

Preface

Out of the Present into the Past

In early nineteenth-century New Orleans, the months when yellow fever was in town were known as the *tiempo muerto*, the dead time. People who could afford to left the city. The dead could be seen everywhere, in parks, on open barrows, or floating down the Mississippi. The disease known as COVID-19 is less lethal than yellow fever, which, in a bad year, might kill as much as a tenth of the population. In 2020, the bodies piled up in smaller numbers and out of sight, unless you happened to be working in a hospital, morgue or crematorium.

But the phrase *tiempo muerto* does capture something of the pandemic season of 2020. The great deceleration of all things felt like a reversal of modernity's inner logic. Flights, speeches, conferences, ceremonies and meetings were cancelled. Time ceased to rush like water in a fast river. It pooled around each task. The future became hazy. For a seasoned professor confined to his house it was a good time to be writing a book and compiling a volume of essays. For young people in the academic sector, on the other hand, there were no final exams, no conferrals of degrees and no celebrations with friends and relatives. The thresholds they had striven towards, rites of passage marking the transition from one phase of life to the next, had melted away. For them, it was as if the future had been switched off.

In order to collect my own thoughts and to signal to the wider world that historians were still thinking, even as the world around them was shutting down, I began a series of podcast conversations with colleagues whose aim was to explore how reflecting on the past can help us to reflect on our present predicaments. These discussions, broadcast under the title *The History of Now*, generated suggestive and contradictory insights.

The raw terror of earlier encounters with epidemic disease was one interesting theme. In early modern Venice and Florence, Jane Stevens Crawshaw and John Henderson reported, fear was seen as a threat in its own right, because it was believed to heighten the vulnerability to infection. The public health authorities tried to counter it by dealing with the public in a calm and compassionate way. But the opposite problem also presented itself. When passing health inspectors discovered a gaggle of young Florentines blithely partying at the height of a sixteenth-century plague epidemic, they went to a nearby graveyard, brought back the corpse of a young woman who had recently died and threw it into the midst of the revellers, shouting: 'She wants to dance too!'

It was a striking feature of the COVID-19 pandemic, Samantha Williams, Romola Davenport and Leigh Shaw-Taylor observed, that although our capacity to amass and communicate scientific knowledge was incomparably greater than that of our predecessors, our ability to actually fight and treat the disease (at least until the emergence of a dependable vaccine) was less well developed, with the result that we tended to fall back on techniques already employed by medieval and early modern cities: quarantine, lockdown, social distancing, masks and the closure of public facilities such as shops, markets and churches. Then, as now, the political authorities had to balance the threat to life against the threat to incomes and economic vitality. In commercial cities such as New Orleans, Istanbul, Bombay and Hamburg, that was an impossible balancing act.

The measures adopted by political authority to meet the challenge of contagious disease always go to the heart of the social contract between the rulers and the ruled, Peter Baldwin told me. Where the danger was evident and the policies plausible and transparent, social conformity with counter-epidemic measures tended to be high. But where trust in the authorities was lacking, the effort to suppress contagion by ordinances limiting movement and economic activity could trigger protests and riots, as in today's United States, or, as Shruti Kapila observed, in late-nineteenth-century plague-struck Bombay, where measures enacted by the British triggered an uprising that culminated in the assassination of the city's plague commissioner and his assistant. 'Plague is more merciful to us,' wrote the Indian nationalist

Bal Gangadhar Tilak, ‘than its human prototypes now reigning the city.’

The habit of assigning a moral meaning to pestilence is as old as the written record of its effects. In the Mosaic Bible, disease is often presented as something willed by God. ‘For now,’ says the God of Exodus (9:15), ‘I will stretch out my hand that I may smite thee and thy people with pestilence.’ From this it followed that epidemics must be signs of divine disfavour requiring acts of propitiation by humanity. The towns of medieval and early-modern Europe, Chris Briggs told me, often flanked their public health measures with regulations forbidding prostitution, gambling, card playing and general frivolity, on the grounds that these would further provoke an already vexed deity. The habit has persevered: think of the businessman and bed accessory tycoon Mike Lindell, CEO of MyPillow® Inc., who appeared at a White House press conference alongside Donald Trump and presented an off-piste monologue in which he declared that the current COVID-19 pandemic was God’s way of punishing an America that had ‘turned its back on God’. Americans should get back to reading ‘the book’ with their families.

There has always been an alternative view, of course. In his account of the ancient Athenian plague epidemic, the historian Thucydides noted archly that the pious and the impious died of the disease in equal numbers. In the Book of Job, Jonathan Lamb reminded me, disease is not a punishment, but the consequence of a dark wager between God and Satan. Jealous of Job’s loyalty to God, Satan tempts the deity to let him test this virtuous man by visiting disease and death first on his cattle, then on his wife and children and finally on Job himself, who passes through these horrors in a state of the profoundest confusion, because he has no way of understanding why he is being tormented. The need for moral understanding remains strong. Even in the relatively secularized environment of the present-day West, there is an urge to mitigate the meaninglessness of suffering and death by speculating hopefully on the notion that the pandemic will leave us more attentive to the ecological fragility of our world and more sensitive to the bonds of solidarity and interdependence that connect us with our fellow citizens.

It is easy to imagine that contagious diseases fan out evenly across

human populations, like billiard balls rolling across a table. But in fact their trajectory is highly uneven, because it is nearly always mediated by structures of social inequality. In the towns of early modern Europe and the Ottoman Empire, Nükhet Varlık pointed out, the wealthy could flee from crowded cities to rural retreats where infection was less likely. In the plague years of early modern Cambridge, the highest mortality rates were seen in the suburban areas between Jesus College and Barnwell, where college servants and the labouring poor lived. Kathryn Olivarius told me that in New Orleans, new immigrants, especially Irish and Germans, tended to die in the greatest profusion from yellow fever, because they occupied cheap rooms in crowded tenements, where rates of infection were high. In colonial America, Sarah Pearsall reported, epidemic disease killed fastest in populations that were already immuno-suppressed by malnutrition. Eighteenth-century Native Americans displayed heightened vulnerability to smallpox, Pearsall observed, because forced displacement had already degraded their nutritional standards.

Today, there are signs in the United States and many other countries of a stark variation in mortalities that correlates with income and levels of community health. Even in the most prosperous parts of the world, the pandemic has intensified social awareness. Attention focused on carers, nurses, social workers, paramedics and delivery drivers – fellow citizens whose work is not usually handsomely rewarded, but whose importance was now suddenly conspicuous. People got to know their neighbours, brought food, shopping and medications to vulnerable men and women locked down in their homes, and lined up along their streets to applaud health workers (at least until the government began telling them to do so, at which point enthusiasm dwindled). Here, too, there were parallels with the past. Even during visitations of the bubonic plague, a pitiless and terrifying disease with a far higher lethality than COVID-19, medieval English communities displayed high levels of social solidarity. In Venice and Florence, the authorities rolled out elaborate provisions – furlough payments, free food deliveries (including a litre of wine per day), tax and rent freezes and efforts to get people back into work once the disease had passed. The smallpox epidemics of colonial America triggered stupendous feats of caring, mainly by women, who often took in and

raised the children of dead neighbours, friends and relatives. Far from breaking the bonds of social solidarity and unleashing anarchy, the encounter with epidemic disease heightened social cohesion and reinforced ethical norms.

During the lockdown, I happened to be reading Heinrich Heine's *Französische Zustände*, a series of articles written during his sojourn in Paris in 1832. In the midst of a piece composed in April of that year, I found the following parenthesis, inserted some years later:

At this time I was often disturbed, most of all by the horrific screaming of my neighbour, who died of cholera. In general, I must point out that the conditions at that time had a regrettable impact on the pages that follow . . . It is very disturbing when the sound of death sharpening his sickle rings all too sharply in one's ears.

Heine had seen people dragging through the streets the mutilated corpse of a man lynched by a crowd because he had been found to be carrying a white powdery substance, believed to be a cholera-spreading toxin (in fact the powder turned out to be camphor, thought by some to protect against the disease). He had seen white bags full of corpses piled up in the spacious hall of a public building and watched the corpse wardens counting off the bags as they passed them to gravediggers to be loaded onto wagons. He remembered how two little boys with sombre faces had stood beside him and asked him which bag their father was in. A year later, the misery and fear were forgotten. This same hall was full of 'cheerful little French children jumping about, the chattering of pretty French girls, who laughed and flirted as they went about their shopping'. The cholera months had been 'a time of terror', more horrifying even than the political Terror of 1793. Cholera was a 'masked executioner who made his way through Paris with an invisible mobile guillotine'. And yet its passing seemed to leave no trace on the frivolous vitality of the city.

I began to think about the place of epidemic catastrophes in history. There exist many wonderful studies of the impact of epidemic disease: Richard Evans's classic *Death in Hamburg* on the nineteenth-century cholera crises, Laura Spinney's *Pale Rider* on the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918–19, Elizabeth Fenn's *Pox Americana* and Kathryn Olivarius's study of yellow fever in antebellum New Orleans, to name just a few.

But it was striking how little trace even the most horrific encounters with deadly pathogens had left on mainstream historical narratives and on public memory.

In one of our podcast conversations, Gary Gerstle remarked that he had been thinking all his adult life about the impact of war on American governance and yet had never written a single word about the flu pandemic of 1918–19 that killed more Americans than the First World War. How many Americans today remember that more compatriots died of smallpox during the American Revolutionary Wars than as a consequence of armed conflict?

This seemed to be a problem specific to modern history – the Black Death, Miri Rubin reminded me, was one of the central themes of medieval studies, and the early modernists, too, were alert to the importance of epidemic disease. The Spanish conquest of the Americas, Gabriela Ramos remarked, might not have happened as it did, were it not for ‘invisible allies’ in the form of diseases endemic to peninsular Spain, but unknown in Mexico and Andean America, whose inhabitants, immunologically naïve to these pathogens, were all but wiped out by them. Only in the modern era did epidemic disease seem to have been moved to the margins of visibility. Sarah Pearsall proposed that this had to do with gender: since the lion’s share of caring during epidemic crises fell to women, she argued, the topic forfeited its claim on the attention of male historians. Commenting on the near-invisibility of the flu pandemic in many accounts of the US contribution to the First World War, Gary Gerstle suggested that an historiography oriented towards the struggle and destiny of nation-states was more attuned to the kinds of suffering and sacrifice that take place on battlefields than on those that unfold in hospital wards when mortalities surge.

And perhaps, Laura Spinney remarked, there is something inherent in the character of an epidemic that resists our efforts to integrate it into grand narrative. Historians, and humans generally, are addicted to human agency, they love stories in which people bring about or respond to change. They think in terms of long chains of causation. But an epidemic occurs when a non-human agent erupts without warning into the human population. A narrative centred on humans, Sujit Sivasundaram suggested, will never be capable of making sense

of a phenomenon like COVID-19, whose unliving pathogen crossed the boundary between the animal and the human worlds. What was needed was a different way of telling history, one that made space not just for the disruptions wrought by humans, but also for the sentient agency of pangolins and civet cats and the non-sentient energy of atmospheric systems and the physical environment.

For the most part, humans have preferred accounts of disease that stress either divine agency (this is a scourge from God or the gods) or human causation. In the fourteenth century, Jews were suspected of poisoning wells; in sixteenth-century Milan, suspicion focused on *untori*, plague ‘anointers’, strangers from other Italian towns who were believed to be smearing church altars with a pestilential paste; in nineteenth-century Paris, crowds sprang upon men believed to be ‘poison-mixers’. President Donald Trump spoke of ‘the Chinese virus’ and bantered with his supporters about ‘Kung Flu’, while theories proposing that COVID-19 was concocted in laboratories by Chinese, American or Russian scientists were rife on the internet. One of the most virulent conspiracy theories worldwide claimed that the COVID-19 virus was spread by 5G phone masts. A curious variant, widespread in Brazil, Pakistan, Nigeria and Argentina, proposed that Bill Gates had personally engineered the current pandemic in order to implant microchips in humans along with a vaccine, so that they could be ‘controlled’ via 5G telephone networks.

We have learned so much and we have learned so little. Watching President Donald Trump flounder day after day in front of the cameras as he recommended untested therapies to the public like a snake-oil salesman from the Old West, contradicted his own medical experts and tried to blame the virulence of the disease on the poor governance of Democrat governors and mayors, I found myself thinking of Wilhelm II, Germany’s last and most incompetent Kaiser. The two men were strikingly similar. Both exhibited a tendency to blabber about whatever preoccupation happened to be on their minds at any given moment. A short attention span, extreme irritability, a tendency to drift into incoherence under pressure, anger-management issues, a hectoring, bullying demeanour, coldness and lack of empathy, egregious boastfulness, crackpot plans, sarcastic asides and off-colour jokes were common to both. It was Wilhelm II

who said to a group of advisers: ‘All of you know nothing. I alone know something,’ but no one would be surprised to hear these words on the lips of Donald Trump. Both men denounced domestic protesters as anarchists and troublemakers and both insisted on tough repressive measures against them. Both were preoccupied by zero-sum scenarios of conflict in which one country’s victory must be another’s defeat. Like Trump, the Kaiser was completely incapable of learning from his own mistakes.

We all saw the strained expressions on the faces of the experts and staffers standing around the president as he veered off the text prepared for him into narcissistic speculations that appeared completely decoupled from reality. In 1907, exactly the same phenomenon was captured in a famous caricature by Rudolf Wilke published in the satirical journal *Simplicissimus* under the title ‘During a speech by the Kaiser’. A group of generals listen to a speech unfold in three phases. During the first, ‘The Fine Opening’, the gentlemen look on, calm and attentive. Then comes ‘The Awkward Bit’ – the Kaiser is off-message, the generals stroke their beards, adjust their monocles and look awkwardly at the decorations. At last comes ‘The End’: Hurra – hurra – hurra!!’ The speech is over, to everyone’s great relief.

The point of these reflections is not that they make William II look any better, because they do not. It is rather that the extraordinary spectacle of the Trump presidency could be said to have changed the frame of reference. There was a time when the Kaiser looked like a uniquely German disaster. The domineering demeanour, the empty posturing, the absurdly affected countenance at public occasions, the impulsiveness, the self-absorption – all looked like the symptoms of a peculiarly German malaise. In a brilliant study of the Kaiser’s court, John Röhl described eloquently the ‘Byzantinism’ of the Kaiser’s entourage, the toadying, forelock-tugging deference to the ‘All-Highest Person’. Everything that was wrong with Germany seemed to be on display here. The Trump presidency has not overturned that narrative, but it has unsettled it. We all remember cringing at that televised meeting in the cabinet office of the White House in June 2017, at which cabinet members newly appointed by Trump vied to outdo each other in gushing expressions of praise and fealty to the president. No one *chose* Wilhelm II – he was thrust upon the Germans by the

inflexible logic of dynastic inheritance. The Trump presidency revealed that even a powerful and self-confident democracy rooted in liberal values can bring forth atavistic enormities.

What we will learn from the pandemic remains to be seen. As I write these words it is still unclear how quickly and how fully economies across the world will recover from this crisis. The encounter with a pandemic is not new, but the measures enacted to counter its propagation are. As Adam Tooze remarked in one of our podcasts, the velocity and volume of the economic shutdown are completely unprecedented. The crises of 1929 and 2007–8 were different from each other, but both were triggered by internal malfunctions of the global system. This pandemic crisis, by contrast, is an exogenous shock, a fast-freeze of the real economy by government fiat. The speed of the freeze was important, because it meant that stakeholders had almost no time to adjust their behaviour to changing conditions. Whether a partially frozen world economy can be thawed and primed back into rude life remains to be seen. We have never been here before.

The essays in this book were chosen because they address themes that have informed my work since I became a student of modern European history: religion, political power and the awareness of time. The history of religion has always interested me because religious traditions situate human endeavour within the largest possible compass. Political power connects culture, economy and personality with decisions that affect great numbers of people. And the study of time, not as the limpid plasma through which history moves, but as something constructed and shaped by narratives, religious and secular, has always interested me, because it exposes one of the deepest ways in which those who wield power manipulate our awareness, our sense of history. Most of the essays are the product of repeated redactions and elaborations. They are all *essays*, in the sense that they are all exploratory chains of thought, rather than watertight exercises in historical argument. Some of them stem from public lectures, others from review pieces. Only two of them ('From Prussia with Love' and 'The Life and Death of Colonel General Blaskowitz') are supplied with source notes, because they draw extensively on archival sources. I have included two short pieces in which I discuss the work of a colleague, in order to show the work of others illuminates our path, both as historians

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and as people. I have not attempted to ‘update’ any of the essays – readers will note that the final one, ‘Uncertain Times’, though contemporary in focus, dates from that far-off epoch before COVID-19. There seemed to me to be a risk that in making it more up-to-date, I might make it less fresh. The essays in this book, like their author and the protagonists who appear in them, are prisoners of time.

The Dream of Nebuchadnezzar: Thoughts on Political Power

I want to begin these thoughts with the Book of Daniel. Chapter 2 of this book opens with a scene involving King Nebuchadnezzar II of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, who reigned from 605 BC until 562 BC – forty-three years in all. Today Nebuchadnezzar is mainly known for two things: building the Hanging Gardens of Babylon – one of the wonders of the ancient world – and for besieging Jerusalem and destroying its temple, inaugurating the so-called ‘Babylonian Captivity’ of the Judeans.

Chapter 2 of the Book of Daniel recalls a morning in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, after the sacking of Jerusalem. The king wakes up disturbed by a dream. He can’t find rest. He summons his wise men, ‘the astrologers, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans’. They appear. They ask him to describe the dream. He can’t. ‘The thing is gone from me.’ It seems the king has forgotten his dream. At this point the mood in the room plummets. The wise men (who are now not feeling very wise) try as gently as they can to break the news that their transferable skills, impressive as they are, do not include reading the minds of sleeping kings: ‘it is a rare thing that the king requireth, and there is none other that can shew it before the king, except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.’ In other words: ‘Sorry boss, this is way above our pay grade.’ The wise men are presumably feeling apprehensive at this point, and with good reason, because a moment later the king says: ‘If ye will not make known unto me the dream, with the interpretation thereof, ye shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made a dunghill.’ The conversation continues, but the thrust of the king’s position is already clear. The wise men are a waste

of space. This empire has had enough of experts. In his rage, the king orders that every wise man in Babylon be executed.

The king's execution order stirs consternation. Among those who are shocked to learn of it is a young Jewish captive, in effect a prisoner of war, by the name of Daniel – a man of noble birth who had lived through the siege and destruction of the city of Jerusalem. Daniel was one of a group of handsome and intelligent young Israelites from good families who had been brought back from the defeated city to be taught the literature and language of Babylon and serve in the monarch's court. So Daniel, too, was among those 'wise men' who faced execution if the king's decree were to be carried out. The book records that Daniel speaks to one of the palace guards. He asks what's up with the king. The guard explains. Daniel wants to know if he can get some face-time with the monarch (I'm translating freely from the Aramaic here). The guard agrees to fix a meeting. Daniel goes to the friends he shares his apartment with: Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Guys, he says, let's pray to God for insight. Let's 'desire mercies of the God of heaven concerning this secret'.

The next morning, Daniel goes to the king. We have to imagine that the king is initially sceptical: if the wise men of Babylon have collectively failed in this task, what should Daniel hope to accomplish? But to the king's astonishment, Daniel describes the dream, or, rather, he describes *a* dream, a dream that he hopes the king will accept as his own. He frames it not just as an alarming nocturnal experience, but as a prophetic revelation: 'O king, thy thoughts came into thy mind upon thy bed, what should come to pass hereafter: and he that revealeth secrets maketh known to thee what shall come to pass.' And then comes the dream itself. The king, Daniel says, had beheld a colossus: 'This great image, whose brightness was excellent, stood before thee; and the form thereof was terrible.' Its head was of gold, as brilliant as the sun. Its breasts and arms were of silver. Its belly and thighs were of bronze. Its feet were part of iron and part of clay.

But what does it mean, the king asks. One can only suppose that Daniel felt tremendous relief at this point. After all, he had no way of knowing whether the king would accept the dream Daniel had proposed to him. Daniel begins his exegesis of the dream he has put

into the king's head: 'Thou, O king, art this head of gold.' For 'wheresoever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven hath he given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all'. At this point, one has to admit, Daniel is handling the situation brilliantly. He flatters the king, first, by suggesting that he is the privileged receiver of mysteries divulged by the hidden master of all secrets and second, by implying that this divine authority underwrites the king's power. The king wants to know more: what are the silver breasts, the belly of bronze, the iron thighs, etc. for? Daniel explains: after the golden age of Nebuchadnezzar, whose lustre will never be outshone, will come a lesser age of mere silver, and then an even lesser age merely of bronze. And then will come a really quite crap age of iron and clay when men shall fight men and kings shall fight kings. 'And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed.' There are other details to the dream and to Daniel's exegesis that I shall not deal with here.

The king's reaction to all of this is quite extraordinary: 'Then the king Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face, and worshipped Daniel, and commanded that they should offer an oblation and sweet odours unto him.' The mass execution of the wise men is cancelled. There are some further complications in this story: Nebuchadnezzar's mood swings get a lot worse – he spends a seven-year period in a state of mental anguish living with beasts in caves and fields. In the early nineteenth century, William Blake captured this phase of his life in an unforgettable print, naked, dirty and crawling on all fours, Nebuchadnezzar stares at the viewer in swivel-eyed mania (Fig. 1). The Book of Daniel, a very eccentrically structured text, records various further dreams and visions, and Daniel gets into some hot spots, most famously an intimidating encounter with some lions in a den.

But if we reflect on the opening scene in which Daniel narrates and interprets the dream, we find in it a beautiful and subtle fable on power. The story tells us that the most powerful man in the world is powerless before his night terrors. He summons the holders of bureaucratic power, the experts, the custodians of privileged knowledge. But they fail to come up with a solution, and as a result they forfeit their power



Figure 1. The anguish of a once mighty ruler: *Nebuchadnezzar* by William Blake (c. 1795–1805) (*Tate Gallery*)

and even, potentially, their lives. And into this fraught constellation steps someone with no power at all: a rightless young alien, a prisoner of war, a captive from a sacked city. The jury is still out on whether God actually told Daniel the king's dream, or whether the young man didn't simply possess the human insight required to understand the true nature of the king's predicament. Later in the book there are verses thanking God for lending Daniel a helping hand. But this is an interpolation. The story itself suggests something different, namely that the young man understood how to read the situation in which the king found himself. What could a man as powerful as Nebuchadnezzar possibly fear, other than his own mortality? And how better to reconcile him with that terrible certainty than to establish his eternal primacy over the rest of human endeavour? At the same time, Daniel imparted to the king something he had himself experienced as the son of a destroyed city, a piece of wisdom, namely, that power is *always temporary*. And his reward for this wisdom is to see the greatest king in the world abase himself before him.

It is hard to overstate the importance of Nebuchadnezzar's (Daniel's) dream for the theme of this essay. Because the colossus of the dream, presented by Daniel as prophecy, became a way of imagining world history as the unfolding of something foreordained, a narrative sanctioned by biblical prophecy. Until well into the early modern era, it was conventional to think of world history as an eschatological sequence of hegemonies based on Daniel's dream, starting with the Babylonians, then moving on to the Persians (with the optional addition of the Medes), the Greeks and the Romans. I will return to this idea in a moment.

Power is at once the most ubiquitous and the most elusive theme of historical writing. Questions of power lie at the centre of most historical narratives, but the concept is rarely interrogated or analysed. There are studies that aim to clarify the differences between various types of power, but they tend to be written by sociologists or political scientists rather than historians and no consensus on definitions has been reached. Even in the field of political and diplomatic history, pre-eminently concerned with the exercise of power, the term is almost always deployed as a transparent signifier whose meaning requires no separate elucidation. By contrast with 'gender' and 'culture', 'power' has never provided the focal point for the kind of sub-disciplinary formation that might have licensed a concerted theoretical and comparative engagement with the problem of power across the full spectrum of historical practice. Look up 'power studies' on the internet and you will find pages focusing on the strategic and conceptual study of air and space power or the protection of personnel and equipment through safety training, or the optimization of electrical grid performance.

Why is this so? The reason may lie partly in the nature of power itself. It is, as the historian of the Middle Ages Thomas N. Bisson has put it, 'so conceptually vast and so inscrutably inflated, that one instinctively seeks to pluralize the word'. Power is not an identity that can be said to inhere in groups or individuals; rather it expresses a relational state of affairs. Power is thus neither a substantive entity, nor an institution, nor even a possession, but rather an attribute of the relationships within which it is exercised. It was in recognition of this

feature of the phenomenon that Michel Foucault, the most influential post-war theorist on power, refused to treat it under a separate rubric, choosing instead to embed his reflections in an analysis of specific institutional and disciplinary contexts and practices.

From this flows the difficulty of power as an object of synoptic historical contemplation, for the relationships within which it makes itself felt are as varied as the entire field of human experience. As a purely relational concept, it is often difficult to localize. This may help to explain the perennial debates that are fought across academic history over the extent of the power wielded by specific sovereigns and regimes. At the very least, they suggest a persistent uncertainty about how and where power arises and resides in complex systems and whether its exercise depends more upon coercion or the consent of those over whom power is supposedly wielded.

The bundling of meanings in and around the term ‘power’ is a further difficulty. ‘Power’ and ‘influence’, though used interchangeably, are not necessarily synonymous. I remember seeing a colleague walking in Cambridge and being amused at the words emblazoned on the T-shirt of her three-year-old daughter: ‘I may be small, but I’m very influential’. The international relations theorist Robert Keohane found the same imbalance in what he called ‘the big influence of small allies’. ‘Like an elephant yoked to a team of lesser animals’, he wrote, the United States is tied by various international agreements to an array of smaller and weaker allies. ‘These are the badgers, mice and pigeons of international politics and in many cases they have been able to lead the elephant.’ The boundaries between power and authority are often blurred, despite the long European tradition of theorizing the relationship between secular and priestly authority in terms of the distinction between *potestas* and *auctoritas*. Making sense of power has thus often involved disentangling the different kinds of asset that may be invoked to sustain it.

So I shall make no attempt here to chart chronologically the evolution of historical ‘power studies’ (since no such thing exists). I’m not going to categorize the various ways in which historians have deployed the term or tried to define it. Rather, I want to look very briefly at some of the configurations in which the operations of power have attracted the attention of historians: the powers and superpowers of

the international system, power and personal dominion, the power of states, the ultra-concentration of power in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, its place in pluralist democratic systems and its supposed diffusion in the era of 'late capitalism'.

The sources that historians use are themselves often artefacts of power. Many of the archives historians labour in are the fossilized remnants of once-powerful bureaucracies, and historians themselves are not immune to the attractions and repulsions of power. Bearing this in mind, I close with some brief thoughts about the operations of power upon the writing of history.

THE POWER OF THE POWERS

The book of Daniel laid the foundation for a way of thinking about the history of the world as the unfolding of a prophesied sequence of empires. The age of the Babylonians was followed by that of the Medes and Persians. Then came the Greeks and then the Romans, whose reign many Europeans believed had outlasted antiquity in the form of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. This sequential template remained hugely influential well into the early modern period and still wields profound influence in the world of rapture websites. The term 'rapture' refers to an eschatological doctrine positing that the history of the world will end with a seven-year period of tribulation, before or after which Christians will be seized away into the heavens to join Christ.

In other words, Daniel's prophecy imagined world history, before it had even happened, as a sequence of powers, a sequence of hegemonies. The grip of this vision began to weaken only when the Saxon political theorist Samuel von Pufendorf, along with various other scholars, began to argue in the seventeenth century that the era of the Romans was long over. Pufendorf denied that the Holy Roman Empire was the continuation (in the prophetic or any other sense) of the ancient Roman Empire and so challenged the hold of revelation upon history. For Pufendorf, what mattered about history was not the diachronic sequence of empires, but the synchronic relations between them – expressed in alliances, conflicts and wars. The relations among

powers, Pufendorf argued, were inherently chaotic and unpredictable, since the interests of each territorial state constantly changed in accordance with shifts in the balance of power among them. The idea of powers jockeying for supremacy, or at least security, within a competitive multi-state system helped to establish 'human history' as an autonomous discourse, distinct from the *historia divina* underwritten by prophecy.

Once it was separated from prophecy, the history of powers could unfold under the rubric of disruption and change. 'Fragility and instability are inseparable from the works of men,' wrote Frederick II of Prussia in 1751. This was just as well, the king thought. For if there were no great upheavals, 'there would be no great events'. The arc of ascendancy and decline traced by the great powers of world history reminded the king of the regular motion of the planets that, 'having traversed the space of the firmament for ten thousand years, find themselves at the place from which they departed'. The study of the careers of great states was thus a study in the mutability and elusiveness of power. The hegemony of any one state was always temporary. The mighty empires of the ancient near east and of Greece and Rome were now mere ruins. Today's great potentate was tomorrow's Ozymandias. The Spanish Habsburg hegemon of the sixteenth century, with its bullion and mercenary armies, made way for the Dutch Empire of the Golden Age; the hegemony of late seventeenth-century France made way after long and bitter struggles for the British Empire of the nineteenth, a vast naval enterprise sustained by industrial might and unparalleled financial resources. But British imperial hegemony was also temporary; it would not outlive what Henry Luce famously called the 'American century'.

The habit of imagining history as a succession of empires has been hard to shake. And from this arises one of the central questions posed by US political scientists: whether the United States, whose relative lead in terms of military power is still unprecedented in world history, will succeed in the medium and longer term in maintaining its leadership position. In this context there has been a lot of interest in something called 'soft power', a form of legitimacy generated by the dominant state's association with a universalistic culture, attractive values and a liberal and/or multilateral engagement with other states