The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge

Mandelbaum, Maurice

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In this book I shall attempt to clarify some problems that are of concern to philosophers and to historians who reflect on the nature of history as a discipline, on what constitutes explanation in history, and whether historical knowledge is as reliable as other forms of knowledge may be. Although these problems have long been discussed in one form or another, most of the issues that remain current began to be intensively discussed in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Since then, the philosophic literature concerned with historical knowledge has grown enormously, and the interest of historians appears not to have slackened. While I hope not to have overlooked any of the most significant contributions to various aspects of the arguments that have flourished, it is my aim to offer a consistent view of my own rather than to attempt an assessment of all the admittedly important
positions that have been advanced, criticized, and defended by others.

As a foundation for what is to follow, I shall first attempt to show in what sense one may claim that there is a fundamental unity in historical studies; I shall also attempt to indicate some of the important ways in which these studies differ from one another. When one considers the proliferation of forms of historical writing since the beginning of the eighteenth century and the differences in the interest and the practices of historians of different backgrounds, it may seem foolish to propose—as I shall do—that there is unity as well as diversity in historical studies. Practicing historians are thoroughly aware not only of the individual differences among historians, but of the long-term changes and the short-run fashions in the kinds of subject matter with which historians have been concerned. This diversity has been so apparent that one finds very few historians making a serious attempt to characterize in a careful or precise way what is distinctive about their discipline. On the other hand, when philosophers have been concerned with the problems of historical knowledge they have generally failed to recognize the diversity that exists in the field of historical studies: I know that my own work has suffered from that defect. In what follows I wish to lay equal stress on the unity and on the diversity that are present when one takes into account the whole range of historical studies. It is to a consideration of the question of unity that I shall first turn.

I

It is a commonplace in the literature of our subject that historians are concerned with particular events that occurred at specific times and places, and not with them only in so far as they represent events of a given type. To be sure, historians occasionally embark on analyses of similar events, comparing and contrasting their origins and natures, as R. R. Palmer in *The Age of Democratic Revolution* studied one facet of the political history of the eighteenth century. They also frequently choose some very limited topic for study because they take it to be typical of other phenomena in which they are interested, as a medieval French historian may study a particular village to find out about French village life at the time. Similarly, a historian may study the lives of persons belonging to a particular social class in Victorian England in order to gain a better understanding of the class structure and class attitudes prevalent there at the time. Such studies are sometimes said to involve “generalizations” because they move
from what was true in specific cases to what generally held true at the
time. It is important to note, however, that such generalizations are
simply means of discovering and describing what was characteristi-
cally true of some particular place over some particular span of time.
One should not suppose that because historians “generalize” in this
way that they are attempting to formulate or confirm any generaliza-
tion as to what always, or usually, occurs in situations of a given type.
In this respect their aims are different from those characteristic of
sociologists or social psychologists who might be dealing with the
same materials. Thus, the familiar thesis that historians are concerned
with the particular, rather than with establishing explanatory generali-
izations, appears to me sound. The classic formulation of this distinc-
tion is attributable to Windelband, who distinguished between the
idiographic aims of the historian and the nomothetic objectives of the
sciences.\footnote{\textsuperscript{1}}

Unfortunately, those who initially introduced this contrast into dis-
cussions of historical knowledge formulated it in a way that involved
many other issues. For example, the contrast between idiographic and
nomothetic interests became entangled with the claim that each his-
torical event is unique and unrepeatable, and that in this respect
historical events are different from the events with which the natural
sciences deal. From this claim it was thought to follow that while
nature could be adequately described in terms of laws, laws were not
in principle applicable in the domain of history. Unfortunately, this in
turn was thought to imply that historians must use methods totally
different from those used in the natural sciences. It is against this
tangled background of issues that Carl Hempel’s famous paper “The
Function of General Laws in History” should be read. Unfortunately,
these issues were not disentangled within that paper itself. For exam-
ple, the question of the function of general laws in historical explana-
tion is not equivalent to the question of what it is that historians are
attempting to do, yet Hempel failed to draw this distinction: Most of
his argument was in fact directed toward showing that historical ex-
planations involve the use of general laws, but from this he drew the
unwarranted conclusion that historical studies are not primarily con-
cerned with the description of particular events.\footnote{\textsuperscript{2}} Since this confound-
ing of two distinct issues and other similar confusions continue to be
present in much of the literature that stems from Hempel’s extremely
influential article, only a return to the original idiographic-nomothetic
distinction, disentangled from other issues, will permit us to make a
fresh start.
It is my claim that any work we take to be historical in nature purports to establish what actually occurred at a particular time and place, or is concerned with tracing and explaining some particular series of related occurrences. However, this does not entail that in fulfilling such a task the historian may not, at certain points, have to rely on generalizations in order to offer a coherent account of some of the occurrences with which he deals. For example, in attempting to give an account of a particular revolution, a historian often has to make use of certain general assumptions concerning how individuals generally behave in particular sorts of situations, such as those that arose in the course of that revolution. This does not involve any abdication of his primary enterprise as a historian, since before he can make use of any generalizations concerning their behavior he must establish the nature of the situations in which these individuals were placed, and he must also have established how they did in fact behave. The function of his assumptions concerning human behavior is that of linking the behavior of individuals and of groups to the situations in which they found themselves, rendering it intelligible why they acted as they did. Unlike a social psychologist who may be concerned with revolutionary movements, the historian is not attempting to show how certain factors that may be present in all human behavior can be used to account for the occurrence of revolutions. Also, unlike sociologists who attempt to establish theories of revolutions, historians are concerned with what actually occurred in specific cases, rather than with discovering the general sociological conditions that serve to explain those types of social and political change designated as revolutions.

The foregoing example should make it clear that the task of the historian is quite different from that of the psychologist or sociologist, whose approach to the same subject matter is nomothetic rather than idiographic. However, it would be misleading to assume that the historian’s approach is in all cases as free from general theoretic components as the preceding example may have suggested. In some cases at least, he must have a broad acquaintance with social theory in order to recognize various alternative types of explanations that could be used to account for the facts with which he is to deal. As one illustration of where this is needed, consider the problem of a historian who wishes to trace the history of a particular set of beliefs and an associated pattern of actions, such as beliefs in witchcraft and the prosecution of persons as witches. A historian of witchcraft must seek to establish whether it is more plausible to hold that the spread
of the beliefs and of the patterns of action with which he is concerned is best accounted for in terms of direct influence and imitation, or in some other way. For example, they might have arisen independently of each other because of the presence of similar psychological or sociological conditions in different places at the same time. In short, the historian will often be enmeshed in precisely the same sorts of problems that any anthropologist must face when he deals with the question of whether the distribution of a particular set of culture traits is to be accounted for by diffusion or whether it is an example of independent origins. This will almost always involve general knowledge based on a comparison of instances; it is not usually a question that can be satisfactorily solved merely by examining any one case. However, the fact that a historian must make use of general knowledge of this sort, drawn from his familiarity with other cases, does not signify that his task in any particular case diverges from a concern with understanding and describing what actually occurred in that one case: His interest remains rooted in that case, and is idiographic.

I turn now to a second generic characteristic of historical studies, no matter in what field they are pursued: They depend upon inquiry, the purpose of which is to establish the truth concerning particular events that did actually occur. In this, historical studies are to be distinguished from stories, myths, and memories, with each of which they have on occasion been claimed to be intimately related. Let us first consider the fact that the element of inquiry distinguishes them from memory. While our own memories, or the records of the observations of others (which in an extended sense can be characterized as a form of “memory”), may give us information useful for conducting an inquiry into what has occurred, such information does not constitute more than a starting point for historical studies. The accuracy of our memory, or of the records, must be tested against other memories and records, and relationships must be established among a host of such remembered and recorded events. It is for this reason, and not for the reasons assigned by Benedetto Croce, that one must distinguish between history and the types of records Croce designated as mere chronicle: Chronicles purport to be a record of a set of facts that did occur, but a chronicle neither supports its statements by authenticating them, nor does it necessarily provide an account of the relationships in which they stand to one another. It is the task of the historian to take chronicles and all other related records of the past, and to establish, through inquiry, the various relationships that ob-
tained among these recorded facts. One of the merits of Collingwood's work on the nature of history was that he insisted upon the essential role inquiry plays in anything we denominate as a historical work. This thesis is, however, independent of other doctrines with which Collingwood associated it, such as his contention that history is the reenactment of past thought. To mark this difference, and also to separate my use of the distinction between history and chronicle from the view of history to which Croce subscribed, I might say that the role of inquiry in history is not instrumental to reliving, reenacting, or in any other way experiencing or bringing alive what is past. Its role is to allow us to know what occurred, and to know it as fully and accurately as we can. To put the matter in as strong an opposing light as I can: History aims, and ought to aim, at being wissenschaftlich, which is to say that in laying claim to truth it must be able to advance external evidence that vouches for its truth; in default of this, it is not to be considered a historical study.

Inquiry in history not only serves to distinguish it from memory and from mere chronicles, but also distinguishes it from story and myth. Neither the storyteller nor the mythmaker need seek to establish that the elements entering his account actually occurred; even if he aims at conveying a truth through his story or myth, that truth will not depend upon whether the elements through which it is elucidated do in fact refer to actual events. Although there are works of art, especially in painting and in fiction, that strive to depict specific events, or to depict very concretely the kinds of events that did occur at a particular time and place, such attempts are by no means characteristic of all works of art; and if one claims—following Aristotle—that poetry is truer and of greater import than history, it is not to such features of the work that one would be inclined to refer. Rather, the truth one would usually wish to assign to a work of art or to a myth, if one were to assign it such an attribute at all, would lie in its revelatory character when taken as a whole. All of the events in a story may be fictitious, and in some novels, such as Kafka's The Castle, they may bear only ambiguous resemblances to events that ordinarily occur in everyday life; yet the story can, like a myth, carry a meaning that relates to human experience in such a way that we are apt to regard it as true, and as profoundly true, or perhaps as false. Fiction, however, is not history. One would be extremely silly to ask of a novelist whether there was really some person exactly like a character he had depicted in one of his novels, or to ask whether anyone who had in some respects served as a model for one of his
characters had, in real life, stood in the same relations to other persons as had been depicted in the novel. It is not silly, however, but absolutely essential that we demand of a historian that he include within his account only such persons as really existed, and only such events and relationships among these persons as did really occur. Putting the matter more generally, we impose upon historical studies a truth condition that is not only different from any applied to art or myth, but one that may be more severe than the truth condition placed on the theoretical structures of the natural sciences by some philosophers of science. We ask that a historian’s account of a series of events be true not only of that series when viewed as a whole, but that its account of all of the component elements included within the series also be true. If this demand were abandoned, history would not be a descriptive discipline, dependent for its truth on the accuracy with which it could infer what had actually occurred.

This claim, that historical studies characteristically aim at discovering and describing the nature of particular events and series of events, and that inquiry enables them to do so, is a claim that has often been challenged. Such challenges have occasionally arisen because historical accounts refer to the past, which (being past) cannot, of course, be directly observed. Both Charles A. Beard and Carl L. Becker sometimes appealed to arguments of this type. Taken by itself, however, this form of argument is not strong. One may note, for example, that the historical aspects of various natural sciences, such as geology, are not generally challenged simply because they concern the past. Nor is it usual—or plausible—to challenge all historical reconstructions which concern past actions; for example, we do not believe it intrinsically impossible to establish in a court of law what occurred in a specific case. Whatever difficulties may beset such inquiries, they are not usually subjected to wholesale challenge. It is therefore not surprising that skepticism with respect to our historical knowledge is only occasionally based on the fact that historians deal with the past; its most usual sources are to be found in other aspects of the subject matter with which historians are concerned. For example, it is often assumed that the particular interests, antipathies, and sympathies of historians cannot be disentangled from the materials with which they deal. Furthermore, different historical accounts are often taken to be so diverse and disparate that no general standards are applicable to those that were written at different times, arose out of different interests, and were guided by different assumptions. However, were it possible to show that differing historical
accounts are not intrinsically unrelated, but that they tend to dovetail in spite of differences in the prejudgments of different historians, and that they explore different aspects or facets of a single body of connected data, then it might be claimed that these accounts supplement, corroborate, and serve to correct one another. Were this the case, it would not be necessary to abandon the assumption that there is a common standard for judging historical inquiries, however diverse they may be in content or in their approaches to that content. I shall later examine this problem in some detail. At this point I shall confine my attention to showing that the data used in differing sorts of historical accounts do in fact have important features in common, thus laying the groundwork for my claim that they constitute a connected set of data. The nature of these data constitutes the third and final generic characteristic of historical accounts with which I shall be concerned.

It has often been supposed that the data of history include all that is accessible, or becomes accessible, with respect to what any human being has done, said, felt, or thought over the whole of the past. Such characterizations of what belongs to history are not unusual, and they appear to be attractive because they do not place antecedent restrictions on historians, except for the stipulation that history is concerned with the human rather than the nonhuman past. Yet, characterizations of this type are too inclusive, unless their scope is tacitly restricted to make them conform to the actual practice of historians. This becomes evident when one considers the fact that the thoughts, feelings, and actions of any individual may be seen in relation to various contexts, of which their historical context is only one. For example, a psychoanalyst is interested in the thoughts, feelings, and actions of his patient; a judge is interested in the thoughts, feelings, and actions of persons brought before him in a trial; and it is normal for any parent or child to attend to what other members of his family feel and think about many matters—otherwise neither parent nor child would know what to expect when behaving in one way rather than another. The historian, however, views the thoughts, feelings, and actions of individuals in a special context: He views them in their societal setting, that is, in terms of the various ways in which they affected, or were affected by, the society in which they took place. It is only insofar as individuals are viewed with reference to the nature and changes of a society existing at a particular time and place that they are of interest to historians; it is not the thought or action of any individual viewed merely as this specific individual with which
the historian is concerned. For this reason I elsewhere characterized the domain of historians as “the study of human activities in their societal context and with their societal implications.”

That characterization suffered from one defect I now wish to correct: It tended to lay undue stress on the institutional structures of societies and left too little room for the consideration of those aspects of human culture, such as the arts, technology, or philosophy, that undoubtedly have some relation to the organization of the societies in which they are found, but which can also be the objects of independent historical inquiries. In what follows, much more will be said concerning the difference between institutionally oriented histories, which I have elsewhere referred to as “general history,” and histories of specific aspects of culture, which I termed “special histories”; here it is necessary only to discriminate the way in which I shall be using the terms “society” (or “societal”) and “culture” (or “cultural”).

Social scientists, and social anthropologists in particular (e.g., A. L. Kroeber, M. J. Herskovits, S. F. Nadel, and Clyde Kluckhohn, among others), draw a distinction between “society” and “culture,” but no standard definitions of these terms have become established. I shall be using them, and their cognates, in the following way. A society, I shall hold, consists of individuals living in an organized community that controls a particular territory; the organization of such a community is provided by institutions that serve to define the status occupied by different individuals and ascribe to them the roles they are expected to play in perpetuating the continuing existence of the community.

I wish to draw a distinction between a society, as thus defined, and my use of the term “culture.” In doing so, I shall not conform to either of two usages currently found in the writings of most anthropologists. In one such usage the term is not primarily employed as a generic term, but is used to designate the particular way of life characteristic of a society, as when one might say “the culture of the Navaho differs from that of the Kwakiutl.” Another usage tends to restrict the term “culture” to a system of ideas and values that shapes the behavior of individuals in a society. For my purposes at least, neither of these ways of defining culture seems adequate. Instead, I shall use the term in a generic sense, as E. B. Tylor originally did, and I shall include as elements of culture artifacts and the ways in which they are used, as did he. The chief reason for defining it in this way is that various cultural elements need not be tied to a particu-
ular society, but can migrate from society to society. So too can artifacts, as many familiar studies of the diffusion of culture traits and culture complexes have shown. Also, no complex society is likely to be as monolithic in its culture as speaking of “the way of life” or “the values and ideas” of a society would seem to suggest. Although persons occupying different institutional roles in a society may share a common culture in many respects, they may also belong to different cultural subgroups within that society, being distinguished from one another by speech, possessions, and dress, as well as by manners, tastes, and morals.

I shall, then, use the term “culture” as a generic term designating whatever objects are created and used by individuals and whatever skills, beliefs, and forms of behavior they have acquired through their social inheritance. Defined in this way, “culture” does not include institutions, such as kinship systems or rules governing the distribution of property and the division of labor, which define the status and roles of individuals within a society and regulate the organization of its life. Rather, I am using “culture” as a generic term covering language, technology, the arts, religious and philosophic attitudes and beliefs, and whatever other objects, skills, habits, customs, explanatory systems, and the like are included in the social inheritance of various individuals living in a particular society. Using these definitions of “a society” and of “culture,” special histories trace various aspects of culture as they arise and change in a society, or as they cross the boundaries separating societies, whereas general history is concerned with the nature of and the changes in particular societies.

Although the contrast I originally drew between general history and special histories has not had any marked impact on discussions of historiography, it has on occasion been referred to; what is of more importance is that others have quite independently used the term “general history” in essentially the same sense as that in which I used it. Most notable among the parallels is the distinction drawn by Otto Brunner, the medieval historian, between “history as a discipline” and other historical studies, a distinction he developed in a lecture entitled “Das Fach ‘Geschichte’ und die historischen Wissenschaften.” He held that history as a discipline—“History, tout court,” as it is sometimes put—concerns the actions of human beings, both individually and in groups, in the context of a particular organized society; the structures of such a society distribute relationships of power among the individuals, and it is in terms of these power relationships that the individuals act. In contrast to general history, taken in this
sense, which he called “Geschichte im engeren Sinn,” Brunner characterized the special forms of historical study (“die historischen Fachwissenschaften”) as dealing not with individuals and groups, but with their cultural products, such as philosophic and religious views, works of literature and art, which the historian investigates, interprets, and depicts.10

In a somewhat different manner, W. H. B. Court, the economic historian, raised the question of the relation between economic history and general history.11 In this connection he distinguished between the history of single nations, which he referred to as “general or integral history,” and what he referred to (not altogether happily, I think) as “universal history.” While general history attempts to deal with all aspects of a particular society, and may thus be called “integral,” an economic historian needs to transcend the confines of single nations, tracing the spread of economic institutions and dealing with whole trading areas, or even with all nations, from an economic point of view. Economic history, in this sense, is a special discipline, a Fachwissenschaft in Brunner’s terminology, concerned with the nature of and changes in one aspect of human culture rather than attempting to depict the nature of a particular society and the changes in it.

To be sure, whether one deals with economics or art or religion, or with any other aspect of human culture, innovations and change take place in particular societies and form part of the life of that society; they are therefore of concern to the general historian who attempts to understand and depict the nature of a given society and its changes. Yet, these aspects of culture may also spread beyond the points of their origin and present the special historian with a distinct subject matter of his own. Thus, as both Brunner and Court suggest, and as I wish to emphasize, while the tasks of the general historian and of those dealing with special histories are different, they are none the less complementary, lending each other mutual support.

In the light of what has been said concerning general history (which deals with societies) and special histories (which deal with culture), it might be thought that I wish to minimize the historian’s concern with individual human beings. This is not the case. That on which I wish to insist is merely the fact that in order for an individual to be of concern to a historian his character and actions must be viewed in relation to the place that he occupied and the role that he played in the life of a society or in relation to some facet of culture; and this holds, as well, for groups of individuals. Such relationships
may of course be of different kinds. For example, a historian may be concerned with the actions of an individual because he had a certain institutional status within a particular society, or because of some important influence he had in changing that society, or simply because he may serve as representative of some aspect of the social or cultural life of that society. What is important to bear in mind is that the place individuals occupy in any historical account is relative to the social organization and the culture of the society the historian seeks to understand and depict.\textsuperscript{12}

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it is also important to note that a historian's idiographic interest in some particular society does not signify that historians may not undertake comparative historical studies. These studies, which are becoming of increasing interest to the historical profession, often help to direct attention to aspects of societal organization or cultural activities that might be overlooked by any historians whose familiarity with different forms of organization and of culture tends to be restricted to what was most characteristic of the nature and changes to be found in the history of their own society. Furthermore, the striking presence of quite different features in other societies may call attention to the presence of analogous features in one's own. Thus, comparative historical studies help to prevent misinterpretations of other societies and their culture, and misinterpretations of our own. However, such studies need not involve an abandonment of the historian's idiographic approach, turning historians into psychologists or sociologists; they simply attest to the fact that adequate historical understanding, in any field, demands sophisticated inquiry: What is present and needs to be described does not always lie on the surface of those forms of social organization and of cultural life with which historians seek to come to grips.

In sum, it has been my contention that historical accounts are concerned to establish through inquiry, and to validate through evidence, occurrences that relate to the nature of and changes in a particular society, or—using the same methods—to trace continuity and change in those human activities that we may designate forms of culture.

II

It will be recalled that in introducing my contention that history as a discipline is concerned with societal facts and with the elements of
culture produced by men in different societies, I indicated why I attach importance to showing that there is unity as well as diversity in historical accounts. If the events with which these accounts deal are intrinsically related, and if there are interlocking data that historians can use in establishing their relationships, then various historical accounts can serve to supplement, corroborate, and correct one another. Under these circumstances one would not need to abandon the assumption that there is some common standard for judging historical inquiries in spite of the diversity in their content and in their approaches. One important way of establishing that there are interlocking relationships among historical accounts is to take note of the phenomenon I have elsewhere termed the scale of such accounts. Some historians survey longer time intervals than do others, because of the subject matter with which they choose to deal, and some are concerned with more inclusive entities than are others, who choose subjects of smaller scope and enter into them in greater detail; but these differences in scale do not make their accounts irrelevant to each other. One way of illustrating this fact is to say that in the field of general history (although not, as we shall see, in all special histories) the series of events with which the historian deals is an indefinitely dense series, just as is the geographical territory with which a cartographer deals. Let us examine what, precisely, this means.

A map maker always operates on some scale; let us initially suppose that he is drawing a map of the continental United States on a scale of two hundred miles to the inch. He may then draw a map of any one of the states on some other scale: for example, Connecticut at ten miles to the inch, Wisconsin forty miles to the inch, and Texas eighty miles to the inch. The Connecticut map can thus include more information concerning roads and towns than can the Texas map, but either map may be blown up further, to include more details. Such maps may also be supplemented by maps of the main arteries of the major cities that lie within the state, and these maps may be supplemented by street maps that show not only the main arteries but each city street. Further, the Department of Public Works in a city can usually supply maps identifying buildings and utilities on each block of each street, and, in the end, architectural blueprints might be found showing the floor plans of these buildings and even the details of wiring and carpentry in each of the rooms in the buildings. It is in this sense that I would characterize the possible maps of a territory as being indefinitely dense. Similarly, historical accounts of a series of events may, in many cases, form a dense series, with the various
temporal and geographical segments of a nation's history being capable of being explored in further detail, insofar as the requisite data are available.

The applicability of this simile to historical studies should be obvious. Some histories are concerned with longer stretches of time than are others; also, the regional as well as the temporal scope of different histories varies, some historians being concerned with the political life of a nation as a whole, whereas others focus on what occurred in the politics of one region, or with political changes within a single city. To be sure, maps drawn on different scales do not present us with representations of the very same items: The details shown on a city map are not represented on a national map, nor—on the other hand—can a city map give indications as to what road one should choose in leaving that city in order to find the best route across the country. Nevertheless, maps drawn on different scales, if they are accurate, will fit together, allowing us to move toward an increasingly small target, or they will allow us to find our way from any particular starting point to other points that are extremely remote. In the realm of historical studies, one can also move in either direction: from broad horizons to more accurate and detailed vision, or from an acquaintance with what is most familiar to entirely unfamiliar territory. In each case, the historian will either follow connections that his own investigations uncover, or he will be helped by connections that other historians, working on a different scale, may have laid out for him. It is in this sense that historical studies using different scales reinforce one another, even though the details they depict will necessarily be different—and will be different precisely because different scales are used.

The interlocking of historical data is also to be found in the fact that different historians deal with what I shall term different facets of the same events. To illustrate this aspect of historiographical practice, one need merely bear in mind that any stretch in the life of a modern society can be viewed in terms of political changes, economic changes, the international relations of that society, or the like. To be sure, a historian dealing with any one of these facets will almost certainly be called upon to make reference to events that historians approaching the society from another point of view will also be forced to mention or investigate. Nonetheless, having approached a society from one point of view rather than another, a historian will not be obliged to trace all of the connections that are of importance to the historian who approaches the same society from another
angle. Once again a comparison with map making may be helpful. The same geographical territory—say, that of the United States—may be mapped in terms of its political subdivisions or, alternatively, in terms of its physiographic features; in the latter case the map need not reveal state boundaries, but it will show differences in altitudes in various areas of the country, which a political map will not do. Other maps of the United States will indicate our systems of transportation, but will not indicate the altitudes of various regions and need not indicate state boundaries. In short, maps drawn on the same scale and having reference to the same region may be concerned with very different aspects of the territory they map. Yet these maps fit together. On each of the maps, the Great Lakes and the Great Salt Lake must be shown in the same relationship to one another, and must bear the same relations to other points, such as Cape Cod and San Francisco Bay. If these geographical features of the same territory are not depicted in a consistent manner, we demand that one or another of the maps be revised. And so, too, in history.

To be sure, when historians depict different facets of a society controversies frequently arise as to which of the interlocking factors with which they deal is to be considered the more important: for example, whether in the case of concurrent changes in the economic and the political aspects of life in a society one of these can be held to be responsible for the other, or whether both result from strains due to some long-standing dysfunction in the organization of the society’s life. Thus, it must not be assumed that in history the relationships between different facets of a society are inert and static, as is the case in geography. We shall later be forced to deal with these and similar problems of causation in history. We shall also have to raise the question of whether the adoption of some general theory, such as the Marxist theory of social structure and social change, makes it impossible to find a fit between historical accounts that deal with different facets of societal life. For our present purposes, however, where we are concerned with understanding the unity and diversity in historical studies, it is necessary only to take note of the fact that historians dealing with one and the same society often deal with different facets of that society, as well as deal with it on different scales, and for that reason there is great diversity—and there will always be great diversity—in the ways in which the same society will be described.

This has become especially noticeable since the hegemony of political history has been broken. To be sure, as Otto Brunner pointed out, history-as-a-discipline—that is, general history—always has the
organization of society, and therefore relationships of power among the members of a society, in the forefront of attention. This, however, does not entail that it is primarily concerned with political life in any narrow sense: The relationships of power in many societies do not turn on such institutions as kingship, or on the relations between church and state, or on representative forms of government, as political historians were inclined to hold. It has become increasingly clear that in order to understand many of the major changes in a society—for example, those in the United States after the Civil War—it is wholly inadequate to focus attention on the course of political events alone. In addition, knowledge of the successive waves of immigration is needed, and so, too, is knowledge of the development of technology and its application to the manufacture and distribution of goods. These facets of our history have, of course, been closely linked. There also are many other aspects of American life that historians recognize as important and find it necessary to take into account. For the sake of increasing accuracy, checking what might otherwise be too facile overall generalizations, all of these studies must be pursued in considerable detail. Thus, within the scope of what I have termed “general history” we find historical accounts (written on very different scales) concerning our politics, economic organization, foreign affairs, changes in the forms of our family life and in the nature of our educational and religious institutions, and the roles played at various times by distinctions of wealth, ethnic origin, and race. Consequently there is boundless variety in what is investigated in an attempt to understand the nature of a single society and the changes that occurred in that society within a limited period of time. And historians are not, of course, interested only in some particular society, but deal with the nature and the interrelationships of many different societies.

Given this variety in the matters with which those whom I have termed general historians are concerned, what further areas of investigations are open for those who pursue special historical studies, that is, who are concerned with the special Fachwissenschaften as Otto Brunner designated them? It is with these studies, and with their differences from general history, that the following section is primarily concerned.

III

It is not usual to regard historians of literature, of science, of painting, or of philosophy as “historians,” even though it cannot be
denied that they are concerned with establishing and delineating historical connections in the fields within which they work. To be sure, what they establish often throws light on various aspects of what I have termed general history; it is also often the case that an awareness of the relationships within societies with which general historians are concerned is of crucial importance to these special histories. We shall shortly have more to say concerning these interlocking relationships, but it is first necessary to turn our attention to the differences between the kinds of inquiry involved in general history and the procedures followed by those who write special histories, such as histories of a national literature, a style of architecture, or a period in the history of science or philosophy. One such difference relates to the fact that in writing an account of some period in the life of a society—say, of France in the reign of Louis XIV—one is dealing with what continuously existed in a particular region over a stretch of time; insofar as their materials permit them to do so, there is in principle no limit to the detail into which historians can enter in exploring the nature of a society and its changes. Different historians may assign different degrees of importance to different aspects of a particular society, but even as its institutions change there are continuous ongoing connections among them. For example, though France not only changed during the reign of Louis XIV but has changed even more radically since, due to major fluctuation in its political structures and continuing changes in its economic organization, there has been, through time, a people occupying a given territory, with peoples of other languages, traditions, and forms of social organization around them; however much the social organization of French life has changed, France has remained throughout the last centuries a society different from those by which it has been surrounded, possessing a degree of continuity and a unity of its own.14

In contrast to the continuing existence of a society such as France, with which general history is concerned, let us consider the object of some special history, such as a history of French literature. The historian of a national literature, or of the literature of a period, is dealing with a collection of works that may be related to one another in a variety of ways, but in dealing with this collection of separate works, he is not dealing with anything that constitutes a single functioning whole. There are, so to speak, gaps between these works: Unlike the elements in the life of a society, they are not continuous, forming an indefinitely dense series which can be explored in ever increasing detail. One can, for example, imagine the main outlines of
French literature as having remained the same even had some individual plays or poems or novels not been written, or even if there existed others of which all traces have now been lost. To be sure, influences exist, and the special historian often searches for a connecting link between works that seem similar and yet puzzlingly different, but there is no guarantee that any such link ever existed: Genuine innovation, as well as influences, must be taken into account. While there are high-water marks and major turning points in a nation's literature, that literature does not constitute a single continuing event, as does the nation itself. This is true not only of literature and the arts, but of technology and of customs. It is the same difference to which I have already called attention, between habits and artifacts that individuals learn and create in the course of their lives, and which I designate the elements of a culture, and the institutional patterns in which these activities are carried on. As I pointed out, cultural habits may migrate from society to society; they are not rooted in any one form of life, and different individuals in the same society may not possess a common culture. In understanding the elements in a culture, how they arise, change, and spread, we must therefore not look to their institutional basis only, but must trace particular influences, allow for innovation, modification, and changes in use. It is in this way that historians of the special disciplines, and historians of customs and technology who are not dominated by an institutional bias, will proceed.

The difference between those who have what I would term an institutional bias, attempting to explain the elements in a culture solely in terms of the society in which these elements are found, and those who treat these elements in partial independence of that society can best be suggested by considering the relationship between an author and his works. One cannot understand a literary work simply in terms of its author's character and life; one must also take into account the traditions of his craft that he absorbed—or against which he rebelled—the reception accorded his own earlier work, and the relationships in which he stood to other authors and to the audiences he sought. Thus, there is a history of an author's work which—although an intimate part of his personal history—demands treatment in its own right if we are to understand the characteristics of what he produced. Similarly, to understand developments in the science of a period, or changes in architectural style, we need special histories and cannot view these forms of activity simply in terms of changes occurring in the societies in which they were produced. It is with the
semiautonomous histories of the various aspects of cultural life that special historical disciplines, such as literary histories, histories of science, and histories of theology, as well as histories of language and of customs, are concerned.

To say that these histories are semiautonomous should call attention to the fact that even if they are not to be regarded merely as facets of the institutional life of a society, they frequently are deeply influenced by the nature of that life and the changes taking place in it. One cannot, for example, understand some changes that take place in the arts without finding in them reflections of how people reacted to events that occurred in their lives; nor can one always understand changes in the position of artists or of scientists in their societies without understanding changes in the institutional structure of those societies. Thus, the special historian often needs basic help from the general historian if he is to understand the materials with which it is his task to deal; and the general historian may derive help from the special historian in coming to understand how people viewed the events of their time, and how, for example, the development of science and technology paved the way for major forms of economic change. This interlocking of different forms of historical inquiry need be no more surprising than the manner in which inquiries into different facets of the institutional life of a society offer each other corroboration and mutual support.

While these connections between general history and special histories should not be underestimated, it remains true—as I have remarked—that historians of literature, of painting, of science, or of philosophy are not usually regarded as “historians,” and their academic posts more often than not are outside departments of history. It is not difficult to understand why this should be the case. A historian of literature, for example, will almost always have to function as a critic as well as a historian, and he may therefore find a more natural place for himself among those who are concerned with the practice and theory of criticism, with hermeneutics, stylistics, and linguistics than among those whose interests are more purely historical, focusing primarily on the nature and changes within a society. Similarly, the historian of philosophy must have a concern with philosophic problems for their own sake, and to be a historian of art demands aesthetic sensitivity and some degree of connoisseurship. Furthermore, as I have pointed out, a great deal of the work of those dealing in special histories has to do with comparative studies, with studies of influence, and with the migration of cultural traditions over
time; thus, the focus of their attention will not be like that of general historians, whose aim it is to understand the nature and the changes of particular societies.

To be sure, there has been a tendency among many cultural historians, and among some institutional historians, to obliterate any ultimate distinction between general histories and special histories; they do so because they assume that within any society, or in any age, there is an overriding unity that embraces all aspects of social life. Such a unity is sometimes held to be based on the dominance of some form of institutional structure, as has sometimes been held by Marxists; sometimes it has been identified with a pervasive *Zeitgeist*; at other times it is more modestly claimed that there are common intellectual presuppositions and common forms of sensibility that underlie traits common to the social institutions and to the cultural products of an age. Any one of these monistic tendencies will do much to obliterate the degree of independence that, I believe, must be preserved in various fields of historical inquiry. This can most clearly be shown by considering what is inevitably involved in the ways in which, for various purposes, we periodize history.15

Any periodization of history demands that we select some aspect of the life of a society, or some aspect of cultural life that we regard as important, as the basis for marking the beginning, middle, and end of the period with which we are concerned. One cannot assume, however, that what marks the beginning of a period when seen from a political point of view also marks the beginning of a new economic period, nor that a periodization in terms of some element of culture, such as painting or literature, will be synchronous with a periodization based on scientific discoveries or on philosophic innovation. This is not to say that it is misleading to offer periodizations of history, if the principle of periodization used is made explicit. What is to be rejected is the all-or-none approach of monistic views of history, in which periodizations are taken to be equally applicable to all aspects of a society and its culture. How great a distortion this can involve is most strikingly illustrated by the way in which the concept of “the Renaissance” has sometimes been used, even when that concept has been applied only within Italy. In literature, two major Italian authors of the Renaissance, Petrarch and Boccaccio, died in 1374 and 1375; but the Renaissance painter Raphael died 146 years later. Thus, the period designated as “the Renaissance” must be differently dated if one is concerned with painting rather than with literature. Similarly, were one to view the new science of the sixteenth and
seventeenth centuries as a Renaissance phenomenon, as is sometimes done, the limits of the period would have to be greatly extended, since Galileo died 122 years after Raphael. In fact, the stretch of time from Petrarch's birth to the death of Galileo is approximately equal to that from Galileo's death to the present day. It is certainly implausible to assume that there was one and the same spirit successively developing in different areas of cultural life over that length of time. In fact, no investigations of the actual works produced in different fields during that period would support the notion that it is legitimate to regard "the Renaissance" monistically, as if it were a unitary phenomenon pervading all aspects of Italian cultural life from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century.

Nor is it only with respect to cultural periodizations that such a situation obtains. If one chooses different institutional facets of a society, one finds that even though they are intimately connected, one or more of them may have failed to change at the same accelerating rate as others. In such cases, of course, major dysfunctions may have arisen; but even if it is assumed that these will in time correct themselves (as sociological and anthropological functionalists tend to assume), the historian who wishes to look at what actually occurred within a particular period will have to take such dysfunctions into account. In taking "the long view," the monistically inclined historian conceals from himself and his readers what did actually occur. This holds as well for those who take "the broader view," looking only at a total result. In accounting for the outcome of a presidential election in the United States, it is assuredly necessary to take into account a variety of interests, dissatisfactions, antipathies, and enthusiasms which come together to give the final result. Yet, this result does not necessarily give an accurate picture of the basis for the votes in different regions of the country, nor among different classes of voters within these regions; the results of the election as a whole may therefore be relatively unintelligible until these fragmentary data are analyzed and it is shown in what ways they contributed to the final result. When a historian takes the broad view, or when he takes the long view, he is interested only in final results, not in tracing the nature of a society and the changes in it as these actually occurred over time. For a historian, I submit, this is a contradicatio in adjecto, for regardless of the diversity to be found in the matters with which different historians deal, it is their commitment to idiographic concerns that leads us to regard them as historians.