

## A CROOKED LINE

When there are obstacles,  
the shortest distance between  
two points is a crooked line.

—Bertolt Brecht

A  
Crooked  
Line

*From Cultural History  
to the History  
of Society*

GEOFF ELEY

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For Tim



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## PREFACE

AS A YOUNG PERSON seeking change in the world, living through a time of excitements and upheaval, I wanted to become a historian because history really *mattered*; it was necessary for making a difference. I never thought that the connections from history to politics were easy or straightforward, whether in the grander way or just as a guide for personal behavior. Some homilies about the uses of history certainly invited simplicity, marshaling stock quotations made ever more facile by repetition: Orwell's "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past," for example, or Santayana's "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."<sup>1</sup> Learning from history was more complex than that—less transparent, less manageable, less reducible to a set of direct protocols or prescriptions.

But how exactly the past gets remembered (and forgotten), how it gets worked into arresting images and coherent stories, how it gets ordered into reliable explanations, how it gets pulled and pummeled into reasons for acting, how it gets celebrated and disavowed, suppressed and imagined—all have tremendous consequences for how the future might be shaped. All of the ways in which the past gets fashioned into histories, consciously and unconsciously, remain crucial for how the present can be grasped. For political purposes, history is constantly in play. I continue to believe that history matters in that sense. In negotiating the promises and possibilities, and the pitfalls and deceptions, of the past's disorderly presence in the difficult landscape of our social and political lives, the professional historian—someone schooled in the ways of the discipline, intimate with its practices, enabled by its epistemologies—has an essential role to perform.

While this book draws on biography, it makes use of the personal

voice only sparingly and strategically. Readers expecting a detailed account of my own political involvements or outlook will certainly be disappointed. I've tried to avoid straying into the kind of self-referentiality that would collapse the last four decades of historiography into the experience of the historian, charting its movements by reference to an avowedly personal "I," and reducing the explicit object of inquiry to the implicit sensitivities—and dilemmas—of the inquirer. My book is far less than autobiographical in that sense. If it seeks to relate large historical debates, political changes, and social processes to the practices of the individual intellects that engage them, it presumes no pre-given logic to the connection. Indeed, while the political, the historical, and the personal form the triangulated streams of what I want to say, their relationship bespeaks contradictory pressures as much as confluence or collision. It's precisely at those moments of critical tension—involving the breaches between social processes and subjective experience, or between politics and the academy—that this book raises its central questions: What is history? Why do we do it?

My main motivations for writing this book are two. The first is to take stock; the second is to explore history's relationship to politics. With respect to the former, what follows is meant neither as a survey of current approaches and types of history nor as a guide to best practice. Nor is it quite a work of theory, in the manner of another familiar contemporary genre, in which the advocates of "new ways of telling the past," who celebrate the pleasures of experiment and transgression, face off against the champions of the tried and true as they circle their wagons "in defence of history."<sup>2</sup> As should become clear, I'm personally far more disposed to the first of these postures than to the second. But in providing my own take on the contemporary debates of historians about their discipline, I've chosen a rather different tack. Using my own experience as a point of departure, and returning to it allusively along the way, I've tried to present the disagreements among social and cultural historians of the second half of the twentieth century as a journey through a politics of knowledge defined by certain primary and abiding questions in their various forms: of base and superstructure, being and consciousness, structure and agency, material life and subjectivity, the "social" and the "cultural." In so doing, I've tried to see the genealogies of the historian's understanding in a continuous conversation between the main forms of historiographical inquiry and the succession of surrounding political conjunctures.

Here I've chosen the personal voice in order to emphasize precisely the *collective* rather than the individualized nature of how that happens. In my view, our ability to work through the most difficult questions and problematics—the respective challenges of social history and cultural history, in the terms of this book—almost always entails a collective and collaborative effort that too often goes unacknowledged. In traveling down new roads, in exploring new directions, and in engaging with new theories, methods, and ideas, we succeed best by dialogue, by cooperation, and by finding the points of connection beyond our immediate scholarly concerns—whether to other fields, to other disciplines, or to wider contexts of politics and the public sphere. In what follows I seek to relay back and forth between my own experiences as a historian and these larger contexts in a variety of ways. One of the most formative of those contexts was provided by the British 1968; another by the particular institutional environment of the University of Michigan in the 1980s and 1990s.

In telling my own story I'm aware of taking a risk. The perspectives are necessarily partial and subjective. As I take pains to acknowledge from time to time, there are obvious specificities of standpoint—of generation, nationality, geography, gender, sexuality, citizenship, political affiliations, and so forth—quite apart from my preferred kinds of history and theory, which structure and dispose my discussion. My overt presence in the text becomes submerged for quite long periods, then to resurface for the purposes of key discussions, usually at points of transition. Embedded in my account are also certain arguments about British-U.S. and British-German circuits of intellectual exchange which could certainly be developed into the subject of a book in themselves. At the very least I've tried to be explicit and self-conscious about the place from which at any one time I'm seeking to speak. I've certainly tried to deliver the kind of detailed historiographical narrative for our own present that no one else has yet provided. In that sense, the partialities of standpoint are less important: it's the form of the account that matters. In tracking myself as a young (and then not so young) historian moving through contemporary politics and historical studies, I've tried to model the necessary protractedness and arduousness of developing workable ideas. For those at their own beginning stage of becoming historians, I want to show the lifelong character of the process. Above all: we learn through dialogue with others.

I certainly want these reflections to play a part in shaping our



understanding of what historians do, just as I'd like them to illuminate the intellectual-political histories that bring us to where we are now. But I see my book as seeking to *open* a conversation rather than aspiring to bring anything to closure. In that respect, by far the most important feature of the past four decades of historiography has been the huge tectonic shift from social history to cultural history that forms the subject matter of this book. I've been inspired in my outlook as a historian by both of those disciplinary movements. Moreover, despite the unsettlements and disappointments accompanying the impasse of social history, I experienced the so-called linguistic or cultural turn of the 1980s as a vital empowering of possibilities. Yet at the same time I've always been impressed by the obstacles to building a conversation across the resulting differences. The first purpose of my book, consequently, is to step back from the situation created by the "new cultural history" and to consider what the latter may not be accomplishing so effectively. Without in any way disavowing the processes of critique and labors of theory, or the kinds of cultural analysis these have enabled, I want to explore how and in what forms the earlier moment of social history might be recuperated. What has been gained and what has been lost by turning away from the salient commitments of social history? What in those earlier inspirations remains valuable for critical knowledge—and dissent—today?

As I've already said, my reflections on that question will be avowedly partial in all sorts of ways, limited both by my own particular knowledge and expertise—that of a modern European historian trained in Britain, working mainly on Germany, living in the United States—and by the kinds of history I'm mainly interested in writing about. But I've tried as far as possible to cast a very wide net, to educate myself in the concerns of other fields and areas of the discipline, and to reflect self-consciously on the partialities of my standpoint. More to the point, I'd like my own mapping of this territory—the forms of a politically engaged historiography during the past four decades—to resonate not only with those in my own immediate fields, but to speak comparatively or analogously to the experiences of others working elsewhere.

My second motivation comes from politics. In what follows, my concern is not with historiography in some entirely open-ended, capacious, or pan-disciplinary manner, but with a more delimited body of work. I'm interested in those historians since the 1960s who've

sought to link their scholarly practice of the discipline to a politics of large-scale social and cultural change. Using my own passage through these years as a reticent but purposeful counterpoint, and while focusing on three especially notable or emblematic individuals—Edward Thompson, Tim Mason, and Carolyn Steedman—to exemplify and condense the argument, I've tried to capture the ways in which politics and the writing of history are constantly informing each other. *Politics*—whether in the grand, institutional, and macro-discursive dimensions or in the micropolitical, personal, and everyday—can profoundly influence the kinds of history we're able to think and do. *History* and *politics* bleed into each other all the time. Thus my book is about the politics of knowledge associated with social history and cultural history in the broadest of ways.

As I try to emphasize, this isn't a simple or one-to-one relationship. But inscribed in my account is a strong generational subtext centered on the political and ethical meanings of 1968. While Edward Thompson was much older and possessed of a very different political sensibility, his work and presence exercised extraordinary influence on the generations of historians coming of age during the 1960s and 1970s. Tim Mason was certainly among the latter, although just old enough to register a kind of distance. Carolyn Steedman's biography was entirely bounded by the parameters I'm describing, as indeed was my own formation. Again, no *particular* set of standpoints or identifications was entailed by that political conjuncture, and we'd be hard put to assimilate Steedman's heterodox, independently minded originality to any straightforward version of a generational narrative. The argument I'm making is far more about a certain kind of relationship between historians and the public sphere.

In talking about that relationship, however, I'm continually reminded of a double difficulty: historians and the works they produce are no more consistent, stable, or transparent than the practices of a public sphere and the passions and antagonisms that underlie even the most rationalist theories of its constitution. Not only does this book not aim to defuse this double difficulty. It does its best to provoke it. In seeking to illuminate the proliferating tensions in how we now approach the past, it is equally alive to the demands for recognition inhering among them. Only with an understanding of those tensions will history—and the twin categories of the cultural and the social—be made fully available for politics.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE IDEA FOR THIS book was hatched on November 18, 2002, when I gave my inaugural lecture as the Sylvia L. Thrupp Collegiate Professor of Comparative History at the University of Michigan. In naming my chair (local custom asks collegiate professors to choose their own title by honoring someone connected to the University) I wanted to make a double statement. First, as well as being a pioneer of medieval social history, Sylvia Thrupp was a main instigator of the openness of historians to interdisciplinary and comparative analysis. The journal which she founded in Chicago in 1958 and brought to Michigan three years later, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, fostered a rare and challenging reciprocity between historical thinking and various kinds of social science. An unforced eclecticism, with a willingness to think comparatively across the disciplines, across fields, and across periods, was the hallmark of Sylvia Thrupp's editorship, and it came to describe the outlook of the Michigan History Department more generally. Her energy and acuteness of judgment made the journal into what it still remains, namely, the premier international showcase for historically inclined interdisciplinary scholarship across the social sciences. Second, Sylvia Thrupp came to Michigan as the first Alice Freeman Palmer Professor of History, a chair originally endowed for a distinguished woman historian in the pre-affirmative action era when the presence of women in the profession was still so sparse. Though she'd retired by the time I arrived in Ann Arbor in 1979, I was lucky enough to get to know her via *Comparative Studies*, and I'm proud to be associated with her name.<sup>3</sup>

Immediately after delivering my lecture, I was urged by Phil Pochoda, Director of the University of Michigan Press, to consider converting my thoughts into a book and I've been enormously grate-

ful for that initial encouragement and subsequent support. In my immediate editor at the Press, Jim Reische, I've also been fortunate indeed. I wrote the book between October 2003 and April 2004 during a year's leave, which was made possible by a Guggenheim Fellowship and the associated support of the University of Michigan. Pete Soppelsa provided invaluable help at the final stage of the manuscript's preparation.

Still more crucial have been the various intellectual communities I've relied upon over the years, whose identity should be readily apparent from what follows below. Pride of place goes to the University of Michigan, both to my colleagues and graduate students in the Department of History and to the wider interdisciplinary culture fostered so uniquely by this University, whose crucible in many respects was the Program in the Comparative Study of Social Transformations (CSST) formed in 1987. I also thank my fellow German historians as well as my wider cross-disciplinary community in German Studies, who again include a remarkable group of colleagues and students at Michigan itself and an essential network of friends on either side of the Atlantic (and the North Sea). My final source of friendship, solidarity, and inspiration in this collective sense is the one absolutely crucial to the framing of the arguments for this book, namely, those who share my credo of engaged scholarship and intellectual work, who write the histories from which I learn the most (whether members of the historical profession or not), and who believe that history can and should continue making a difference.

In those three broad respects I owe so much that it becomes invidious to name only a small number of individuals. But for this particular book I'd like to acknowledge intellectual debts ranging from more recent exchanges to conversations now stretching across many years. I thank Lauren Berlant, David Blackburn, Monica Burguera, Antoinette Burton, Kathleen Canning, Jane Caplan, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Vinayak Chaturvedi, Becky Conekin, David Crew, Nick Dirks, Jessica Dubow, Atina Grossmann, Julia Hell, Young-sun Hong, Kali Israel, Jennifer Jenkins, Robin Kelley, Mike Kennedy, Marjorie Levinson, Alf Lüdtke, Terry McDonald, Kristin McGuire, Bob Moeller, Gina Morantz-Sanchez, Frank Mort, Dirk Moses, Rudolf Mrazek, Keith Nield, Sherry Ortner, Kathy Pence, Moishe Postone, Alice Ritscherle, Sonya Rose, Bill Rosenberg, Adelheid von Saldern, Bill Schwarz, Bill Sewell, Peggy Somers, Scott Spector, Carolyn Steedman, George Steinmetz, Uli Strasser, Ron Suny, Dennis

Sweeney, and Susan Thorne. Each of these superb scholar-intellectuals (some of them historians by profession, some not) gave me indispensable help and guidance, whether by their general influence over the years or by their specific advice.

A number of people read the entire manuscript, including the two anonymous reviewers for the Press, whose readings were extremely helpful and discerning. The finished manuscript was read by Gina Morantz-Sanchez and Frank Mort, who were the very best of readers. They suggested many particular improvements, but most of all helped me believe in the usefulness of the project. If Frank kept my sights focused in Britain, Gina helped me keep my footing in the United States. Finally, Jessica Dubow read the book as I was writing it and proved the ideal interlocutor. From neither Britain, Germany nor the United States (but South Africa); not a historian by discipline, but with a range of historical knowledges very different from my own; not a sixty-eightier, but of a much younger generation—in each respect she brought differences of perspective that sharpened the clarity of what I wanted to say. I thank each of these readers for the generosity of their response to the spirit and purposes of this book.

I would like to thank Ruth Rosengarten for her generosity in allowing me to use her drawings for the cover art of this book. They express perfectly the essence of my purposes.

It should already be plain that my book offers more than just historiographical commentary. The cadence of its organization—from optimism through disappointment to reflectiveness and finally defiance—gives the game away. It also aspires to politics. Above all, it presents a statement of personal conviction. It makes an appeal to my fellow historians, both within the profession and without. Practice the historian's classic virtues, of course. Ground yourself in the most imaginative, meticulous, and exhaustive archival research, in all the most expansive and unexpected ways the last four decades have made available. Embrace the historian's craft and the historian's epistemologies. But never be satisfied with these alone. Be self-conscious about your presuppositions. Do the hard work of abstraction. Converse with neighboring disciplines. Be alive to the meanings of politics. History is nothing if not sutured to a pedagogy, to a political ethics, and to a belief in the future. Otherwise, as Stuart Hall once said at the end of a reflection on the meanings of popular culture, to be perfectly honest, "I don't give a damn."<sup>4</sup>