Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. . . . Thus the awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again.

(Karl Marx, Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon).

Introduction: Marxism, Tradition and Revolution

This paper explores some aspects of the work of John Berger in relation to Marxist history-writing and its own peculiar relationship to tradition, the past and specifically the notion of the ‘dead’.

In the first part of this paper I offer a speculative commentary on some photographs of a country doctor. In the second section I examine Berger’s notion of the clerical rendition of inarticulacy and particularly his description of the everyday activities of this country doctor. In the third part of the paper I explore Berger’s notion of the ‘forest’ and its relationship to the articulation of the experience of the dead. In the final section I return to an examination of photography and the nature of traces. The question of the traces of the experience of the dead, and how this provides the warrant for certain forms of interpretation but limits and constrains other kinds of narratives is discussed here. In this conclusion I briefly try to demonstrate the practical and ethical problems of both positivist and relativist history-writing and affirm a form of realist and Marxist historical practice resting on the constraints to interpretation present in records and artifacts.

One of the great ironies of Twentieth century Anglo–American Marxism is that the rendering visible of the future revolution has taken its resources from, quoted from, or transformed, the traditions of the past rather than engaged with a radical prefiguring of the future. At first sight this seems like a contradiction for Marxists: the weight and the deadness of the past had always been perceived as a retarding force in the work of Marx and Engels. A truly Marxist description of history and the resolving of all idealist superstitions and traditions into the material historical process by using the methods of historical materialism would act as a purgative to purify and
remove the blockage of all of the old ideas and practices that were standing in the way of progress, revolution and an orientation to the future (Marx 1975: 217). In their critique of the spirits of idealism abroad in their own time, Marx and Engels had written of the phantoms, chimeras and imaginary beings of the past which enslave us, which are of our own creation and which must be destroyed before anything could possibly be revolutionized (1970: 37). It is ironic and seemingly contradictory, then, that in contemporary Marxist historical writing the present and future seem to be sacrificed in favour of the imagining of the past. Not in order to annihilate tradition but to uncover other traditions, values and experiences that have been passed over in silence by historiographical and political orthodoxies. In Walter Benjamin’s theorization of history, the revolution is not, in practical and visionary terms, an elucidation of a liberated future but a vengeance inflicted on behalf of the past, ancestors, the dead (1970: 262).

It is in this elucidation of the traditions of the past, the description of the dead, in the writing, rather than the making, of history, that Marxism has been most successful in Britain and the United States. Rather than being seen as the *vis inertiae* of history (Engels 1975: 39), the task of Anglo–American historical practice has been to recover and describe the lost traditions of the peasantry, the common people, the working class (Samuel 1981). The historical writings of Edward Thompson, Raphael Samuel, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill and Peter Linebaugh among others has led not only to a reassessment of the wider macroscopic historical process but to a new awareness of the potential of microscopic descriptions of individual human beings and social groups hitherto rendered as silent by powerful non-Marxist historical narratives. This rendition of experience and its traces finds its epistemological warrant in attempts to provide an extensive counter-history to the history of capital (as already undertaken by Marx and Engels and an earlier generation of Marxist historians) and ‘bourgeois’ history-writing itself. Yet nowhere in this project is there a finer rendition of the traces of the dead and the ethical imperative to describe them, than in the work of a non-historian – the art-critic and storyteller John Berger. In his many art-historical, fictional and sociological works Berger concerns himself with uttering and articulating that which could not be previously articulated, presenting himself as the mediator and the interpreter of the experiences of the inarticulate. In these different works he acts as the translator between the peasantry and the intelligentsia, the cosmopolitan and the provincial and the living and the dead. This radical act of translation means that he performs the task, as he once said of someone else, of ‘clerk of the foresters records’, (Berger and Mohr 1967: 89). This work of Berger, in turn, provides the warrant for another reading of Marx, a Marx who never surrendered an obsession with spectres, illusions, ghosts, simulacra, appearances and apparitions. Cornelius
Castoriadis once argued that when Marx stated in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* that the ‘memory of past generations weighed heavily on the consciousness of the living, he pointed once more to this peculiar mode of the imaginary manifest in the past lives as present, where ghosts are more powerful than men of flesh and blood, where the dead clasp the living, as he liked to say’ (1987: 132).

The repetition of these themes of spectres and the dead in the work of Marx alerts us to the deep penetration of the weight of the past into the writings of Marx himself. It means that we must understand the particularities of those traditions and dead lives to fully understand ourselves and our contemporary political projects. It is only in the elucidation and description of the terrain of the past that we come to know who we are even if only to forge an imaginary identity from the disparate elements of experience – a whole being comprised of fragments. Elucidating that terrain means examining documents, memories, objects and photographs to gauge whether it is possible to extract workable forms of historical knowledge from them that point to past realities that lay beyond the objects as they present themselves before us. By examining the photograph of a country doctor we will see what kinds of relationship begin to emerge between what or who is depicted and the photographer and what we can understand about those depictions.

**A Photograph of a Doctor**

Sassall, the doctor, is now dead. He died before I was born. He exists for me only in the words and pictures of John Berger’s and Jean Mohr’s book. Particularly the pictures: the landscapes within which the doctor works and travels, then the receptionist’s desk, the waiting room and finally Sassall himself immersed in the practice of his vocation. It is a minor operation – the doctor intent upon his work – the photographer moves closer and then the scene shifts to the doctor speaking, smoking, intent on another form of practice – explanation, imagination and then the scene shifts again – to the workers with whom he practices – the people of the forest. The photograph documents the dialectic between the practice and the practised upon. Sassall’s is the only relatively constant face but he appears less and less – the rural workers become the central focus as the book progresses. There is much we can begin to learn from these depictions that are not simply the impositions of our own concerns. We learn that pictures are not silent, that images are more than metaphors, that surfaces have a depth, that examination can lead to understanding, that a picture is a trace, however distorted of something which lies beyond it, an elsewhere to where you are now. It is a disclosing, a document, an artifact, a track of something, a peculiar fragment thrown
before our eyes for a moment and a reminiscence and a residue of another previous moment. It is a discursive phenomena which can disclose the extra-discursive moment of its capture.

At the same time it is now impossible to conceive of the photograph as an aid to an empiricist or positivist project – a picture is simply not that direct in what it points to, it is not in any simplistic sense a documentation of a historical fact but something more complicated and opaque. But neither should we see the picture as a product of the will and imposition of the person viewing it – it is not that malleable. The picture is both open and constrained, it frustrates some interpretations and makes others possible.

The implications of this dialectic between an infinitely interpretable discursive construct and a closed, positivistic, caged fact is recognizable throughout Berger’s work. Berger once wrote of Modigliani that he, ‘sought an invented letter, a monogram, a shape, which would print as permanent the transient living form he was looking at’ (1985: 101). For Berger this very transience of the living thing or object to be represented and transformed in the very act of recording displays the ethical imperative to represent and document. To capture what is in life before it passes away.

It is impossible, however, to see this act of capture in isolation from the social relations of the period of the emergence of photography. The relationship between photography and the sociological, scientific and historical disciplines is important for Berger in terms, not only of the analysis of empirical traces but also in terms of largely unproblematic positivist renditions of evidence:

Positivism and the camera and sociology grew up together. What sustained them as practices was the belief that observable quantifiable facts, recorded by scientists and experts, would one day offer man such a total knowledge about nature and society that he would be able to order them both. Precision would replace metaphysics, planning would resolve social conflicts, truth would replace subjectivity, and all that was dark and hidden in the soul would be illuminated by empirical knowledge.

(Berger and Mohr 1989: 99)

There is obviously some kind of relationship between positivism, photography and sociology but there is certainly no equivalence between them. Photography and positivism are quite different projects.

If a photograph is a recording of the once living, now dead, captured momentarily in its living process, its transience, its life, then there are very real problems with the analogy with positivism. As Perry Anderson notes, positivism and other theories of historical knowledge work with dead material ‘Scientifcally . . . the overwhelmingly preponderant domain of ascertainable knowledge is in the realm of the dead’ (1976: 110). Both
photographs of the dead and historical and sociological positivism are concerned with dead, lifeless material. But one is caught, captured in a moment of life, the other is static, a capturing of something which is unchanging and lifeless in its very nature. There is no sense of movement in positivism. Engels makes some pertinent points in *Anti-Dühring* on the positivist analysis of the natural world:

The analysis of nature into its individual parts, the grouping of the different natural processes and natural objects in definite classes, the study of the internal anatomy of organic bodies in their manifold forms – these were the fundamental conditions of the gigantic studies in our knowledge of Nature which have been made during the last four hundred years. But this method of investigation has also left us as a legacy the habit of observing natural objects and natural processes in their isolation, detached from the whole vast interconnection of things; and therefore not in their motion, but in their repose; not as essentially changing, but as fixed constants; not in their life, but in their death. (Engels 1936: 27)

It is positivism which is lifeless, but a theoretically informed empirical practice traces life, represents movement, scores the contours of the process in the act of research and writing. Like photography, it captures moments in movement. In this sense consciousness has a part to play as long as the mappings abstracted in the mind are extracted from the evidence rather than imposed upon it. If we examine the nature of the depiction of what has disappeared, or is silent, inarticulate, seemingly without life and expression we can see the necessity of a documentation and an explanation which is free from the lifelessness of positivism without surrendering, as we will see in our conclusions, to an equally sterile anti-realist conception of history and historical writing. We will begin to do this by looking at the relationship between what is documented and the person who documents – the dialectic of the doctor whose picture we have already begun to examine and his patients, and the dialectic between the theoretical and the empirical in that very practice.

**The Foresters Records**

Harvey Kaye has argued, in his work on Marxists and the writing of history, that John Berger’s work has constantly confused the boundaries between sociology, fiction and criticism. But in all of his work there has been a recurring concern with historical thinking and consciousness (Kaye 1992: 145–46). In this section of the paper we will explore the question of history and consciousness by examining Berger’s analysis of record-keeping, medicine and the task of the intellectual.
In the book *A Fortunate Man* (1967) written by John Berger with photographs by Jean Mohr, there is a profound description of the everyday activity of a general practitioner who works among the people of ‘the forest’, a poor rural community in England. Not only does the doctor act as a healing force in the community, amongst the people he visits he acts as a witness to the passage of their lives, an objective annotator of their physical and mental experience. He is an outsider in the community who has been allowed to observe the community, to record its lives and activities:

He does more than treat them when they are ill; he is the objective witness of their lives. They seldom refer to him as a witness. They only think of him when some practical circumstance brings them together. He is in no way a final arbiter. That is why I chose the rather humble word *clerk*: the clerk of their records. He is qualified to be this precisely because of his privilege. If the records are to be as complete as possible – and who does not at times dream of the impossible ideal of being totally recorded? – the records must be related to the world at large, and they must include what is hidden, even what is hidden within the protagonists themselves.

(Berger and Mohr 1967: 109)

The universalizing capacity of Sassall, the doctor, allows him to move between the abstract and the concrete, between the terrain of their everyday lives and the realm of theory. Because the foresters have little experience of the world beyond the forest they do not retain the power or the means to theorize and engage in a process of abstraction beyond the practicalities of everyday life (Berger and Mohr 1967: 103). Only the doctor can articulate their experience in terms of the universal. Sassall is the historian of the people of the community, he is their abstract comprehension, the coherent renderer of experience, ‘the growing force of their self-consciousness’ (Berger and Mohr 1967: 111). He acts, in some sense, as their index. The importance of this can be seen in Walter Ong’s notion of a textual index, where the location of information is switched from ‘places in the mind’ in oral cultures to a location in a literate culture where we have a textual index, universal and referable for all, ‘physically and visibly localized’ (Ong 1988: 125). The clerk has the ability to be used as a reference, things can be looked up in him, they have a focus and a ‘trace’ and this is inaccessible without the abstractive, intellectual index in an oral culture where a clerk is absent (Ong 1988: 31). But we need to examine the historical or personal origination of the power of the doctor particularly in terms of the intellectual’s practice in rural or peasant cultures.

The first warrant for the doctor’s activities as the power of comprehension for the community is his status as an outsider to the community itself. He is not one of them, having no existence as a ‘member’. The doctor was not born
in the forest and was not shaped by it. He remains somebody who is marginal, outside of the traditions, not implicated in the patterns and the processes which structure the existential being of the community. However much he may want to belong, he does not and can not be part of it in the same way as those born in the forest. Because of this lack of implication and an inhabitation of a different sense of being, he stands outside of the quarrels, the loves, and the social cages in which those he treats are entwined. Trusted because of this, he can in no way act as the agent of the particular interests, but only as the force of an abstract, universal, or at least ‘outside’ system of values and practices. As we have said, the doctor is not implicated in the internal nets of the forest, his being was not shaped there, but somewhere else. It is this external outside world that has shaped him: it is all that is not the forest. The particularities of forest existence seem absurdly narrow compared with this experience of the world. He becomes the particularizing agent of the world’s nature and process. Sassall’s knowledge could not have been acquired in the forest: it had to be sought elsewhere. The foresters understand this and because of an inability to move beyond the boundaries of the trees for any length of time, they know that they cannot, and would probably not want to, purchase the ways of knowing that belong peculiarly to the doctor as the representative of the world.

A further critical element lies in the nature of the form of knowledge. The foresters have to live, work and eat: their world is centred on the ability to earn wages to survive. Their knowledge is based on all that will help them to do this. As such it is a practical knowledge; how to turn a lathe, cut coal, grow food. It is not that their knowledge is not entwined with more abstract forms of speculation; the mathematical construction of a lathe, the nature and origins of coal, botanical considerations. Abstraction and speculation are implied and present in their work, but it is part of their work which is of no concern to them. The nature of something is its use, the reason for why something functions is of no practical relevance in terms of their survival. This is in contrast to the doctor. Because of the status of the doctor as the particular, here, now, localized representative of a more abstract, worldly system of knowledge, he combines within himself a curious hybrid form of theoretical and practical knowledge and the many degrees between them. It is practical to be theoretical and speculative. He is also seen by the foresters, in his powers of abstraction to be more than they. In this sense his knowledge combines practicality with the power of theory.

A different aspect of the doctor’s work lies in his very availability. Sassall is known to all, personally or by reputation. He visits, is visited, he is spoken about, known. In this sense he is something like a common property of the forest. He acts as the common index of all the community, all can go and be seen and be visited if appropriate. This is fundamentally different from other
kinds of public occupations. He is like a directory, all can look him up. He is not just the representative of the wider universe, he is a universal presence in the forest itself, an intellectual, as it were, who is potentially present in mind in all times and places in the forest. As a universal presence in the forest he is a directory or encyclopedia which can be referred to. Because of the knowledge he has of the foresters he has the capacity to relay back his recordings to the people. The practical and theoretical knowledge he has from the world out there is the counterpart of the practical and theoretical knowledge he has of the world ‘in there’, of the forest itself. They can go to him to learn about them, their history, their stories, their memories. These are held within the mind of the doctor, and as such do not have to be held in the minds of the foresters.

The forest is predominantly an oral culture, not that it is illiterate, but that text-based thought has still not colonized the traditions of the forest (it would signify the end of the community if it did). All of the problems and possibilities of oral thought and transmission are present in the forest. Because of this Sassall is the representative of literacy in an oral culture. His theory and practice is largely textually-determined and his modes of observation are impossible without a form of abstraction which is a product of literacy rather than orality. The power to transcend space and time in imagination is much more effective and, more importantly, precise in literate culture. If this leads to a denigration of an imprecise oral culture subsequently seen as quaint, that is in the nature of the historical process itself. Many things are gained and many things are lost. On a simple but profound level, in the same way that he can be looked up and referred to, he can look up and refer himself, to things. Not to people but to books. He has the capacity to lock into a world which sees beyond the boundaries of the forest.

The mechanisms of looking and observing lead us to a final element of the doctor’s work. Not only can the doctor look at them, see them, gaze upon them, he can also, in a peculiar phenomenological exercise see ‘into them’. Because Sassall’s work is to examine the particular complaints and problems of the many of the community, he has the capacity to see them as a whole, and then move again to the particular. He engages in a curious abstraction from one patient to the many of the foresters. He can see, therefore, what they cannot. He can record what they cannot see, the internal existence and process of their physical body, and the hidden, to them, workings of their hearts. This exercising of a knowledge which works ‘within’ is a result of the peculiar, abstractive relationship between the practicality and the theory. He can see them within the sum of all that he has known: individuals are the components of the system of the forest and he knows the component and the system, in all of its workings.

But the doctor is more than the ‘mind’, the powers of comprehension, of
the inarticulate poor, he is also, and perhaps most importantly, the representative of the dead:

The doctor is the familiar of death. When we call for a doctor, we are asking him to cure us and to relieve our suffering, but, if he cannot cure us, we are also asking him to witness our dying. The value of the witness is that he has seen so many others die. (This, rather than the prayers and last rites, was also the real value the priest once had.) He is the living intermediary between us and the multitudinous dead. He belongs to us and he has belonged to them. And the hard but real comfort which they offer through him is still that of fraternity. (Berger and Mohr 1967: 68)

It is in this translation between the living and the dead that the doctor attains an immense objective power. Not only is Sassall the classificatory index, the encyclopedia of the foresters, he is the link between the oral culture and the past itself. He is their reference in terms of their passage out of life and the observer of the process. The doctor attains his powers of mediation for the following reasons.

Firstly, because he knows death. Sassall, as a universal presence amongst the foresters and as the representative of a wider universal power can not only see each death, he also sees the accumulation of deaths as a system and a network of practices and happenings. The foresters are aware of this sense and he represents to them the continuation of their life and its ending. He knows what is and what has been in the forest and the world in a way that the foresters themselves cannot. Related to this is that he has known the dying in all of their particularity and historical idiosyncracy and peculiarity. Each death is different and represents a termination of a particular world. Not only does he know death in an abstract sense, he has been the witness to death’s individuality. He has known this in the past and the foresters are comforted by this manner of knowing. But also he acts as witness to those who are now dying. This is closer to a common-sense notion of being a doctor. He can see it happening now, here, in this place and time in the forest. He is needed even though the utility of his actions may not be apparent, rationally and logically. But the foresters can see this and so can he.

Secondly, because he can make sense of the dying, practically and theoretically, even if he cannot relay this to them. He can record the death, the reasons for it, even though this may be opaque to their more localized knowledge. In this sense, the doctor is a mystery to them: they do not know what he understands and has knowledge of.

Thirdly, because Sassall’s mediation lies in the relationship between his worldly, more universal knowledge and the way his form of abstraction relates to the particularity of death. He dignifies, comforts and in doing so universalizes the very act of dying, the experience of passing from life. His
power lies in this dialectic between death in the worldly sense and this death, here and now in the forest. This particularity, he then records, writes down, officializes. It becomes part of the index, referred to, remembered until memory stops, but written forever. Berger could not have remained unaware that in this description of the country doctor, he is also displaying his own activities as describer, translator and index. He himself is the clerk within another forest, an imaginary one at times perhaps, but one, even for that, that is not less present.

**The Forest as Metaphor and Actuality**

The metaphor and actuality of the ‘forest’ permeates Berger’s sociological and fictional writing, whether it is in the description of individual trees or in the analogy of the forest and the world. It is intimately related to Berger’s descriptions and explanations of the complex embeddedness of peasant existence; its actualities and aspirations. The peasantry is a dying class because of a distancing between itself and the actual and imaginary forests that Berger describes: the latter as metaphor for the peasant’s historical sedimentation and authentic being before the physical dispersals of migration and the mental dispersals of alienation. This dialectic of the actual and imaginary space is an important one. The actual forest where the doctor works and records is mirrored, in Berger’s work, by the image of a forest less rooted to a particular, visitable geographical space. Describing, in one of his works, an architectural structure created by the peasant mentality he talked of it as an imaginary and physical construct; at once a tomb, a castle, a stomach, a brain, a forest. It is something which is entered into, surveyed, changeable (1992a: 87). Yet the trees of the forest are things not only imaginatively constituted by human beings but things which constitute human beings themselves, they are the natural and social relations which at least partly determine the kinds of humanness possible there:

Their presence, if it offers a kind of company, is earlier than justice or the notion of indifference. The company they offer is spatial, and it is a way of measuring, of counting. Long before any numerals or mathematics, when human language was first naming the world, trees offered their measures – of distance, of height, of diameter, of space... Trees offered man the measure of his upright space, and in this offer... there is the discreetest assurance in the world, that we have never been utterly alone.

(Berger 1992b: 76–7)

Trees are measures of human beings, they can use them to see into the distance but they are also for the peasant, markers, artifacts for storytelling, ‘full
of incidents, imagined and remembered’ (Berger 1979: 20–21). The forest is a tolerant habitation, it is lived in, it is the world and there are stories there (1972: 176). Keith Thomas has noted that trees have always been seen to stand for something. The people ‘cherished their associations, their antiquity, their link with the past. A hankering for continuity, a bid for family immortality, and a tendency to invest trees with human attributes were all important’ (Thomas 1983: 223). It is in the rendition of the stories of the forest that the peasants find themselves and their sense of habitation. It is in the recording of these stories that the storyteller acts as the index, the force of comprehension of its inhabitants. The dialectic of the storytelling fuses the teller, listeners and protagonists, speaks for, to, in its voice (Berger and Mohr 1989: 285). It records and transmits on behalf of the inarticulate, trying to articulate their most intimate experiences.

Jean Mohr recounts that, ‘One day the woodcutter’s wife stopped me in the village and said: “I’d like to ask you a favour. Would you take a photo of my husband? I don’t have one, and if he’s killed in the forest I won’t have a picture to remember him by”’ (Berger and Mohr 1989: 285). Life lived in the spaces of the forest is a temporary habitation. Because the forest is the habitation also of death, the clerk must record the life before it passes as well as mediating between the living and the dead in the actual and the imaginary forest, ‘Each clearing is recorded/on a screen I carry/rolled like a cloth/in my head a sheet/pulled over/the eyes of the dead/keeps out the look of the world/on the cloth/unrolled/I follow their spoor/in the forest I knew’ (Berger 1992b: 63).

This forest in Berger’s work is sometimes an actual space and sometimes it exists as an imaginary space, not locatable on any map outside of Berger’s particular imaginary. Yet it is more complex than this. Even when Berger is writing of an actual space, it is a space where a dialectical imagination constantly fuses with the real. It is constantly entwined with images which are suggested by the location but have a reality only in terms of a sense of projection and abstraction of imagination. At the same time the imaginary spaces existing only in the dream or the mind constantly refer to the actual. They would have no meaning if they could not be somehow related to real places, combined, recomposed and rethought as they are. In this the forest can sometimes work as a metaphor standing in for the world or a state of mind, a place where distance is limited, a place of measurement, a place of work, a place of mystery, a place of solitariness and community, a place where one can be lost but find oneself again. The forest is where the dead are neighbours of the living and the living remember the dead. And it is in this elucidation of the dead of the forest that Berger reworks those very themes of habitation, migrancy and humanness.

Berger notes that it is only when the traces, the recordings of the dead are
fused in an organic relationship with the living can the peasantry understand themselves as the living and soon to be dead. But sometimes the relationship is severed; philosophically, geographically and historically. A migrancy over geographical space, away from the forest can lead to the severing of the vertical lineage in terms of ancestry. It is in the descriptions of the lives of a migrating peasantry to the metropolis that this ancestry is discarded or forgotten:

After the migrant leaves home, he never finds another place where the two life lines cross. The vertical line exists no more; there is no longer any local continuity between him and the dead, the dead now simply disappear; and the gods have become inaccessible. The vertical line has been twisted into the individual biographical circle which leads nowhere but only encloses. As for the horizontal lines, because there are no longer any fixed points as bearings, they are elided into a plain of pure distance, across which everything is swept.

(Berger 1992b: 65–66)

This relationship between the living and the dead is so important because the severing of those vertical relationships and the loss of those traditions and memories leads to the disintegration of a class as a political and human force (see Triulzi 1981: 92–96). It is eliminated from the terrain of history because it has no history, its subjectivities and objective history become subsumed within the dominant modes of thought of capital, weakening resistance and subsequently any possibility of reclaiming a self-understanding outside of the discourse of commodification. It then becomes the object of the historical process and not the subject (Berger 1972: 33). Like the decline of the peasantry he is documenting, it is only when the traces of the dead are rendered visible by the storyteller that this historical consciousness finds its validation. The presentation of the index of the past in the form of its storyteller creates the resources for actions which counter those of capital (1972: 11). Even if nothing else these stories are the last vestiges of a dying class. Berger is granting the migrant peasantry ‘a last image of itself, to make permanent its survival on another plane’ (Duvignaud 1972: 9) and arguing at the same time that this could be part of a possible basis for a viable political strategy. Without those kinds of stories and indices we are homeless and outcast into a world without measurement and meaning and bereft of political and philosophical agency. The dead can no longer be observed and no longer see us. It is only in the measuring of the traces that we can measure ourselves, even when the old world is passing. In the villages the dead are buried locally, names inscribed are effaced by the weather, but they are still present in the traces they have left behind in the landscape. In the city the dead leave no trace, they are erased and once the memories holding them have gone, they too have gone (Berger 1990: 53). It is the final, ironic victory of capital’s
definition of a human being. The human is dissolved into the ensemble of social and historical relations and leaves no trace behind.

The describing, the inscribing of the dead allow us a recognition of who we are and without this death is entropy alone. But the inscriptions are also marks of respect for the dead themselves. Those who have crossed the boundary between the living and the dead have a need for the physical inscriptions on the tombs and stones:

What is inscribed is a form of identification and the identifications are addressed to a third party. The tombstones are letters of recommendation to the dead, concerning the newly departed, written in the hope that they, who have left, will not need to be renamed. . . . They are within speaking distance. The living do not know how to speak their language. Our stories are not read by the dead.

(Berger 1992b: 44)

For Berger they are the imaginary and ethical ballast of those who remain. In more than a metaphorical sense, they exist as an imaginative presence. Berger observes them when his eyes are closed, they come to him, and he is unconcerned whether he is visiting them or they he. Their faces can be discerned and they look at him with a sense of recognition (1992b: 13–14). It is in this radical act of imagination and translation that we can reach out in grief and communicate and make the separated unified again if only in imagination and not in the real. But we must always remember that peculiar dialectic of them both and recognize that without those traditions and memories the real is unaware of itself as a historical continuity and totality. This imagination of those gone has:

The capacity to reconnect, to bring together, that which is separate. Metaphor finds the traces which indicate that all is one. Acts of solidarity, compassion, self-sacrifice, generosity are attempts to re-establish — or at least a refusal to forget — a once-known unity. Death is the hardest test of accepting the separation which life has incurred.

(Berger 1992a: 152)

Grief occurs in the separation of living and dead, but the tragedy lies in the elimination of the actuality of the vertical relationship of a class with its own past commemorated by memories and articulated by sharing stories and histories. The allocation of grief’s share onto descendants, the recurrence of particular subaltern histories and traditions, the formation and reformation of the ensembles of collective identities organically linked to the subjective traditions of a class allow the possibility of some kind of ideological coherence and may prefigure a more enduring political victory. The non-remembrance of those relationships and traditions will signal the final elimination of a culture and a class.
If we return to photographs and particularly the photographic renditions of the dead we can draw some conclusions about particular theories and forms of historical practice which are worth pursuing. In his critical appreciation of the photographer Marketa Luskacova’s pictures of the peasantry Berger makes explicit all he wants from the extraction of the dead from silence and non-memory. Berger sees Luskacova as summoned by the dead through curiosity: they ask her to find some who still, metaphorically, remember them. They are a dead in this world, here and now, who are being forgotten as never before, as a whole category of people and in turn this is intimately related to the decline of the peasant class and their traditional inhabitations of culture and place (Berger 1992a: 120–121). It is in the forgetfulness of the world of the dead that the surprise of the capturing of its traces can catch us unawares. Like Luskacova’s photographs Berger’s writings allow us to rethink the relationship between the dead and the living in terms of the imagining of these things, an imagination which does not invent, but discloses that which exists (Berger 1979: 176).

Disclosing the dead means opening them to the world, uncovering the significations they bear for the present. In an obvious sense the dead are those who are not living or have life beyond the world. They have the ability to have some impact on the world of the living but only if the living themselves are receptive, remember and ‘disclose’ them. At times Berger writes of them almost as a physical, real presence, at other times they are a radical act of imagination. Without them we have no history and no mechanism of understanding the world. All becomes present and we cannot measure ourselves because we have no template to do so. The world becomes horizontal, a world of boundless distance. They are our stories, our unification and our reconciliation with history and the changing of history. The inscriptions which remind us of them give us the capacity to recognize ourselves in the world. As Marc Bloch has said, these inscriptions, indeed anything which remains to remind us of the presence of the dead, are residues of past worlds:

Whether it is the bones immured in the Syrian fortifications, a word whose form or use reveals a custom, a narrative written by the witness of some scene, ancient or modern, what do we really mean by document, if it is not a ‘track’, as it were – the mark, perceptible to the senses, which some phenomenon, in itself inaccessible, has left behind.

(Marc Bloch 1954: 55)

As in Berger’s discussion of Modigliani we find the imperative to record the transient, once living, forms. They are traces of the dead which survive to come before the gaze of the historical practitioner and they capture moments
or processes from the past which then act as the resources for our historical recompositions. Traces therefore tend to take the form of traces in writing, artifactual traces, oral utterances, memories, genealogy and images, including photographic images. They are not the social facts of sociological and historical positivism but neither are they subject to the limitless interpretations of a deconstructionist history. They hold within them constraints and possibilities for interpretation and storytelling.

In the first section we began to examine the nature of photography, positivism and the nature of documentation in terms of the capture of life in its moment of passing. But as we have seen in our discussion of the foresters and the dead, the imperative to record and explain is also threatened by projects which attempt to deny the notion of an extra-discursive reality beyond the photograph, text, artifact. This project is entwined with notions of storytelling, the infinitude of interpretation, the multiplicity of narrative, and ultimately the suspension or denial of a real, objective historical process. We can get an initial sense of this project in its contrast to lifeless positivism. The ‘historical imaginary’ of positivism, argues Reedy was radically divorced from aesthetic criteria and the idea of telling a story, it was:

Conceptually stunted and linguistically lifeless. Without escaping the penumbra of fictionality that shadows every representation of history, they lost fiction’s verbal seductiveness by ignoring the fact that artful narrating – plotted ‘storytelling’ replete with tropes – is mandatory for an account of the past that hopes to engage and persuade. Narrative discourse is as indispensable for charting humanity’s variegated career as for the individual’s own self-comprehension.

(Reedy 1994: 19)

As we can see, a positivist project which takes its analogy from the the most problematic reductions of the ‘physico-chemical sciences’ (Goldmann 1969: 112) cannot provide the inspiration for a contemporary narrative historical practice. Positivist historiography saw history as unchanging and repetitive and, much like the sociology of Durkheim and Comtean philosophy, it was little more than a search for the kinds of simple factuality as elusive in the sciences of nature as in the sciences of the human. It was not interested in narrative and the artful telling of stories. Positivist renditions of evidence were unmediated by consciousness and art yet as Peter Lamarque notes, ‘All writing involves some degree of artifice; there is no pure unmediated representation of extra-linguistic fact’ (1990: 137). All this is well documented but the problem now becomes less the absent or naive positivist rendering visible of facts than the abdication of certain kinds of more complex and subtle documentations, factualities and truths in favour of the artifice alone. The dialectic between a science and its pursuit of Truth and the aesthetic and its infinitude of truths has culminated in the victory of a parody of scientific
truth and a historical art which because of its abandonment of any method-
ical tracking of the human in history, is sterile.

For realist historians artifice and artistry are modes of presentation not
investigation. They are part of the writing of history and not of the method-
ical and scientific investigation of the traces of the dead entwined in their his-
torical processes and cultures. The rhythms and the movements of the traces
must master and constrain the historian, rather than the historian engaging
in a radical project of interpretative imposition and constraint-free story-
telling.

We can see both the limits of positivism, the problems of relativist story-
telling and the necessity of empirical procedures in Berger’s problematic dis-
tinction between drawings and photographs as documents. The photograph
is a trace of a reality beyond the consciousness of the observer. The drawing
is not a trace, because it is a product of consciousness and the demands of
the phenomenon represented can be transformed, if not disregarded by the
artist’s endeavours.

A photograph, unlike a drawing, is not a translation from an appearance,
a reality (Berger and Mohr 1989: 93–95). The appearance is mediated by the
technologies of the camera but is also something which is an abstraction, a
quotation from the living reality, a natural trace left behind by something
which was real but is now gone (Berger and Mohr 1989: 92). The differences
between a photograph and a drawing can be explored by seeing the drawing
as a translation, mediated by the consciousness of the artist. Even though it
sometimes makes reference to a reality out there, ‘In a drawing an apple is
made round and spherical; in a photograph, the roundness and the light and
shade of the apple are received as given’ (Berger and Mohr 1989: 93–95).
This notion of traces naturally and traces intentionally left behind has a series
of implications for the historical practice of writing about the dead from the
records they have kept. The act of art is translation, the act of history is quo-
tation. Historians should not make but find.

Yet there are some occasions when the drawing becomes a trace not of the
represented but the artist who represents. What is being pictorially repre-
sented becomes an irrelevance but as a representation of the artist’s con-
sciousness itself, the drawing exists as a historical phenomena to be
examined. It is a trace of the translator rather than the reality of the object
depicted. But, at its best, history is trying to depict not the internal features
of the historian but something external in the processes of the world. If we
allow the historical record to have no constraints and allow all to be inter-
pretation and consciousness then we are making a product of hallucination and
delusion. We are saying that the imagination of the translator is all that
matters. If we replace the photograph with the drawing and make this the
accepted analogy with historical practice we are abandoning not only the
lifelessness of positivism but arguing that the historical representation, the drawing, is more important than the record, the photograph. By doing this we extricate the dead from our world, banish any search for the truth of their experience and allow all to be art rather than science. The dead will perhaps be indifferent. But as Benjamin once remarked, ‘Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious’ (Benjamin 1970: 257). No longer will the transient living forms be captured before death, and if they are it will not matter. Marc Bloch once wrote that the historian is like a fairy-tale giant, trying to catch the scent of human flesh. It seems as if, these days, the historian is looking within and no longer searching for the tracks in the fields and forests. The giant has turned into an ogre, denying the right of subaltern classes and individuals to a history and hiding the bones of the dead in his darkening cave.

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Notes


2 The question of the universal and universality lies beyond the boundaries of this paper. However, universality can be taken to mean here, a series of senses which are deeply implicated in the idea of truth and the accumulation of the truth of the world, as the system resulting from the accumulation of particularities. Now this can lead to a macroscopic focus on system, structure and the global whilst relegating the micro-truths of the particular. But what I am arguing in this paper is that the process of abstraction from the particular to the universal, the concrete to the abstract and the forest to the world, is one that is central not only to Sassall’s work but also to Berger’s. In this sense the practice of the intellectual, storyteller etc. is multifaceted and deeply complex because it elucidates and tries to uncover the truths of the relationship between so many different kinds of processes. The notion of the ‘world’ has similar problems but I take it to mean all of the relationships and processes outside of the forester’s locality.

References

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