FACT, FANTASY, AND GERMAN HISTORY
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I start with a conundrum: For most laypeople, history is concerned with telling the truth about the past: countering propaganda, myth, and legend with an honest, objective, unbiased attempt to tell it "as it really was" (or, to use the famous Rankean dictum, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*). For most lay visitors to historical museums and exhibitions, or lay viewers of television documentaries, or if there still are any lay readers of academic history books, there is an implicit assumption that what they are consuming is an accurate representation of some facet of the past as it actually happened. But even the briefest glance at the last ten or fifteen years of historical controversy and theoretical debate will suffice to show that this confidence in the objective representation of past reality is not shared by large numbers of academic historians. Quite the opposite, in fact: Reading some historians, particularly those engaged more with theory than practice, one might gain the impression that history is just another form of fiction; reading others, one might suppose that history is essentially a form of politics (even warfare) by other means.

Here I introduce some of the elements of skepticism that - although far from new - have in part been brought to a head by recent debates. I shall argue that an "appeal to the facts" is not an adequate solution to the postmodernist challenge: There is no way that allegedly "traditional" empiricist notions of history can be salvaged (even if one could find any real historians to stand in for the strawmen who are often lampooned by postmodernists). Nor do we need to take postmodernist refuge in "celebrating" history as fantasy or diversity of equally plausible fantasies between which we cannot make a rational choice. Instead of resting content with analyzing the polarization between those who reiterate that the past is out there, what really happened, and those who look at the gap between that past and our capacity to know it in the present, I suggest ways of bridging this gap. I
shall try to rescue some notion of historical truth or at least argue the
case for spending our time trying to talk sense about the past, rather
than nonsense about the impossibility of knowing the past.¹ I do this
with particular reference to that most controversial of histories - the
"past that will not pass away," characterized by more-or-less perpetual
disagreement about the often disagreeable namely, German history.

The Problem: Facts and Geschichtsbilder

To the layperson, what distinguishes history from fiction is that while
fiction can create figments of the imagination, history must be based on
facts that are true. For some historians or historical theorists influenced
by postmodernism, this distinction has collapsed.

Because postmodernism seems currently to be widely perceived as the
major challenge to the practice of history as the pursuit of the truth
about the past, we must clarify the nature of the beast.²

How should we define postmodernism? For some postmodernists, it
simply is our contemporary condition, the nature of the age in which
we live. As one particularly extreme exponent puts it, "postmodernity is
not an 'ideology' or a position we can choose to subscribe to or not;
postmodernity is precisely our condition: it is our fate."³ Whether one
accepts this claim or not (and I do not), there clearly is an element of all-
pervading zeitgeist: In the latter quarter of the twentieth century, in a
wide range of endeavors, there was what might be characterized as an
aura of uncertainty, but not necessarily pessimism; the rejection of old
(Enlightenment) certainties about progress, understanding, and control,
of single truths and definitive accounts, was often associated with a
celebration of multiple perspectives, of the simultaneity of the
nonsimultaneous, or a reveling in the free play of the imagination. As
far as the discipline of history is concerned, however, there are some far
more specific things that can be said.

Postmodernism essentially is a theoretical development (or perhaps
better, fashion) of the last few decades that has restated an age-old
skepticism about the possibility of historical knowledge.⁴ Postmodernist
challenges to what might be called empiricist, or traditional, views of history range from the less to the more skeptical, and are rooted in a variety of philosophical positions. I want here to focus particularly on two major lines of attack that have been mounted on what are assumed to be "traditional" or "empiricist" notions of history as a craft designed to uncover the truth about the past.

One line of attack, exemplified by F. R. Ankersmit, Keith Jenkins, and to a somewhat lesser extent Patrick Joyce, focuses on the impossibility of ever gaining real access to a real past. There is no unmediated "reality"; all we have are Derridean texts commenting on texts, discourse layered on discourse. Because there is no way that unmediated access to a real past can serve to assist in adjudication between competing accounts of the same historical phenomenon, different representations can only be judged on aesthetic or political grounds. In this view, history functions as a substitute for, rather than an attempt at faithful (if partial) representation of, the past. This version thus collapses history into art or politics (or both).

The other line of attack does not dispute the reality of the past or at least the reality of surviving traces of a real past but rather focuses on the imaginative ways in which these surviving traces are actively selected, combined, and shaped by the historian to produce an essentially imagined account in the present. The classic exponent of this point of view is of course Hayden White, with his notion of "emplotment." White claims that stories are not simply "given" in the past, to be "discovered" by historians, but rather are imposed on selected tidbits the flotsam and jetsam, the floating debris of the past to construct a narrative that is more akin to the work of a novelist than a scientist. This version, then, collapses history into a form of creative literature.

Irritating though this sort of relativism, verging in some cases on nihilism, may be for practicing historians, there are as yet no fully adequate responses. Little light is shed on fundamental theoretical problems by didactic primers on "the historical method" (source criticism, etc.), such as that by John Tosh (who remains remarkably
unperturbed by the postmodernist challenge, classifying it merely as yet another "new approach"). A theoretically more sophisticated attempt to rescue some notion of "telling the truth" about the past by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob ends up providing a somewhat Whiggish overview (and implicit celebration) of the development of a diversity of voices, failing to address questions of mutual incompatibility, a topic to which I return subsequently. An "appeal to the facts" is often used to argue the case for an empirically rooted history that is true. Richard Evans, for example, enters a plea against confusing the bigotry of Holocaust denial with real scholarship, irrespective of a formally comparable scholarly apparatus that serves to create the "reality effect." And in the somewhat different case of David Abraham's interpretation of the Weimar Republic, Evans points out that there appeared to be a broad consensus irrespective of theoretical or political persuasion concerning what is held to constitute "sloppy scholarship."

The facts of the matter clearly are important. Consider the case of "Binjamin Wilkomirski" (or Bruno Grosjean), whose claim to be a child survivor of Auschwitz has been challenged. The argument hinges on the question of whether his best-selling account, *Fragments*, is true or not; even those now convinced of its fraudulence concede that it is a moving read, a potential "classic" of Holocaust literature. It thus is not so much the reality effect which clearly is something of a success but rather the claim of authenticity that is at stake here. The identity of the author, in other words, matters and we read the book in a different way, depending on whether we think it is genuine autobiography (and hence authentic historical witness) or realistic novel (the accuracy of which can be tested against some model of what the experience of a child survivor would "really" have been like).

The general point is that we do appear to share very widely accepted conceptions of factual truth and falsity; but, important though this is, it is not an answer (or at least not a complete answer) to the postmodernist case. Most paid-up postmodernists would in any event agree that it is possible to make singular statements about the past that
are true (or not, as the case may be); strung together in chronological order, they make up what White has identified as annals and chronicles. He focuses rather on what is subsequently done to these discrete facts in order creatively to transform them into (an invented) historical narrative. And even those postmodernists who wish to suggest there is an impenetrable veil over the "real" past and that all "evidence" can in principle be interpreted in a multiplicity of equally valid ways actually operate in their own academic communications as though historical texts are open to a single, accurate interpretation.\textsuperscript{15}

We can, therefore, say with some certainty when a particular historical account appears to be wrong; we can make negative points about distortion, inaccuracy, and falsehood with a considerable degree of certainty. But, for a variety of reasons, there are serious difficulties beyond this level of the falsifiability of individual statements of fact. And the most dramatic and heated historical disagreements are often not about what actually happened on which there is general agreement but how it should be characterized, explained, and inserted into a wider interpretive framework or "historical picture."\textsuperscript{16}

Take, for example, the forever controversial questions surrounding the Third Reich. With the exception of those Holocaust denial revisionists who are beyond the historical pale (and the scope of this essay), we do not on the whole dispute the known dates and facts. The chronicle (give or take some quibbles about selection for inclusion or exclusion, and some agreement over crucial gaps in the evidence) is more or less uncontested. We do, however, have an extraordinary variety of conflicting contextualizations and interpretations, with radically divergent political and moral implications in each case.\textsuperscript{17} Consider just a few:

Is Hitler's rise to power best explained in terms of factors intrinsic to German history, as, in different ways, both the Sonderweg thesis and a variety of cultural approaches would suggest? From medieval "failure" to unify, through Prussian absolutism and militarism, to "belated unification" and rapid industrialization; from Lutheran quietism
through the German *Aufklärung* to *deutsche Innerlichkeit* combined with *Gründlichkeit*; in this sort of approach, premised on the need to identify long-term malignancies, there is always something to complain about in this most "difficult history."

Alternatively, should we frame Nazism not as something specifically German but rather as a consequence of "modernity," inaugurated by the French Revolution with its collapse of traditional authority and the unleashing of the masses, comparable to (even in partial response to) communism? Or, by contrast, as something to do with capitalism, captured by the generic notion of fascism rather than totalitarianism? Or should we perhaps reject such larger patterns altogether and present the rise of Hitler as a purely contingent event, explicable only in terms of a detailed narrative of individual actions and historical accidents; or as the charismatic takeover of an unwitting population by a uniquely potent individual, akin to a magician, thus leaving Germans innocent of anything other than falling prey to his powerful spell? Each of these *Geschichtsbilder* presents quite a different interpretive framework for understanding the same chronology, the same set of "facts"; and each carries with it quite different political implications and morals.

The same is true of controversies focusing more specifically on the Holocaust. Is it best explained by primary emphasis on Hitler and a small gang of evil henchmen, as many historians from Ritter and Meinecke to recent "intentionalist" accounts would have us believe and as many politicians, from Konrad Adenauer onward, continue to suggest, thus effectively exonerating the vast majority of the German people? Or should a wider circle of social groups be brought into the frame, and if so, who? Indicating bureaucrats and technocrats renders modernity problematic, whereas involving the Wehrmacht affects the sensibilities of those who want to be able to cling to some notion of honorable service to the Fatherland. Or should we accept the invitation to indulge again in collective self-flagellation or national character assassination by reference to an allegedly distinctive German "mentality" characterized by a peculiarly rabid anti-Semitism persisting over centuries?
As the heated controversies over, for example, the Wehrmacht exhibition and Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* reveal, the reception of any explanatory framework is affected as much by its broader attribution of guilt and innocence as by what one might call "purely academic" criteria although it is notable that in both these cases historians have scurried away to check the accuracy of the facts and to critique points of detail. What was interesting about the notorious *Historikerstreit* of 1986 is that the political implications of different interpretations appeared to take total primacy over any notion of empirical adequacy. This was amply demonstrated both by Nolte's "method" of posing rhetorical questions and by Hillgruber's awkward confusion between personal sympathy for a particular group and historical empathy as a tool for understanding different mentalities.¹⁹

All these sorts of accounts at least seem to have actors at whom the finger can be pointed, and in part the heat of the debates is explained by the shock waves unleashed each time a new culprit is framed. But behind them all lie larger historical pictures of the ways in which regimes should be classified, how they function, and what role individuals are or are not able to play in them (the notion of *Handlungsspielraum*). One of the reasons why Goldhagen appeared to score easy victories over Hans Mommsen during his media tour of Germany, for example, was that Mommsen's more complex structural or functionalist account appeared to shift too much causal weight into the passive voice, with its emphasis on the "increasingly chaotic functioning of the regime" as the prime culprit. Goldhagen gave us both a collective culprit and a happy, if illogical, solution (the allegedly enduring mentality of centuries was transformed overnight by the introduction of democratic structures after 1945).

These diverse underlying *Geschichtsbilder* are not questions of purely academic importance. Much historical work is very closely related to practical consequences for the protagonists.²⁰ Historical interpretations were germane to the practical tasks of denazification and reconstruction immediately after the war in dramatically different ways in East and West Germany and in subsequent Nazi war crimes trials. More recently,
historians have been called upon to give evidence to the *Enquetekommissionen* of the parliament in the newly unified Germany about structures of power, complicity, and opposition in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Analyses of the "second German dictatorship" have had major implications for those East Germans who have lost their jobs or been "restructured" out of their careers because of assumptions about complicity and guilt in another *Unrechtsstaat*. They have also had unsettling implications for large numbers of East Germans who cannot recognize their own mundane biographies, their "perfectly ordinary lives," in the black-and-white histories written after the fall of the Berlin Wall, or who resent the notion of an authoritarian East German social psychology that allegedly is the product of collectivized potty training.

So: The facts alone are not enough. We can agree, against the more extreme postmodernists, that the facts are important and can exercise a form of veto power. But there is or has to be more to the defense of history than an appeal to the facts can deliver. There has, in short, to be some means of combining fact and fantasy, that which can be said to be true or false as an individual statement, and the larger pictures that do not appear to be firmly anchored in the facts. We need now to take a closer and more direct look at the nature of history as a discipline.

**Bridging the Gap: The Parameters of Historical Inquiry**

There are in fact two sorts of gap that I seek to bridge: first, the gap between "knowledge of the past in the present" (historical consciousness, the products of history as a discipline), and "the past as it actually was" (history as that which has gone forever); and second, the gap between "the facts we are more or less agreed on as true" (fact) and "that which is contributed by the play of human creativity or imagination" (fantasy). I seek to bridge these gaps not by looking for some (allegedly typically British) fudge or compromise, the "middle way"or now even "Third Way"but rather by focusing on the character of the constructions we devise, whether consciously or not, to make transitions from one side to the other. I also seek, in the process, to
break through the current impasse between those historians who want to adopt the attitude of "business as usual, just get on with the job, we can do it even if we don't know how," and those who adopt the opposite attitude that runs, "when you come to look at it in detail you can't provide firm foundations for what you are doing and therefore your interpretation is no better than anyone else's."21

My broader argument is that historical knowledge is made up of a combination of fact and fantasy, using the latter term in a wide sense to embrace a range of aspects of the human imagination and capacity for intersubjective communication (in other words, understanding fantasy in the Germanic sense of Phantasie, rather than what one might call the rather specific English literary notion, with its veiled connotations of untruthfulness). A fuller account would need to look in detail at such questions as empathy, interpretation, and representation, which cannot be explored further here.22 The point, however, is to look at the ways in which the play of the imagination is not as free, as arbitrary, as postmodernists appear to think; to look at why, or indeed how, "fantasy" can be constrained by "facts," as captured through the activities of the creative, inquiring mind; in other words, to look at the interplay between fact and fantasy, seeking to explore different positions on a spectrum in which the one is anchored, to a greater or lesser extent, by the other; and, in the process of this exploration, to achieve greater clarity about the kinds of choices we unavoidably have to make. We cannot necessarily devise shared criteria for deciding which approach is "better" or "worse" than another; but we can at least hope to clarify our grounds for agreeing to disagree. It is worth noting at the outset that there are patterns to the way we imagine the past. We are not talking about individual, private fantasies here, but about collective sets of conceptions and approaches. I therefore focus, in this context, on some aspects of these collective ventures, considering specifically the questions of the interrelations between paradigms, concepts, and politics.

Paradigms23
Any cursory glance at substantive historical writing and historiography will reveal a startling array of alternative approaches, or what, to borrow a term from Thomas S. Kuhn's now classic analysis of the natural sciences, we may wish to call paradigms. Actually, if we were truly Kuhnian, we would call these "paradigm candidates" because none has as yet attained true hegemony. The point here, however, is that in the field of historical inquiry, for reasons that we need to explore, none of them are ever likely to achieve hegemonic status across the field as a whole, although they often dominate particular institutional or intellectual corners at different times. I would contend that, irrespective of some spurious sense of a need to be faithful to Kuhn's stimulating original definition, it would be extremely fruitful to explore the nature of these candidates for paradigmatic primacy in history. It is in this spirit that I elect to adopt the term paradigm, as follows.

Paradigms, for my purposes here, are defined not by the essentially external criterion of success, that is, unchallenged hegemony over an intellectual field as a whole, but rather in purely internal terms, that is, in the ways in which they shape general approaches to a topic of inquiry. Paradigms in the sense in which I use the term here are made up of certain general components: basic presuppositions about what to look at (and what to look for); a framework of given questions and "puzzles"; a specific set of analytical concepts through which to capture and reproduce the "evidence"; and a notion of the types of explanation that will in some way satisfy curiosity or answer a particular question. It seems to me that analyses of "approaches" in history have not as yet distinguished sufficiently between different kinds of historical paradigm, and I would like to present a more differentiated framework for thinking about different approaches here.

Historiographical works often trace the development from "traditional" approaches (political and diplomatic history, history of "great men") to a multiplicity of perspectives - social history, labor history, economic history, women's history, "new" cultural history - allowing a diversity of previously repressed voices to be heard. The view often appears to be
that the more spotlights are cast on different parts of the past, the more the cumulative illumination there will be.\textsuperscript{27} However, it seems to me that some "new approaches" in history are actually not so much new approaches to old questions as old approaches to new questions. These are what I call "perspectival paradigms": paradigms looking at topics or "segments of reality" that had hitherto been partially ignored or completely neglected. Such perspectival paradigms are often simply subject specialisms that may serve to complement previously dominant histories (irrespective of the curious prevalence of personal animosities across these subfields).\textsuperscript{28}

But perspectival paradigms are cross-cut by other kinds of more fundamental, underlying paradigm. These are what I call "paradigms proper," mutually conflicting approaches based on prior assumptions that cannot necessarily be reconciled with one another. Recent examples include the difference between "women's history" (a perspectival paradigm saying we have not yet looked enough at the history of a particular group, defined biologically, namely, women); and "feminist history," a paradigm proper that treats gender as socially constructed and embodies a whole set of principled stands on a range of moral and political issues that can just as well be applied, for example, to the behavior and beliefs of men. One might want to elaborate a similar distinction between "social history" ("with the politics left out") and "societal history" (at the root of politics).

Classic examples of paradigms proper obviously include approaches deriving from Marxist or psychoanalytic roots (the nonfalsifiable "belief systems" identified by Karl Popper); or the strong forms of structuralism (Claude Lévi-Strauss rather than Émile Durkheim and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown) and poststructuralism (Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault). These paradigms proper are rooted in irreconcilable metatheoretical assumptions: They are premised on different philosophical anthropologies (views on the construction of the subject, the relationships between society and the individual), on different assumptions about the nature of historical causes and about what it is that the historian is trying to do. At their most explicit when
they become a major "-ism" - they develop into comprehensive thought systems capable of repeated exegesis and elaboration, and often quite different patterns of institutionalization. They pose the biggest headache as far as any attempt to develop any notion of a single, objective "historical method" is concerned. Germans have had to think particularly hard about fundamentally conflicting paradigms with the legacy of East German Marxist historiography, premised as it was on quite different assumptions about the nature of the past and the purposes of historical inquiry.

Sometimes these major paradigms proper spawn what I call "pidgin paradigms" or "magpie theories." These are created when a historian appropriates particularly fruitful individual concepts or insights but does not necessarily wish to buy into the full theoretical gamut. We have many examples of such magpie theorizing being put to illuminating effect: Witness, for example, the widespread adoption of Weberian concepts beautifully exemplified by Ian Kershaw's use of "charismatic authority" to explore the interplay of individual and structure in Hitler's power (in the process helping to resolve some of the issues between intentionalists and functionalists already mentioned); or Richard Evans's occasionally rather eclectic selections from Foucault and others in his Rituals of Retribution; or the very widespread, often unwitting absorption of certain Marxist assumptions. (Who nowadays really thinks a focus on social and economic structures is not at least a better place to start than the Hegelian notion of "world spirit realizing itself"?) Similarly, Freudian notions of repression, or the subconscious, have widely entered into our subconscious vocabularies.

The importance of magpie theorizing is that it underlines the possibility of dislocating specific concepts from their original theoretical - and political - contexts. Deployed badly, it has to be said, magpie theories just masquerade second-rate or even shoddy work in the opaque guise of supposed cleverness (or obscurity). Deployed well, they seem to permit a degree of openness, of "interparadigm communication," while explicitly recognizing the need for a vocabulary of analytical concepts at
one degree of abstraction from the empirical material itself. I shall return to this later.

Many historians prefer to ignore theory and claim it is infinitely more profitable to "just get on with the job of doing history." But no historian is entirely innocent of theory and ignorance is no defense. All historians (even Geoffrey Elton) operate, whether they are aware of it or not, in the context of what I call "implicit paradigms." These are, yet again, made up of the basic components of all paradigms: different presuppositions about what to look for, the concepts through which to capture and reproduce the past, and the types of explanation to be constructed. It should be emphasized that even - perhaps especially - what is construed as a "common sense" approach entails what are usually culturally variable and quite specific assumptions about "essential human nature," patterns of motivation, and so on.

Consider, for example, the conflicting implicit paradigms of those who focus on individual motives and actions versus those who prefer to look at structures and conditions. To return to the example of Weimar: Even among supposedly "atheoretical" historians, there are those who tend to emphasize structural problems - such as long-term sociopolitical legacies, the consequences of war, the incomplete revolution and ambiguous compromises of 191819, the constitutional flaws, the ambivalent and divided political culture, and the inherent economic weaknesses; there are those who would focus on the alleged charisma and organizational brilliance of Hitler and the NSDAP; and there are those who would rather emphasize the decisions and mistakes of key individuals in the closing years and even weeks and days of Weimar democracy, or even the chain of chance events and accidents.29 These differences in implicit paradigms lead to radically divergent interpretations among historians who can in no way be accused of sloppy scholarship; the debates over Weimar are far more deeply problematic than a concentration on the Abraham affair alone would have us think. Implicit paradigms, not facts, are what are at issue here.

What is the evidence? The problem of concepts
Cross-cutting all these forms of paradigm is the problem that there is no generally shared set of concepts, or "theory-neutral data language," with which to capture the evidence of the past and to use in assessing the relative merits of different interpretations in the present. Historical concepts do not neatly correspond to (or at least seem to account for) elements and attributes of the "real world out there," as they appear to do in the natural sciences. Even though concepts in the natural sciences are imposed by the observer (such as quarks or neutrons), they do seem to correspond, in measurably better or worse ways, to an objective outside reality in a way that historical concepts do not.30

Max Weber, who devoted considerable attention to this problem, came up with a typically ambiguous double answer. Unfortunately for us, he got it wrong on both counts. First, we cannot agree with Weber that historical concepts are broadly shared across "the culture of an age" for several reasons. They may be what I call "theory-drenched" concepts: deeply rooted within different paradigms, meaning quite different things within different frameworks. The classic examples here of course are concepts such as class or power, which may be defined quite differently depending on whether one is a Marxist, a Weberian, or a follower of Foucault. And, unless we are prepared to develop and speak in an inaccessible, even arcane vocabulary (easily dismissed as "jargon"), historical concepts also are very often the situated and loaded concepts of everyday life, further cross-cutting differences in theoretical definition. Consider, for instance, concepts of gender or race, construed variously as either essentially biological or socially constructed; or consider the different lived understandings of "nation" in Germany and America, or, at a theoretical level, between an Anthony Smith and a Benedict Anderson.31 It is in the nature of the subject matter that some will be "essentially contested," deeply controversial, carrying considerable emotional freight and significance. Furthermore, far from being universally shared, there may be very little correspondence between the concepts of the observer and those observed (see "anachronistic concepts"), or even among members of either of these communities (as in debates over the class designation of oneself and others).
The other (and at first sight very promising) part of Weber's proposed solution was the quite explicit construction of clearly defined concepts for purely heuristic purposes, which he called *ideal types*. Despite his view that all historical inquiry was but a product of its age, doomed to be superseded as new questions emerged, Weber's endless elaboration of ideal types in *Economy and Society* suggests that, nevertheless, he thought he could come pretty close to defining a kind of provisional Periodic Table of the Elements for history and society; and he certainly used certain concepts as the basis for his systematic comparative historical studies of, for example, the world religions (contrasting this-worldly and other-worldly, mystic and ascetic, and so on). The problem is whether - and on what basis - anyone else would share this (or any other) constructed, conceptual vocabulary. Even the most apparently innocent ideal type selectively highlights certain aspects, makes certain connections, and places a unique historical phenomenon in one or another different theoretical and contextual nexus. The notion of a self-consciously constructed, explicitly defined ideal type is certainly an advance over treating concepts as though they were essential realities; but it does not completely resolve our questions concerning conflicting paradigms.

**More noise: politics**

Why do historians opt for one paradigm or another? First, an observation: There is an unsettling correlation between certain theoretical approaches and corresponding patterns of political or moral identification. In some cases - Marxism, "identity" history - this correlation is both obvious and intentional. But even among those historians who claim that they alone do "objective" history there is a remarkable correspondence between theoretical preferences and political leanings.

If we survey the pre-1990 West German historical landscape, for example, we notice that the more conservative spirits tended to opt for "traditional" historical approaches (high politics, great men, narrative mode); left-liberals tend toward societal or social-structural history (the
"Bielefeld school" exemplified by Jürgen Kocka and Hans-Ulrich Wehler) with or without the new culturalist overtones; and those slightly further to the left could not quite, in the context of the divided Germany in the Cold War period, risk allegations of GDR sympathies by adopting one or another variant of the arcane neo-Marxist debates prevalent at the time in Britain and the United States, but tended rather toward underdog history (Alltagsgeschichte, historical anthropology). There is, of course, no complete overlap between paradigm choices and political sympathies, but tendencies are notable nonetheless. The same is true of Anglo-American historians of Germany, although without the German obsession with (or at least built-in institutional bias toward) political nominations to established chairs and directorships - nor the need to make such hard decisions about firing former exponents of a discredited historical paradigm in a semi-colonial takeover.

This raises rather pointedly the question of whether there is a rational way of adjudicating among competing approaches. Some paradigms, it is clear, are more open than others; the different types of paradigm I have already outlined also cross-cut each other to some extent. Perspectival paradigms, for example, seem to me more akin to language communities within which one has been socialized, feels comfortable, and wants to participate in an ongoing and usually relatively open conversation characterized by a substantive concern with certain questions and issues. Pidgin paradigms may be found in all these approaches as the conversations about the topics develop in what are often heralded as "new directions" implicit paradigms are not incapable of revision on the basis of argument - at least, when this is appropriately presented as "new evidence," without drawing too much attention to the conceptual net in which the evidence is captured. However, in all these somewhat more open paradigms there still is a degree of what might be called "background noise" or "contamination" by political and moral views that surrounds some implicit paradigms (as illustrated previously), and some historians simply do not want to listen to certain arguments that would shift the ground entirely. The position is most problematic in what I have called paradigms proper, where serious metatheoretical choices about fundamental philosophical and
anthropological questions have to be made, often entailing acts of faith or personal commitment to following a guru.\textsuperscript{32}

So, to revert to Kuhn, we appear to find ourselves in a distinctly "pre-scientific stage," a very uncomfortable position indeed for someone who believes that historical enterprise should seek to uncover the truth about the past and who believes that the validity or otherwise of the historical account produced at the end of the long, hard slog of research should be judged on something other than political or aesthetic criteria. This also may ultimately seem to be an untenable position with respect to educational establishments and funding bodies, which may expect a little more for their investment.

The easy answer to this is claiming that, in a democratic system, there is a free market for ideas. I am not sure that this view - which verges on intellectual Darwinism - is entirely satisfactory. Clearly, a degree of pluralism is an essential precondition for genuine intellectual debate; but the equivalent of a majority vote, or a dominant position in the popularity stakes for ideas, is not necessarily an appropriate measure or sufficient proof of greater intellectual adequacy.\textsuperscript{33}

**Politics, Truth, and History: Reinterpreting Modern Germany**

It might by now appear as if, by exploring some of the parameters of the gap, I have merely dug a deeper hole than that uncovered by postmodernists. But I believe, in fact, that explicit analysis of the parameters helps us rather to construct ever better ladders down into that hole, or to drop sounding devices at the right points, and to design buckets and nets of the right size and shape to bring up useful evidence.

This section is based on two premises: It is always easier to criticize than to do, and it is always exceedingly tempting, when returning to a historical question of considerable interest, to relapse into a business-as-usual mode, ignoring not only postmodernist cautions against the possibility of doing it at all but even one's own theoretical tenets. Let us return to consider some illustrations from very recent German history and take the contested territory of GDR history as our final example.
The beauty of this as an example is that, although some older intellectual fronts have simply moved forward to colonize this new historical terrain, the contours of controversy are still more fluid, more inchoate, than are the well-trodden stomping grounds of Weimar and Third Reich history. I focus here on the interplay of politics and paradigms, and take two particular issues, that of grand conceptualization of the whole and that of specific narratives of unique developments, as my examples.

The problem with East German history is certainly not one of a dearth of facts. A paranoid regime amassed literally miles of files and mountains of reports on every aspect of what was going on: from acts of sabotage and Republikflucht at one end of the spectrum to problems of toilet paper provision in hospitals or outbreaks of rabies among pet golden hamsters at the other. However, the very richness of archival and oral history sources only serves to underline the point that, in history, we cannot try to "let the facts speak for themselves." Exposure to the East German archives may even tempt the daunted student to take refuge in White's cautions about the impossibility of discovering, rather than imposing, a historical narrative. But in fact the need for criteria for interpretations we feel we can trust is thrust upon us; for many people, East German history is above all about at last finding out the truth behind the ideological and repressive facade of an often deeply manipulative, cynical, and secretive regime. It thus is all the more important to be quite clear about the relations between politics and paradigms.

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Wall, major public attention was focused on the extent and scope of Stasi surveillance, with almost daily revelations about individual Stasi informers or Informelle Mitarbeiter (IM). A morally and politically engaged historiography grew exponentially: Whereas environmentalists, Christians, and human rights activists were aghast at what the files held, and engaged in a public reckoning with the past, former communist Bonzen Erich Honecker, Günter Schabowski, Egon Krenz, Kurt Hager, and others - were not slow to capitalize on public interest in the collapse of the
dictatorship. Even the tone of many academic analyses of topics such as the role of the Protestant churches, or of general histories of the GDR, was highly charged with political and moral intent. Whether by East Germans such as Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, or West Germans such as Gerhard Besier, there was a message, often not so much implicit as stridently and explicitly expressed in historical analyses. And there were angry public exchanges over who should even be "allowed" or given institutional and financial support to do GDR history, as the debates over the Potsdam Center for Contemporary History Research (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung or ZZF) in its earlier incarnation (as the Forschungsschwerpunkt Zeithistorische Studien, or FSP) illustrate all too clearly.

This phase of acute politicization - or at least of frequent public anger - appears to have subsided to some degree. Conferences are on the whole somewhat more temperate gatherings than they were a few years ago. But there are still massively different general paradigms of interpretation. In particular, the notion of "system-immanent" analyses, widely prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s, in the 1990s came under vicious attack from certain rather stridently triumphalist conservative quarters. There has, in their place, been a dramatic and securely institutionalized resurrection of totalitarianism as a concept designed not only to characterize but also to explain and to denounce the GDR. This has been explicitly countered by those who argue that one should rather look with a more open mind at the social history of the GDR, proposing instead the notion of a durchherrschte Gesellschaft as a means of exploring the variety of ways in which state and society interacted in the GDR. Not surprisingly, these theoretical battle lines roughly (although not entirely) correspond to the well-trodden political fronts of yesteryear.

The lazy way to locate oneself within this clash of paradigms would of course be to gravitate toward that approach that seems, on the face of it, the language community or the political/moral nexus in which we feel most at home. But let us see if the points developed so far can be of any help in adopting a potentially more fruitful approach.
Let us first consider different approaches to general characterization of the GDR. The concept of totalitarianism holds a template premised on contrasts with Western conceptions of democracy; it then plots, or highlights, those aspects in which the GDR is found wanting. This is not, then, a politically innocent ideal type. Were it used solely as a heuristic device, to be rejected once it has served its purpose of highlighting contrasts, further concepts would be required to explore other aspects of East German history not captured by this selective focus on contrasts. But proponents of totalitarian theory implicitly leap from the heuristic notion of an ideal type to the more essentialist notion that the concept of totalitarianism actually captures, reveals, the underlying reality of the GDR. Because this was different from the West, the distinction must, for political reasons, be sustained at all costs. And because the state in modern Western democracies also affects what is therefore also a durchherrschte society, one of the key exponents of the totalitarian approach, Klaus Schroeder, argues that in the case of the GDR we must speak rather of a durchmachtete Gesellschaft a society saturated with power rather than authority.\textsuperscript{41}

Now all this (actually somewhat muddled) thinking is rather promising for our purposes, for we need not rest content with pointing out the not-so-hidden political agenda behind this approach. We can pick up on the empirical assertions being made, and examine them against "the facts" on which, if we are using a similar conceptual vocabulary, we ought in principle to be able to agree. Schroeder has fortunately chosen to use the very clearly defined concepts of power and authority in Weber's conceptual armory; so let us play him on this terrain. On my reading of the files, a picture posing stark contrasts between state and society, and placing primary emphasis on power and force on the one hand and the experience of repression and fear on the other, does not do justice to some of the ambiguities of more complex realities. We also have in some way to account for the ways in which many East Germans felt they were able to lead "perfectly ordinary lives."\textsuperscript{42}

For example, at least some of those who held power did so not (or not only) for power's sake but because they genuinely wanted to achieve
what they thought was a better, more equal and just society; and they sometimes sought this in areas where we, as Western democrats, can agree with their goals. A closer look at the East German health service during the Honecker period will reveal, for example, that the long-serving minister for health, Ludwig Mecklinger, genuinely sought, in adverse circumstances, to find means of tackling deteriorating conditions in health and safety at work, and (unsuccessfully) tried to argue the case against ministerial colleagues for shifting investment away from dangerous and polluting heavy industry. Similarly, there is much evidence of concern to improve rates of perinatal and infant mortality, and standards of care for the elderly and dying. Another area that has received much more extensive attention in Western academia is that of policies to enhance equality of opportunity for women.

Remember, too, that even dictators would prefer at least some of the apparent support for the regime to be real rather than artificially orchestrated or the product of repressive indoctrination. Thus, in some propaganda campaigns the East German public were not only informed and influenced but also to a certain degree consulted (such as in the run-up to the Abortion Law of 1972). The constant monitoring of public opinion was designed not just for the well-known purpose of instant suppression of signs of dissidence and opposition, but also out of a concern to identify and respond adequately to real problems. And if we examine, for example, the evidence of citizens' petitions (Eingaben der Bevölkerung) and related inquiries by committees of the Volkskammer, we find real concern with meeting the needs of people in such mundane areas as housing, child care, food provision, the introduction of shift work, transport from residential areas to the workplace, and so on. Discussions of these issues seem to have been remarkably open and wide-ranging; there is in any event little sign that people felt inhibited from voicing their complaints and desires quite openly in these areas. There is, in short, much that anyone with any experience of local government in Britain would find depressingly familiar.
There was of course the use of power and repression in the East German dictatorship; no-one would dispute this. But there also was a high degree of participation (for whatever variety of reasons) in the mass organizations and activities of this extraordinarily collectivized society; and, among millions of people who were neither committed communists in the service of the cause on the one hand, nor beleaguered Christians, political dissidents, or human rights activists on the other, there was over time an increasing degree of "taken-for-grantedness" about it all. All of this is not well captured by the vocabulary of power, oppression, and indoctrination beloved of totalitarian theory.\footnote{44}

Nor, incidentally, is it well caught by the similarly dichotomous state/society model underlying the durchherrschte Gesellschaft approach. Ironically, this shares with totalitarian opponents a common Geschichtsbild of the GDR as a pyramid of power. While one focuses from the top downward, the other starts from the bottom up. Even the latter's focus on "contested" areas or notions of "self-discipline" (Selbstbeherrschung) are perfectly compatible with the totalitarian emphasis on "limits" and the possibility of "failure to penetrate," "resistances," and so on.

It seems to me, however - as to many others currently grappling with these questions - that we need a somewhat more ambiguous concept for characterizing the GDR.\footnote{45} A better concept might be the notion of a participatory dictatorship, or a police welfare state. I have also toyed with the idea of "modern party absolutism," which has nicely anachronistic overtones. At least these concepts allow us to escape from the inherited overtones and derogatory baggage - of being lumped with the Third Reich in the cataclysmic debates of the Cold War era that is part of the package of totalitarianism. They also have the advantage of embodying within them certain self-contradictory dynamics, helping to point us toward elements of instability and change (for example, heightened expectations during the early Honecker era, with its proclaimed "unity of social and economic policy," and the Helsinki agreement on human rights, which dashed hopes in the 1980s). I think
we also need to develop some notion that allows for the possibility of acceptance, as well as rejection, of the GDR as it actually was, without implying that those who accepted it, or who took it for granted, were in some way either fellow travelers or dupes of indoctrination and ideology, implicitly to be condemned as duplicitous, self-serving, mendacious, or just plain dumb. We have to remember - against simplistic comparisons of "the two dictatorships" - Third Reich and GDR - that the latter lasted more than three times as long as the former and that, in the process, new generations grew up seeing the world in quite different ways.

The point here, however, is a more general one. Such debates over broad concepts may, if we do not become too committed to a particular, essentialist view of the world, be a fruitful intellectual exercise, helping us - as active, inquiring minds exploring, classifying, and shaping the historical material - to highlight points of importance, elements of similarity and difference across a carefully selected range of historical cases. At first blush, this might appear to be a vindication of Weber's ideal-type method, applied with appropriate finesse, clarity, and differentiation (rather than as a blunt weapon of political denunciation, as in the a priori assumptions embedded in totalitarian theory). However, we must remain aware that there is no way of getting at the reality, the essence of a particular case: All accounts are phrased in terms of particular concepts, rooted in particular frameworks of assumptions (or paradigms, to revert to the previous discussion). Concepts at a more general or abstract level are deployed to gather and account for material at a more substantive, particular level. We then return to the difficulties already introduced relating to the choice of paradigms and concepts through which to investigate the past. My debate with Schroeder was made easier by my willingness to adopt the Weberian definitions of power and authority employed by Schroeder; had I rejected these concepts (and insisted instead, for example, on a Foucauldian definition of power), it would have been difficult, even impossible, to engage in the same type of empirically rooted argument.
The problem, in other words, still remains that of finding ways of agreeing on compatible routes for accessing "reality," which in the ideal-type methodology is still (rather unclearly) posited as in principle separable from, and capable of exerting constraints on or influence over, willfully constructed ideal types. And yet, as the example of my own attempts (and those of innumerable others working in this area) demonstrates, we happily do this all the time - out of sheer interest in the subject matter.

Many historians, wearying of what often appears to be a sterile and acutely overpoliticized search for the concept, the approach, retreat instead into what they see as specific narratives of unique chains of events. Let us set aside debates on grand conceptualization for a moment and turn to our second substantive example. Let us consider, with respect to a rather different type of historical account, the ways in which not even would-be theoretical narrative historians can evade fundamental theoretical issues.

A useful illustration could be spun out, for example, with respect to explanations of the collapse of the GDR and the fall of the Wall almost exactly a decade ago - which some have sought to represent as a vindication of "events history" (Ereignisgeschichte) over structural or societal history. The moment we begin to look at the exponentially growing literature in this field, we notice that implicit paradigms immediately come into play, with different prior assumptions determining the focus, shape, and components of different narratives. Some appeal to the constant need for suppression by force, from at least 1953 onward, while others perceive a "golden age" variously located in the later 1960s and/or early 1970s. Some argue that the economic decline was an inevitable result of communist central planning, whereas others see it as a contingent consequence of Honecker's blinkered economic policies in a changing context of world recession. And although one historian would emphasize the role of Mikhail Gorbachev, another would stress the emergence of dissident movements as an indigenous product of the GDR. These differences in general explanatory
perspective are at least in part based in different prior political and anthropological assumptions.

Anyone who has seen Hans-Hermann Hertle's analysis of the actual unfolding of events during November 9-10, 1989, might even come to the conclusion that this must be a prime example of chaos theory applied to history: Looking at counter-factuals, it seems that had Krenz not handed Schabowsk i a draft of the proposed new travel regulations, which he did not even take the time to read through, let alone digest; or had the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) not been in permanent closed session, totally out of contact with what was happening at the Wall throughout the evening (or had Krenz and Erich Mielke been equipped with mobile phones!); or had world news coverage not run somewhat ahead of events, reporting more than was actually the case at the time; or had any one of the confused and beleaguered border guards lost their nerve and started firing on the growing crowds of East Germans thronging the border crossings; then events would have run quite differently, and there might still have been a GDR today. Or it might have collapsed in a quite different, probably more bloody and protracted manner.

Everyone who is actively involved in debates on GDR history will very likely have their own views on these specific questions; I certainly know where I stand on some; I still have an open mind on, and am intrigued by, others; and this of course is the very reason why we continue to engage in active research and debate. But let us return from these particular illustrations to the more general theoretical issues.

Does this rich choice of competing perspectives and explanatory frameworks necessarily imply that all are equally valid or, put differently, equally invalid, equally a product of our imagination, our imposition of narrative, and so on - as a postmodernist might wish us to believe?46 Or is there any way that some form of "appeal to the evidence" however mediated through specific paradigms and associated conceptual frameworks - can help us choose between one or another?
In my own view, some frameworks of inquiry - paradigms proper - will remain mutually irreconcilable, at least as far as fundamental philosophical, political, and moral assumptions about the relations between individuals and society are concerned. Other apparently conflicting interpretations are more a matter of emphasis and synthesis. It is perfectly possibly to combine, for example, analysis of the "history of events," the often unintended consequences of the actions and intentions of individuals and their at times almost haphazard combinations under unique circumstances, with a focus on long-term factors - on institutional configurations, social and economic trends, key elements of structural and cultural history - within which and against which individuals live their lives. It is possible to write history with an acute awareness of the complex ways in which human beings are both in part formed and constituted by the circumstances in which they live - contributing to the remarkable patterning of social behavior - but are at the same time extraordinarily capable of injecting new elements of creativity and change. Let us return, then, to the wider questions about the "nature of history."

(A Somewhat Inconclusive) Conclusion: The Nature of History

What, if any, preliminary conclusions can we draw from these ruminations? I would make absolutely no claim, in this brief essay, to have resolved debates that have exercised many fine minds - including the formidable Max Weber - over decades, indeed centuries. I hope merely to have suggested some ways of thinking about these issues, which will hopefully be helpful in moving the debates out of certain sterile circles and at least somewhat forward, in some respects.

I should perhaps emphasize quite explicitly that this essay is more concerned with addressing certain perennial theoretical issues that confront all historians (whether they are aware of them or not) than engaging in particular substantive arguments within the terms of recent debates about postmodernism (such as the focus on allegedly new "sociocultural approaches," which seems to me to be largely just another example of a perspectival paradigm). Hence my attempt to develop
new, and somewhat more abstract, ways of talking about some of the problems relating to the gap between past realities and present representations.

We will not be able to restore the notion of one hegemonic "grand narrative" (if such a thing ever really enjoyed uncontested status - which seems exceedingly dubious); but at least we can be somewhat clearer about the interactions among different viewpoints in the present and different substantive stories about the past.47 We can also move from the substantive level of talking about specific, substantive types of story (or "metanarratives") to a more abstract level of analyzing the nature of competing theoretical approaches (or "paradigm candidates"). And we can be aware of the fundamental metatheoretical reasons why, in history, we have a multiplicity of competing paradigm candidates rooted in different conceptions of "human nature," different assumptions about the relationships between the individual and society, and so on. At least we can attain a degree of clarity about the bases for disagreements, and the grounds for choosing one or another approach. Nor, I think, will we be able to salvage the concept of "value neutrality" in the way that Weber defined it, simply because there is not and cannot be a shared set of common, unchanging analytic concepts to capture the constructed and changing realities of the social world. We cannot therefore - metaphorically - just leave our values at the door of the inquiry, to be picked up again when evaluating the results, as Weber thought. But we can at the same time be aware that this is not a matter of individual values (with the implied prescription: declare at the outset that you are a white, middle-aged male American conservative capitalist, or a young black lesbian, or whatever, and all biases are signaled and neutralized, or seen as "enriching") but rather a patterned set of (sub-)cultural values. Let me emphasize this: The problem is precisely not the old-hat question of personal prejudices at an individual level, to be declared and taken into account (as in the old adage to students: know the historian before you read the history); rather, the problem is a theoretical one rooted in the multiplicity of competing paradigm candidates and associated conceptual frameworks previously described.48 One could say that, to a remarkable degree,
individual biases are not in fact an issue: The issue rather is the ways in which they are institutionalized and filtered through the channels of specific theoretical language communities. We thus cannot simply seek to declare individual prejudices at a personal level and then hope to appeal to (unspecified) common-craft procedures at some universal level. The problem is precisely that there are no shared sets of theoretical approaches and concepts across the profession as a whole.

But this does not mean that we need to take flight into relativism nor resort to a notion of all history as ideology, nor even stick our heads in the sands of blind empiricism because we will have a greater awareness of the character, extent, and limits - the parameters - of what we are doing. We will at least be able to understand better the nature of competing communities of scholars - without positing some vague notion of a universal guild that allegedly shares certain unexamined craft practices - and be aware of what is involved in opting for one or another theoretical approach or paradigm candidate. Under the appropriate conditions (with certain shared metatheoretical values and assumptions, and institutionally sustained freedom of debate), we will be able to proceed with intelligence and goodwill in a community of scholars more committed to engaging in honest debates about the past than scoring political and personal points in the present. We can make informed choices about the theoretical languages we want to speak, in communicating with each other and - however much it is a matter of "looking through a glass darkly" trying to maintain lines of broken communication between past and present.

How, finally, should we summarize the discipline of history? There is a large and to my mind rather unprofitable industry in elaborating two polarized comparisons: history and science on the one hand, and history and fiction on the other. But it seems to me that there are far more fruitful lines of comparison we can explore if we really want to make some grand statement about the nature of history.

All sorts of other human endeavors could be brought to bear as points of comparison. History is a form of interpretive anthropology, seeking
to recover the lost languages and codes of intersubjective communication of the past. It is a form of art, seeking to depict - in words but also sometimes with visual imagery - worlds we have lost. It is a form of geography, seeking to present reasonably reliable maps of these lost worlds, with conventions for symbols and signs to mark the salient points and features, showing how to find our way around. (And we should never forget that some maps - however artificial the conventions they deploy - are far more useful than others.) History is a form of detective work, seeking to follow hunches, uncover clues, and identify possible culprits. A historian sometimes must also act as a lawyer, constructing a plausible case and deploying all the arts of rhetoric to persuade judge and jury, on the balance of the available evidence or even beyond reasonable doubt (although the court of historical appeal is never closed to new evidence). History is, in short, often partial (in both senses of the word), creative, argumentative, rhetorical - but not necessarily also, or only, invented or untrue. If we accept certain vocabularies and conventions of enquiry, it is even (within the constraints of these language communities) falsifiable.

Most of all, perhaps, history is fascinating. Let us not forget, in the end, that we do history because history matters. At its most basic, we do history because we are curious about other lives, other societies, other worlds. We want to know how different types of state and society were constructed and transformed; we want to know what people believed, why certain tragedies happened, what effects human actions and aspirations have had on the lives of others. We want to understand ourselves and where we have come from. No amount of pointing out that we cannot do these things perfectly, that nothing we say will be uncontroversial, that much relies on shared conventions and assumptions, should prevent us from continuing to explore the past with as much honesty and intelligence as we can bring to bear on this universal human endeavor.
NOTES

1 A fuller version of the arguments will be found in my forthcoming book, Historical Theory: Or, Talking Sense About History (London, 2000).

2 I should emphasize that my purpose here is not to explore in any detail the varieties of postmodernist critique, nor to plot the twists and turns in the development of sometimes arcane debates in this area, but rather simply to note the more important challenges that have recently been mounted to notions of history as the pursuit of truth about a real past. This is, in short, not a brief excursion into intellectual history but rather a raising to consciousness of the key issues with which I am concerned in this essay.


5 For a sustained engagement with a range of theoretical positions, see particularly Robert Berkhofer, Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

6 I am here, of course, glossing over the wide range of positions within the posited "traditional" camp, not all of which are as naive as some postmodernists would have us believe. Both labels postmodernist and traditional actually cover a wide range of approaches; the adequacy of the labeling is for present purposes less important than the questions addressed.


8 See particularly Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore, 1987).


10 See John Tosh, The Pursuit of History, 2d ed. (London, 1991). Konrad H. Jarausch's notion of "post-postmodernism" also appears to state that one can combine a (renewed rather than sustained?) commitment to a relatively traditional version of "the historian's craft" and "accepted historical methods" with a heightened awareness of language or discourse as an element of the social construction of reality, achieved through exposure to postmodernism. This would then be less a new theoretical approach than a traditional approach to a (relatively) new area.

11 Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, Telling the Truth About History (New York, 1994). I discuss this more fully in my forthcoming book (see note 1 to this essay); essentially, the problem is that these authors end up with a situation in which competing approaches are either deemed to be mutually compatible (see my discussion of "perspectival paradigms"), or their adequacy can only be adjudicated on the basis of extratheoretical, political, and moral criteria.

12 Richard Evans, In Defence of History (London, 1997). Given Evans's acute sensitivity to any almost attempt to characterize his position expressed in, to date, around 24,000 words on a Web site of responses to his critics I should hasten to add that he does not restrict his argument to this point.

13 I do not intend here to enter into the arcane debates stimulated by E. H. Carr's confused disquisition on what turns "something which happened in the past" into a full-blown "historical fact"; see E. H. Carr, What Is History? (New York, 1961), chap. 1. Nor do I follow Hayden White's somewhat idiosyncratic distinction between "fact" and "event"; I use the word "fact" in the generally accepted sense of a singular "true" statement about some aspect of the past (which need not be what we conventionally understand as an "event"). See also Chris Lorenz, Konstruktion der Vergangenheit (Cologne, 1997).

14 In the view of journalist Anne Karpf herself the daughter of a Holocaust survivor the only real question remaining now is whether Wilkomirski/Grosjean is "mad" or "bad": whether this is someone who, out of some deep-seated psychological insecurity, has genuinely convinced himself of a different identity or whether this is a person who is knowingly engaging in a long-term game of massive public deceit, for whatever reasons. Karpf, interviewed on "Child of the Death Camps: Truth and Lies," BBC documentary, Nov. 3, 1999.

15 Ironically, this is not least the case with Keith Jenkins himself, who certainly makes a convincing pretense of seeking to expound the arguments of Carr, Elton, Rorty, and
White, as though he really believes he is giving us an empirically faithful rendering of their texts.

16 This of course relates to Robert Berkhofer's notion of "Great Story," or Jean François Lyotard's notion of "metanarrative," both of which highlight the insertion of particular facts into broader, substantive narratives not given by the individual facts (such as the "rise of liberty," "progress," "human emancipation," and so on) or even a great story of "ruptures," "absences," and "discontinuities," although postmodernists might not like to agree that their disjointed view also is in essence a metanarrative based on little more than presupposition). However, given the wider theoretical connotations of a concept such as metanarrative, I decided to stick with a less specific, less loaded term to intimate the rather multifaceted problem of Geschichtsbilder and "noise" around the edges of any historical account.

17 These are rooted to some extent in different substantive pictures rather than differences in theoretical approach (discussed further in the next section), although the two often overlap.

18 This interpretation had the double benefit of both proving anti-Nazi credentials through the outright condemnation of the evil regime and the criminal acts committed in the name of the German people while at the same time providing an effective historical alibi for the vast majority of Germans. For further details, see Mary Fulbrook, German National Identity After the Holocaust (Cambridge, 1999).

19 This is obviously not an appropriate place to give full references on all these controversies. For the points made in this paragraph, see Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust (New York, 1996); and Historikerstreit (Munich, 1987). On some of the older historiography discussed in previous paragraphs, see, e.g., Friedrich Meinecke, Die deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen (Wiesbaden, 1946); Gerhard Ritter, Europa und die deutsche Frage (Munich, 1948), eg. 1934; and further discussion in Fulbrook, German National Identity.

20 It might be noted in passing that even the postmodernist appeal to notions of "rupture" and "lack of order" have political implications but in the case of postmodernist refusal to impose intellectual order or pattern on what appear to be chaotic and disordered events, the practical implication is one of willful abdication from any notion of political or moral responsibility or rational exercise of active citizenship.

21 This is, of course, reminiscent of the story that a bumblebee, if taught the laws of aerodynamics, would discover that it is technically unable to fly. A similar problem is faced by unpracticed bicyclists in their first attempts to balance on two wheels.

22 These issues are discussed more fully in my forthcoming book on these questions (again, see note 1 to this essay). It may be worth reminding ourselves, for the time being, that we, as human beings, communicate with each other on a daily basis -
sometimes with greater clarity and mutual comprehension, sometimes with obfuscation and misunderstanding - and that there is no reason, in principle, why we cannot develop appropriate, if different, forms of communication with other humans elsewhere and at other times. These modes of communication will of course be somewhat different from those involved in face-to-face encounters.

23 I should perhaps emphasize at the outset that I refer here to something rather more general and more abstract than the specific substantive accounts implied by notions of the "Great Story" or the "metanarrative." Whereas paradigm may not be a term welcomed by all, it serves my purposes very well here. 24 See Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago, 1962; 2d ed., 1970).

25 It might be added that with the development of quantum theory, the same currently appears to be true even of natural science pace Kuhn.

26 Maybe, because deviance from the master seems to be frowned on in some quarters, to give this version an aura of theoretical respectability I should call it "post-Kuhnian."

27 See, e.g., Appleby, Hunt, and Jacobs, Telling the Truth About History, which presents an essentially Whig view of the history of history.

28 See G. M. Trevelyan, English Social History (London, 1944; reprint, 1948), vii: "Social history might be defined negatively as the history of a people with the politics left out... [But] without social history, economic history is barren and political history is unintelligible."

29 See, e.g., the essays in Ian Kershaw, ed., Weimar: Why Did Democracy Fail? (London, 1990), where very different weights are given, e.g., to structural weaknesses or individual decisions, as in the perceived degree of "leeway for manœuvre" (Handlungsspielraum) in Heinrich Brüning's deflationary economic policy that had ultimately disastrous social and political consequences.

30 Although there are serious debates in the philosophy of science, on which I am not qualified to comment, a simple example will illustrate the basic point: Two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen will, when combined, produce water - whether one drinks it as a Chinese Marxist or an American capitalist. Remember the old rhyme: "Peter was a little boy; Peter is no more; for what he thought was H₂O; was H₂SO₄."

Cf. also Tom Lehrer's song about the Periodic Table, which ends, "These are the only ones of which the news has come to Harvard; And there may be many others but they haven't been discovered."

31 On different definitions of "nation," see Fulbrook, German National Identity.

32 Let me give some examples of the acts of faith that may be required: I either believe in "deep structures determining surface appearances" or I do not. (For the record, I do not.) I either believe in the "decentered subject" or I do not. (For the record, I do not;
and actually, I must confess to a singular distaste for the kind of pretentious and antihumanistic theorizing that tends to go on in such quarters on occasion.) I either believe that analysis of individual motives and actions constitutes a complete and satisfying explanation of a course of events through a rich historical narrative, or I do not. (For the record, I do not - or at least, I do not consider this to be in any way sufficient as an explanation.) And so on.

33 Again, this is a massive question that cannot be pursued further in this context.


36 Some of the contributions to this debate are reprinted in Rainer Eckert, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, and Isolde Stark, eds., Hure oder Muse? Klio in der DDR: Dokumente und Materialien des Unabhängigen Historiker-Verbandes (Berlin, 1994).


38 See, e.g., Klaus-Dietmar Henke and the work carried out under the auspices of the Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung, Dresden (note the name).

39 See particularly Hartmut Kaebble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr, Sozialgeschichte der DDR (Stuttgart, 1994) and related volumes; and Richard Bessel and Ralph Jessen, eds., Die Grenzen der Diktatur: Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR (Göttingen, 1996).

40 See my overview of the longer historiography in Mary Fulbrook, Interpretations of the Two Germanies (Basingstoke, U.K., 2000). A new twist to old West German battle lines has in fact been given by the East German dimension, in which those who were victims of the SED regime who at least wanted to represent themselves in this light to some degree also adopted the condemnatory mode, often eclectically intermixed with overtones of social history and the history of everyday life. The work of Stefan Wolle is a case in point: See particularly Die heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und
41 Schroeder, SED-Staat, 632 ff.

42 I elaborate on these ideas in a book I am currently working on, titled Perfectly Ordinary Lives? A Social History of the GDR (forthcoming).

43 It should perhaps be remembered that principles of rationing operate in all healthcare systems: It matters little, for those who are excluded or disadvantaged, whether it is because of the primacy of political privilege under communism (members of the SED always had access to the best health care, the best-equipped hospitals and sanatoria in the GDR) or for economic reasons under capitalism (private health insurance schemes, private health care in a country with an overstretched national healthcare system, etc.). From the perspective of the disadvantaged under either system, it would be quite reasonable to quote Shakespeare: “A plague on both your houses.”

44 While I was ruminating on these ideas, a young East German colleague told me that she would never be able to present such an interpretation because the predictable response would be along the lines of “well, you would say that, wouldn't you” in other words, such an analysis could be written off as yet another symptom of Ostalgie. It is also potentially open to denunciation as a tainted attempt to rescue “something good” from the GDR. It seems to me that we should take an emphatic stand against such politicized modes of evaluation, which are not relevant criteria for determining the intellectual adequacy of these approaches.

45 At the time of writing, Konrad H. Jarausch’s recent edited volume, Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR (New York, 1999), was not available to me.

46 Logically, if competing explanations of the same events are mutually incompatible, we must either develop shared criteria for making a choice between them or we must take refuge in pretending to celebrate “a diversity of voices” for which read a rejection of Western traditions of rationality. It may be, of course, that the latter is precisely what some postmodernists - with their explicit rejection of what they term the “modernist” or “Enlightenment project” - want us to do. But, oddly, they simultaneously engage in what on the face (usually) appears to be rational debate grounded in the evidence of what others have said on the same issues and questions.

47 There seems little point, e.g., in seeking to resolve the theoretical issue of grand narratives by proposing the imposition of what amounts to a new substantive grand narrative of disorder, incoherence, and in comprehensibility as being supposedly more apposite to (or accounting better for) the realities (or evidence) of twentieth-century history.

48 Contrary to the impression given in some quarters, it did not take the impulses of
postmodernism to raise questions of “self-reflexivity” and personal bias to explicit attention: Even Geoffrey Elton had some comparatively wise words to utter on this topic more than thirty years ago (see, e.g., The Practice of History, 131ff). And it was of course Elton’s chief intellectual protagonist, E. H. Carr, who said: “Before you study the history, study the historian” - rapidly followed by the arguably much more crucial injunction: “Before you study the historian, study his historical and social environment” (What Is History? 54). Similarly, before postmodernists lay too much claim to coining the notion of history as a “dialogic enterprise,” we should remember that it was of course E. H. Carr who defined history as “a continuing process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialog between the present and the past” (What Is History? 35), a view with which - despite the vast gulf that separated them - Elton to some extent implied agreement.

49 Metaphors I rather like in the context of widespread discussions of history are “transparent window on,” “reflection of,” or “picture substituting for” the past. At least one can discuss degrees of shading and distortion in different types of glass through which one can still discern the shapes of something real, however darkly.

50 I have, in passing, made comments in respect to both of these areas, but I do not intend to explore them any more systematically in this context.