

Theory of Knowledge in History
Sources + Historians = **Histories**

- It has been said that "all history is contemporary history" (Croce) and "History tells us more about the person who wrote it than about the people being written about" (Carr).
- In this sense, works of history themselves become sources for later generations of historians!
- In this session, we will look at the three broad interpretations about the course of history that historians have formulated.

Starter Task

Have a read through each of these quotes. Which one do you like most and why?

"Man is a being with free will; therefore, each man is potentially good or evil, and it's up to him and only him (through his reasoning mind) to decide which he wants to be." - Ayn Rand

"You must believe in free will; there is no choice" - *Isaac Bashevis Singer*

"We like to forget that in fact everything in our life is chance, from our genesis out of the encounter of spermatozoon and egg onward." - *Sigmund Freud*

"A man can surely do what he wills to do, but cannot determine what he wills."
- *Schopenhauer*

"In the mind there is no absolute or free will; but the mind is determined to wish this or that by a cause, which has also been determined by another cause, and this last by another cause, and so on to infinity." - *Baruch Spinoza*

"Life is like a game of cards. The hand you are dealt is determinism; the way you play it is free will" - *Jawaharlal Nehru*

"I am a determinist.
...The real issue, so far as the will is concerned, is not whether we can do what we choose to do, but whether we can choose our own choice" - *Brand Blanshard*

Causation in History – Why do things happen?

- Every historical investigation begins with a simple question: 'Why?'¹
- Pinning down the most important causes of events allows us to decide how best to deal with it. This provides meaning to situations which otherwise would leave us feeling helpless.
- However...History is the flawed product of incomplete, unrepresentative and biased evidence which is selected and interpreted by Historians with their own values and preoccupations.
- So...historians answer the question 'Why?' in different ways, based on the evidence they choose to work with, and the conclusions they choose to draw from it.

Billy Elliot – The Alternative Version, Part 1

- Read through the following account as a class, then answer the questions which follow.

Billy Elliot (35) finished his last can of super-strength beer and reflected on his predicament. He had been unemployed since the last coal pit in his area closed down a few years earlier. Like his father before him, he had taken to drink. Just recently, his wife had left him after finding out about the fling he'd had with Tasha Slappa down the road at a mate's party. He told his wife that the summer heat had made him drink too much, but she told him to shove it.

He decided to get another 6-pack from the local off-licence. The government had recently cut back on unemployment benefits, but the bloke behind the counter, Akaash, had promised him a discount for being such a good customer lately. So, he grabbed his coat and put his shoes on.

Just as he was leaving, his mother rang up to give him some family news. He had a quick chat with her, then left the house. As he strolled down the road, a boy came round the corner on a bicycle in a panic. Billy, who was still reflecting on what his mother had told him, was taken by surprise and leapt into the road.

Sadly for Billy, a steam roller was passing at just this moment, resurfacing the road after it had buckled in the hot summer weather. The driver was still tired because his baby had been crying all night and so he didn't see Billy. As a result, Billy was squelched into the shape of a pancake.



¹ Voltaire once said "Judge a man not by his answers, but his questions".

Questions: The Inquest into Billy's Death

1. What **three** factors would you pick out as being the most important causes of the tragedy?

2. What **one** further question could you ask to deepen your understanding about the tragedy?

3. Here are three verdicts on the death of Billy Elliot². Take a class vote on which verdict you each find most convincing. Each person has two votes: raise both hands for your top choice; one had for your second choice. Record the totals for each verdict in column [c].

A	B	C	D
'Death by Free	Billy's death was a freak accident that has no meaningful cause		
'Death by Marxist Dialectic'.	Billy was a sad victim of economic forces		
'Death by Determinism'.	Billy was the victim of an inevitable chain of circumstance traceable right back to climate and geography		

4. Discussion Point - Are any other verdicts possible in this case (e.g. death by feminism...)?

² Although this example may seem a bit silly, you should bear in mind that every inquest and inquiry has to pass a judgement on causation, which determines where responsibility ultimately lies, which has massive implications for the individuals and authorities involved.

The Historiographical View of Causation

You will now learn a bit more about how historians have approached the thorny issue of causation. Complete the final box in each row by making notes from the teacher seminar.

Summary					Details
Whig Historians	Great Men	Short Term Factors	Where have we come from?	Peaceful, evolutionary progress	<p>Suggested Clip: AJP Taylor on WW1 Origins http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqT2kmKPgeM</p> <p>Suggested Clip: Mark Steel on Marxism http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5_vppUbRd0</p>
Marxist Historians	Economics	Mid-Term	Where are we going?	Violent, revolutionary progress	
Annales Historians	Geography	Long-Term	Are we going anywhere?	Question whole notion of progress	

Billy Elliot – The Alternative Version, Part 2

▪ Take a second vote on the death of Billy Elliot and record your findings in column [d]. You should be able to spot how each of the three verdicts broadly matches each of these historiographical schools of thought!

The Philosophical View of Causation

- The three positions you read about on the previous page are sandwiched between two extremes which reject the idea that human beings can influence the world around them in any meaningful way, whether they try to learn from the past or not:

Read through the information on this page and then answer this question:

How would (a) An **accidental**ist and (b) A **determin**ist explain the way in which your parents conceived you?!

(a) Accidentalism – the idea that everything is simply down to chance events over which we have no control.

***Example:** The French Revolution occurred because Queen Marie-Antoinette told the French people to eat cake when they said they had no bread, because she was in a bad mood with an upset stomach, caused by a fly leaving germs on her food. So, the French Revolution was caused by a fly.*

Key Quote: 'Nothing is inevitable until it happens' (AJP Taylor).

- This is known as the 'Cleopatra's Nose' theory after the French historian **Pascal**, who attributed the development of the Roman Empire to the failure of Mark Anthony to defeat the Romans in battle, because he was infatuated with Cleopatra, and in particular her distinctive nose. Similarly, a well respected historian such as **AJP Taylor** made a whole career making statements such as 'World War One was the result of bad railway timetables'; again, the division of the Christian Church into Protestant and Catholic – with all that this has entailed – can be pinned on the revolt of Martin Luther against the Pope, and Luther himself only became a monk after pledging to devote his life to God after being caught unexpectedly in a terrifying thunderstorm. According to this interpretation, the Northern Ireland Conflict was caused by a thunderstorm in 1517.

(b) Determinism – the idea that everything is the inescapable result of what went before.

***Example:** The French Revolution occurred because King Louis refused to give power to Parliament, because he thought he was appointed by God, because that is what the Bible said, because that is God's will. Therefore, he was killed because it was God's will.*

Key Quote: 'What we call chaos is just patterns we haven't recognized. What we call random is just patterns we can't decipher. There is no free will. There are no variables. There is only the inevitable.' – Chuck Palahniuk

- Although individuals think they have freedom of action, this is only because they are ignorant of how the various forces acting upon them (climate, society, family, upbringing, previous experience, genetics, and so on) have led them to make decisions. A man on a raft in the middle of the Atlantic ocean may congratulate himself on having the free will to paddle this way or that – or not to paddle at all. His ripples, however, make no impact upon the waves and the tides he remains at the mercy of.

The "Boxer Bowles" Example:

Conclusion

- The only essential difference between chaos and determinism is one of focus. A chaos theorist finds an endless number of trivial accidental causes, whilst the determinist finds an infinite number of profound causes. Both though make the same essential point: tracing any historical event backwards in a chain of cause and effect quickly leads to absurdity.
- Not only is this chain endless, they say, but there is an endless number of chains. A historian who starts by explaining the French Revolution with the refusal of the King to grant power to Parliament will head off down one direction, and a historian who starts with the Queen's 'Let them eat bread' gaffe will go down another.
- To add to the confusion, each event may have several causes, which in turn may have been caused by several events, each of which in turn may have several causes. Quickly, any attempt to sketch out the cause of an event turns will resemble not a chain or even a series of chains, but a gigantic tree with an endless number of branches.