

Germany, says Fasolt, is therefore a particularly good context in which to observe the origins of the 'historical revolt' because there, unlike France and England, 'medieval universalism, in the form of the Holy Roman Empire, managed to survive well into modern times with a vitality that has only recently been recognized and still remains surprising to historians with a conventional focus on the rise of the modern state'. (p. 42) But hasn't Fasolt also said that the 'historical revolt', which in concert with the modern state *destroyed* 'medieval universalism', was a liberation movement against 'tradition and authority'? Was 'the' modern state, then, 'rising' in the Holy Roman Empire or was it not? Fasolt could have spared us this confusion if he had consulted more recent scholarship on the Holy Roman Empire that, unlike the older work he cites, pays some attention to the lives of its ordinary people.¹⁰ The 'modern state' *was* in fact growing rapidly in Germany during the seventeenth century. It was growing at the level of the territorial states, not the Empire (though the Habsburgs were building their own territories into states as well). The typical history of state formation in the Holy Roman Empire was admittedly *different* than it was in France and England, but state formation there most assuredly *was*.¹¹ Indeed, the Thirty Years War – which so traumatized Conring – can itself be seen as a last-ditch effort by the Habsburgs to reverse this trend and to turn the Empire into a centralized nation-state like Spain (which they also ruled).¹² This effort failed miserably, of course, and simply opened the way for the energetic resumption of state formation at the territorial level after 1648.

But did these territorial states have anything whatever in common with Fasolt's 'historical revolt'? The princes who ruled these states certainly wanted their freedom from the Emperor. But were they part of a liberation movement, 'a challenge thrown in the face of tradition and authority'? On the contrary; as Fasolt could have discovered in the recent literature on the social history of Germany, the territorial

states – not just Brandenburg-Prussia – were tradition-bound, corporative, and oppressive.¹³ They strengthened and reinforced precisely the ‘tradition and authority’ of communities and guilds that some other states (especially England and the United Provinces) were able to keep in check, and eventually to defeat.¹⁴ This was disastrous for economic development in Germany, with especially dire consequences for the poor, for women, and for outsiders – who found themselves excluded by the increasingly close-knit and exploitive corporate groups (such as guilds and communities).¹⁵ If the territorial states were not by any stretch of the imagination, then, ‘a challenge thrown down in the face of tradition and authority’, might there nonetheless have been some connection between them and the ‘historical revolt’? Fasolt may have been misled by the vocabulary of German political writers in Conring’s time. In consolidating their sovereignty and rejecting imperial interference, especially after 1648, German territorial princes and town councils liked to assert their ‘freedom’ – their *Freiheit* – or, more especially, their ‘German freedoms’ – *Teutsche Freiheiten*. But they did not mean by this anything like the striving for freedom in the western liberal sense, as Fasolt seems to imagine. They meant the corporate rights and privileges that were their due within the imperial constitution. This is how the word *Freiheit* (usually in the plural) was almost universally used in German well into the eighteenth century.¹⁶ There is also some evidence that German academics were no less jealous of their corporate privileges within seventeenth and eighteenth-century university towns than were other corporate groups, and no less vigorous in defending them at the expense of the poor.¹⁷ In this sense there may well have been some community of interest (though this is surely not what Fasolt had in mind) between humanist academics – the bearers of the ‘historical revolt’ – and the state corporatism of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century German territorial states.

But there was indisputably a community of interest at a more obvious level, and one that even Fasolt’s narrow conception of ‘context’ should have included, given that Conring’s biographical details are not considered off limits. Moreover, it is a context that is highly relevant to the mystery about what Conring ‘really thought’ at the heart of Fasolt’s case about the limits of history. This community of interest resides in the simple fact that Conring, like other humanists, was not just a subject but also an *employee* of his territorial prince. Might this fact not have had something to do with his ambivalence? Might it not have made him unwilling to be identified personally with a position that had appeared under a student’s name, as a mere academic exercise, a few years before? And who knows how the political climate (or the international alliances) of the Hanoverian court might have shifted between 1641 and 1644? Fasolt, at any rate, tells us nothing at all about such humble material constraints and seems to assume throughout that Conring was a free agent, able to take any intellectual position he pleased.

But it is well known that seventeenth-century German academic life was not like that. People were silenced or lost their jobs for not following the line taken by the territorial prince.¹⁸ And scholars were frequently put to work to justify state policies, slavishly following their masters’ shifting alliances in imperial politics. Johann Peter Ludewig’s elaborate justification of Frederick II’s invasion of Silesia in 1740 is one of the more flagrant instances. An example closer to Conring’s situation is the ‘Consilium or Statement of the Theological Faculty in Jena’ published in 1620, supporting the revolt of the Bohemian Estates against Habsburg rule. As the Estates were Calvinist, their rebellion in 1618 had inspired only lukewarm support

among Lutherans. Johann Georg, Elector of Saxony (the largest Lutheran state), had wavered and finally decided not to get on the wrong side of the Emperor. Unsurprisingly, Johann Georg's universities of Leipzig and Wittenberg condemned the uprising. But Jena was ruled by Johann Ernst of Sachsen-Weimar, who (though also Lutheran) was an enthusiastic supporter of the revolt, and had put himself in Bohemian service. After the defeat at the White Mountain in 1621, he continued the anti-Habsburg struggle until his death in 1626. An historical materialist would of course argue that the Jena faculty's position, differing so notably from the Lutheran consensus, was no accident.¹⁹ A sufficiently robust historical idealism, surely, would be able to accommodate such obviously relevant considerations?

* * *

The poverty of historical idealism resides in its failure to distinguish itself, up to now, in a clear and principled way from the extreme form of idealism exemplified by Fasolt. This extreme form, which could also be called historical solipsism, naturally exerts the fascination of any radical pursuit of an ideal to its final consequences. We have already noted certain practical and theoretical drawbacks of this idea – it tends in practice to impoverish the concept of historical context,²⁰ and it falls foul of Wittgenstein's private-language argument.²¹

Despite these drawbacks, though, we can draw an important lesson from Fasolt's extreme form of idealism. It reveals an obstacle that any attempt to formulate a more principled idealism will have to overcome. To pinpoint this obstacle more precisely, let us clarify some terms. At the outset we defined historical 'structuralism', for our purposes, as the imposition of an explanatory framework on the immediately visible events and linguistic behaviours of a past society, so that these are seen to manifest some underlying process. The explanatory framework is used as a 'meta-language', a language in which we talk *about* the society under study, whose *own* language is then the 'object language' of the study. In the past century, most forms of structuralism in this sense have been materialist, broadly speaking, including the Marxian form, and the form practised by most economic historians working in economics departments (especially the so-called 'cliometricians'). What characterizes these materialist forms of structuralism is that they deliberately eliminate the object language from consideration. They permit only a third-person perspective on past societies, at the expense of any first-person perspective. They unilaterally impose their categories on the society under study, paying little or no attention to the categories employed by that society itself.

For many historians, this unilateral imposition has seemed at odds with their own (or any thinking person's) basic motivation for, or interest in, history. For them, history is above all an encounter with strangeness, with a different culture; 'the past is a foreign country'.²² We learn about it just as we learn to find our way around in a foreign culture – by immersing ourselves in the *object language*, not by imposing our own meta-language. The historical idealism in which many historians have now taken refuge, in opposition to the excesses of historical materialism,²³ may be said to consist, then, in an effort to *downplay* the meta-language and hear the object language at higher fidelity, without meta-linguistic interference or background noise. The extreme form of idealism exemplified by Fasolt aspires to eliminate the use of any meta-language at all.

The dilemma for any historical idealism, however, is that we *cannot* eliminate our meta-language completely. This is the obstacle that has to be overcome.

However hard we strive to put ourselves in the shoes of the past people we study, there is a remainder of strangeness. We cannot live among them the way an anthropologist can, we cannot literally undertake participant observation. We can come close, perhaps, depending on the records available, but we cannot get all the way there. A feasible historical idealism must, therefore, firmly repudiate this mirage. It must repudiate the illusion of immediacy – the idea that we can do away with our historical meta-language altogether, and see directly, without verbal or conceptual mediation, into the subjective consciousness, the qualitative texture of past lives.

Despite Fasolt's apparent focus on the 'limits of history', his main object is to transcend those limits by overcoming the *mediate-ness* of historical knowledge. He wants to stop historical knowledge from interposing itself between us and a 'true' or 'genuine' reality. 'If the book has any overriding purpose,' he writes, 'it is only to lift the spell with which history keeps us in thrall.' (p. 45) He is torn, admittedly, since he has no idea how things will look when the spell is lifted; and he realizes that meanwhile, on the earthly plane, the spell has its benefits, however humble. History, he says, is 'a good way' of looking at the world, and 'our freedom depends on it'. (p. 32) This ambivalence pervades the text; Fasolt alternately praises history and condemns it. He ends, though, on a firmly negative note:

Far from establishing a temporal perspective, history presupposes one. It shelters us from the experience of time; it comforts us with the illusion that subjects can be defined by their historical conditions and that change over time can be explained by historical development. 'God wants it', the old crusaders would have said. The truth only begins where that illusion ends. (pp. 231–232)

But Fasolt tells us nothing about this more genuine, more immediate 'truth'. In some passages, he associates 'the spell with which history keeps us in thrall' with our entrapment in a Kuhnian paradigm or a Wittgensteinian 'form of life'. But it is fundamental to the views of Wittgenstein and Kuhn that there is no 'truth' outside or beyond any particular form of life or paradigm. No past or future paradigm or form of life could, in this view, be less of an 'illusion' than our present one. Fasolt offers no suggestion how he might challenge these powerful and well-rehearsed arguments. On the contrary, both Wittgenstein and Kuhn are frequently and emphatically endorsed.

Setting such confusions aside, then, let us attempt a charitable reconstruction of Fasolt's basic argument. He seeks to justify the illusion of immediacy – and hence the exclusion of social, institutional, and economic context – by arguing that there is no 'real' distinction between past and present, and therefore no coherent, non-circular concept of 'social context'. Historians are never completely able to silence the interference from the modern, secular, meta-language in themselves when they look at a past object language. The documents about the events and processes they study will never be complete; they will always leave gaps about which historians can raise questions and guess at the answers. Their guesses will inevitably be framed in their own, third-person perspective. Because their view of past events is contaminated by their own present meta-language, there can be no genuine knowledge of past events or processes. Our supposed knowledge of the past is simply a projection of

our present meta-language.²⁴ So there can be no distinction between 'past' and 'present'.

But it is an elementary mistake to conclude from the absence of a clearly-defined boundary that there is no distinction. There is no clearly-defined boundary between stools and chairs; does this mean there are no such things as stools? (Are they 'really' all chairs? Or all stools?) Since it is impossible to purify water so that it is literally 100% H₂O, should we give up water purification? The absurdity of Fasolt's claim, even in this charitable reconstruction, becomes immediately clear if we apply it to knowledge of the non-human past, for example geological or evolutionary knowledge. Is such knowledge 'just politics' because it is a unilateral imposition of our third-person perspective on rocks and bones (which have no object language at all)? Creationists, notoriously, cling to the possibility of an affirmative answer to such questions. But it hardly needs to be pointed out that a historical idealism that resorts to such expedients is in trouble. It would seem far less costly to repudiate the illusion of immediacy.

The failure of Fasolt's argument is no more of a reason to reject the illusion of immediacy, of course, than Conring's failure to justify historical knowledge against Bartolus is a reason to reject historical knowledge. But in seeking to learn from this case, we must be clear that Fasolt's philosophical confusions, his misunderstandings of Wittgenstein and Kuhn, are not peripheral details. To vindicate the illusion of immediacy, it really would be necessary to do what Fasolt so self-confidently undertakes – to overthrow the strongest arguments in the mainstream of western philosophy since at least Kant. The impossibility of unmediated knowledge (and, more specifically, the contamination of our knowledge of the past by our present conceptual apparatus), has been a central preoccupation in western philosophy. It was elaborated with respect to social science by many writers in the neo-Kantian tradition, such as Dilthey, Simmel, and Rickert, and thus also Max Weber. Indeed, Weber in his last years sketched a conception of history that promised to bridge the old gap between historical materialism and idealism. We should keep *both* the meta-language *and* the object language in view, Weber in effect recommended, and should stop trying to rid ourselves of one or the other. We should stop trying to reduce our meta-language to the object language, as the historicists were always trying to do, and we should stop trying to ignore the object language altogether, as economists often did. Weber's proposal was widely influential, and inspired a great deal of important history-writing in the twentieth century. As we have argued elsewhere,²⁵ the most promising current embodiment of this Weberian kind of rapprochement is to be found in an approach that emerged from the work and the students of Peter Laslett, in the context of the programme mentioned above.

The illusion of immediacy will not disappear. It is too seductive, too slippery, and too polymorphous to be laid permanently to rest by mere abstract arguments. And as we have seen, even the most effective arguments against it are evidently capable of being mistaken, in good faith, for arguments in its favour. It is an entrenched weed in the garden of history. Historical idealism offers it a more favourable soil than materialism did, but it need not get out of control and take over the entire garden. Idealism has a natural weed-killer in the neglected conceptual resources buried in its own genealogy.²⁶ It should use them.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

A. W. Carus is the author of numerous papers in philosophy of science, mathematics, and social science, and of a forthcoming book on the place of Rudolf Carnap in twentieth-century thought. Sheilagh Ogilvie specializes in the history of early modern central and eastern Europe, and has published widely on proto-industry, women, guilds, serfdom, communities, economic mentalities, the growth of the state, and the role of institutions in economic development; she is currently writing a book on serfdom in early modern Bohemia.

1 E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (1978), new edition, London, 1995, p. 67.

2 We use the word 'structuralism' in a casual sense, and do not mean to associate this very broad class of approaches to any particular school; we certainly do not mean 'structuralism' in the sense of E. P. Thompson's polemic against Althusser (*Poverty of Theory*). Braudel's scheme of underlying 'structures' and 'conjunctures' tightly constraining the visible 'événements' would, for instance, qualify under this definition, as would most kinds of Marxism. Foucault's notion of 'power' also qualifies, but it seems to us not 'materialist' as the concrete locus of 'power' in any particular social configuration is never made quite explicit. Certain Anglophone versions of Foucault's theory, notably that of Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA 2002), pull it in a more materialist direction, but as far as we are aware this has had little influence on historians.

3 The so-called 'linguistic turn' was, in its philosophical origins, a rejection not only of materialism and idealism, but of any ontological claim (*The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard Rorty, Chicago, 1967). Its point was to suggest that many traditionally metaphysical or ontological questions might better be interpreted as pragmatic questions of language choice. A typical instance of its misinterpretation by a historian is F. R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: the Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley, CA, 1994), p. 2, where the 'linguistic turn' is explicitly equated with a 'sociological turn'.

4 This tendency was expressed by Hayden White some time before it became more widely fashionable, let alone part of actual historical practice, e.g. in the introduction to his *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, MD, 1973. Similar views were later expressed by historians advocating 'postmodernism', e.g. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology*, Keith Jenkins, *On 'What is History?': From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*, London, 1995, or in post-colonial writing with a post-modern slant, e.g. Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, London, 1990. A brilliant overview of this trend in actual historical practice (the best in any language, to our knowledge), comparing developments in the US, Britain, France, and Germany, with many examples, is Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Historisches Denken am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen, 2001.

5 Fasolt often writes as if he believes that intellectuals achieved such astounding feats all on their own. In a few passages, he recognizes that they were not entirely unassisted: 'No doubt the historical revolt could never have prevailed without the help of soldiers and standing armies fighting real battles with real weapons. At least as indispensable were tax collectors, lawyers, bureaucrats, accountants administering state finances, and men of state conducting modern diplomacy.' (p. 17) But we hear nothing further of these useful allies.

6 Though the interpretation of Wittgenstein continues to be a matter of controversy, this view of the 'private-language argument' is generally supported by a large and international cross-section of commentators, e.g. Robert J. Fogelin, *Wittgenstein*, London, 1987; Jacques Bouveresse, *Le Mythe de l'intériorité: expérience, signification et langage privé chez Wittgenstein*, Paris, 1987; Eike von Savigny, *Wittgensteins 'Philosophische Untersuchungen': Ein Kommentar für Leser*, 2 vols, Frankfurt, 1988-9; Warren Goldfarb, 'Wittgenstein on Fixity of Meaning' in W. W. Tait, ed., *Early Analytic Philosophy: Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein*, LaSalle, IL, 1997, pp. 75-90.

7 It should be noted that Fasolt, who frequently quotes and endorses Wittgenstein, is evidently unaware of the tension between his own views and Wittgenstein's 'private language' argument. This is not as surprising as it may seem, since Wittgenstein has been most influential among social science thinkers for a different (though related) reason – the idea that (ordinary) language acquires its meaning from use, and specifically that the meanings of words are to be sought in their use contexts. In this view a language is an epiphenomenon of an entire cultural complex or 'form of life' in which it is inextricably embedded. The implications of this view for social science were first (somewhat one-sidedly, in a rather Collingwoodian direction) articulated by Peter Winch in *The Idea of a Social Science* (London, 1958). The movement

known as 'ethnomethodology', which in some ways exemplifies the 'extreme' tendency we discuss, was also influenced by this aspect of Wittgenstein. The Wittgenstein mainly known to social-science theorists is thus a very one-sided Wittgenstein, in whom the 'private-language argument' is rather peripheral, if noticed at all.

8 For a small sample of such detailed studies of early modern German society, revealing the nature (for instance) of the relationship between early modern German women and men and the nation-states under which they lived, see Rainer Beck, *Unterfinning: ländliche Welt vor Anbruch der Moderne*, Munich, 1993; Hans Medick, *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen, 1650–1900*, Göttingen, 1996; Sheilagh Ogilvie, *State Corporatism And Proto-Industry: the Württemberg Black Forest, 1580–1797*, Cambridge, 1997; Sheilagh Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets, and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany*, Oxford, 2003; David Sabean, *Property, Production and Family in Neckarhausen, 1700–1870*, Cambridge, 1990; Jürgen Schlumbohm, *Lebensläufe, Familie, Höfe. Die Bauern und Heuerleute des Osnabrückischen Kirchspiels Belm in protoindustrieller Zeit, 1650–1860*, Göttingen, 1994. For a brilliant synthesis juxtaposing the findings of such detailed studies of society with the theories of early modern German intellectuals and bureaucrats on the necessity for the early modern state to control the access to marriage and full economic rights by 'economically and morally weak persons', see Josef Ehmer, *Heiratsverhalten, Sozialstruktur und ökonomischer Wandel. England und Mitteleuropa in der Formationsperiode des Kapitalismus*, Göttingen, 1991.

9 Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, and Reinhardt Koselleck served as models, in this respect, for the following generation. Skinner acknowledges that Laslett's work was an important influence on him in an interview published in *The New History: Confessions and Conversations*, ed. Maria Lucia Pallares-Burke, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 212–40.

10 See, for instance, the essays on peasant revolts against German princes, including their appeals to Imperial institutions, in Winfried Schulze, *Aufstände, Revolten, Prozesse. Beiträge zu bäuerlichen Widerstandsbewegungen im frühneuzeitlichen Europa*, Stuttgart, 1983. On the broader implications of such findings for our understanding of the Holy Roman Empire and the early modern German nation-state, see Sheilagh Ogilvie, 'The German State: a Non-Prussian View', in *Rethinking Leviathan: the Eighteenth-Century in Britain and Germany*, ed. John Brewer and Eckhart Hellmuth, Oxford, 1998; and Sheilagh Ogilvie, 'Germany and the Crisis of the Seventeenth Century', *Historical Journal* 35, 1992, pp. 417–41.

11 For evidence on the growth of the state in Germany, see Ogilvie, 'Germany and the Crisis of the Seventeenth Century'. On the contrast between this pattern and that observed in France or England, see Ogilvie, 'The German State: a Non-Prussian View'.

12 For a detailed exposition of this argument, see Ogilvie, 'Germany and the Crisis of the Seventeenth Century'.

13 On this, see, for example, the essays in *Germany: a New Social and Economic History*, ed. Sheilagh Ogilvie and Bob Scribner, 3 vols, London, 1996–2003, esp. those in vol. 2. On how such state oppression weighed particularly heavily on women and other vulnerable groups, see Isabel V. Hull, *Sex, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700–1815*, Ithaca, 1996; Sheilagh Ogilvie, 'How Does Social Capital Affect Women? Guilds and Communities in Early Modern Germany', *American Historical Review* 109, 2004, pp. 325–59.

14 Hull, *Sex, State, and Civil Society*; Ogilvie, *State Corporatism*, pp. 398–446; Ogilvie, *Bitter Living*, esp. pp. 16–22, 320–52; Sheilagh Ogilvie, 'Guilds, Efficiency and Social Capital: Evidence from German Proto-Industry', *Economic History Review* 57, 2004, pp. 286–333, here esp. 287, 290, 299–301, 318, 321, 331.

15 Ogilvie, *Bitter Living*; Ogilvie, 'How Does Social Capital Affect Women?'; Kathy Stuart, *Defiled Trades and Social Outcasts: Honor and Ritual in Early Modern Germany*, Cambridge, 2000.

16 J. Schlumbohm, *Freiheit: Die Anfänge der bürgerlichen Emanzipationsbewegung in Deutschland im Spiegel ihres Leitwortes*, Düsseldorf, 1975, pp. 42–8; see also D. Klippel, *Politische Freiheit und Freiheitsrechte im deutschen Naturrecht des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Paderborn, 1976, pp. 160–70.

17 A. W. Carus, 'Christian Thomasius, Corporatism, and the Ethos of the German Professional Classes in the Early Enlightenment', PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1981, pp. 241–75.

18 Christian Thomasius, the supposed 'father of the German Enlightenment', was constantly harassed and repeatedly silenced between 1690 and 1713 by the territorial government of Brandenburg-Prussia (Carus, 'Christian Thomasius', pp. 179–230). Even as late as 1727, Christian Wolff lost his job at the University of Halle and had to leave town within

forty-eight hours because he would not bend to the Pietist doctrines of the theological faculty there, which King Frederick William I supported: Carl Hinrichs, *Preußentum und Pietismus. Der Pietismus in Brandenburg-Preußen als religiös-soziale Reformbewegung*, Göttingen, 1971.

19 J. Polišenský, 'Die Universität Jena und der Aufstand der böhmischen Stände in den Jahren 1618–1620', *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena: Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe* 7, 1958, pp. 441–7, esp. pp. 445–6.

20 Britain has resisted this extreme tendency better than the US or Germany. Gareth Stedman-Jones for instance ('Anglo-Marxism, Neo-Marxism, and the Discursive Approach to History', in *Was bleibt von marxistischen Perspektiven in der Geschichtsforschung?*, ed. Alf Lüdtke, Göttingen, 1997, pp. 149–209), advocates a thorough-going discursive approach, but is nonetheless careful to spell out that the historian cannot remain entirely within the discursive realm. 'It would be foolish to deny', he concedes, 'that there are processes in the past which are not encompassed... by the languages and discourses of the past.' (Examples he cites are urbanization and population change.) Similar attitudes abound among empirically-minded British scholars. They can be found, for instance, in the methodological writings of Quentin Skinner, who has also been a champion of a moderate historical idealism; see *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method*, Cambridge, 2002. They can even be found in some German authors, such as Koselleck. But as far as we are aware, none of these writers gives an indication how this gap can be overcome – how the discursive and non-discursive can be related to each other. This is the challenge, we suggest, that current historical idealism must meet.

21 See above, notes 6 and 7.

22 The title of a wide-ranging meditation on this theme by David Lowenthal, Cambridge, 1985. Annette Wittkau has shown in her book *Historismus* (Göttingen, 1992) how just this motivation was also (despite Meinecke's and others' later reconstructions) a central preoccupation in nineteenth-century German historicism.

23 The excesses, that is, of historical materialism in what we call its 'structural' forms, as explained above. The reaction against these approaches referred to here is that described above in note 4.

24 'The search for greater objectivity', Fasolt says, 'is bound to deepen history's failure to tell the truth about the world of time.' (p. 37)

25 In our paper 'Turning Qualitative into Quantitative Evidence: a Well-Used Method Made Explicit', Cambridge Working Papers in Economics 0512, 2005.

26 These 'neglected conceptual resources' include not only the works of Max Weber himself and the German historicist tradition on which he drew, but also, we would urge, the wider neo-Kantian discourse in which he participated. One author in this tradition should be of particular interest to current moderate idealists: Ernst Cassirer. His writings were a significant influence on Foucault, according to James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (London, 1993). But Cassirer had a far better grasp than Foucault of the idealist tradition, its intellectual roots, the specific challenges it faces, and – particularly – its relation to *both* the exact sciences and the cultural sciences. It is not surprising that his work (much of which, like Foucault's, is intellectual history) has recently become the platform for new attempts to reconcile the 'analytic' and 'continental' traditions of philosophy, e.g. by Michael Friedman in *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, Heidegger*, LaSalle, IL, 2000.