
Afterword

By its very nature, history is contingent. Historians know all too well that the judgements, indeed orthodoxies, of one generation will be challenged in the next. This is certainly true of historiography. It is also the case that, even in the present generation, different scholars will often have sharply contrasting views on what should be studied and how it should be approached. They also analyse current and recent trends differently. What is significant, central and/or welcome to one historian might be unimportant, marginal and unwelcome to another. These differences are often expressed overtly in historical controversies and sometimes covertly in publication strategies of journals and publishers, in course requirements and in academic patronage. Indeed, this book has been written in a fruitful interchange of views with important differences between the two authors: for example, over the nature of positivism; the validity of 'old-fashioned' political history; and the significance of Karl Marx and E. P. Thompson. This is to the good. It is wrong to believe that there is only one approach or, indeed, that there is an unquestionably correct approach. Such an authoritarian schema is unwelcome. History is most valuable if it inculcates a sense of humane scepticism (not cynicism) about explanatory models and, indeed, questions our very ability to understand the past and thus our own world.

That, of course, is a statement of our own time, and one that might not be welcome elsewhere. Other cultures today have different views of the past and of the historian's role in discussing it. The context of historical work in Iran or China in 1997 is very different from that in Britain or North America.

Nevertheless, while accepting that a statement about the contingent nature of all historical judgement is itself contingent and can be placed in a context, such a statement reflects our suppositions. The past can be approached in a number of ways; it is open to multiple interpretations. That is what makes history so interesting and so important. The moral message is not that history conforms to the didactic, self-referencing certainty of overarching, grand intellectual strategies – whatever their political sources of emphasis – but rather that historical inquiry is shaped by the necessity and value of diversity.