

# Causation in History

## Introduction

Every historical investigation begins with a simple question: "Why?"

- Pinning down the most important causes 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 presuppositions.
- 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.

## The Case of Billy Elliot: The Challenge of Pinning Down Causes

Billy Elliot (35) finished his last can of super-strength beer and reflected on his predicament. He had been unemployed since the last factory 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 had with Tasha at a friend'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 carry-out. The government had recently cut back on unemployment benefits, but the clerk behind the counter 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 called 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 around 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 in the road.

Sadly for Billy, a steam roller was passing by at just this moment, repaving 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 didn't see him. As a result, Billy was squashed into the shape of a pancake.

1. What three factors would you pick out as being the most important causes of the tragedy?
  
2. What one further question would you ask to deepen your understanding of the tragedy?
  
3. Here are three verdicts on the death of Billy Elliot. 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 hand for your second choice. Record the totals for each verdict in column C.

A	B	C
"Death by Free Will"	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 circumstances traceable right back to climate and geography.	

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

## Approaches to the Issue of Causation

1. **Chaos Theory** - The idea that everything is simply down to chance events which we have no control over.

Example: The French Revolution occurred because Marie Antoinette told the French people to eat cake when 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

Details: 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 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.

2. **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. There, he was killed because it was God's will.

Details: Although individuals think they have freedom of action, this 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 al. His ripples, however, make no impact upon the waves and the tides he remains at the mercy of.

## The Approach of Historians to the Issue of Causation

**Whig Historians** emphasize the role of the individual and so belong with the “chaos theorists”

**Annales Historians** emphasize geographical factors and so belong with the “determinists”

**Marxist Historians** emphasize socio-economic factors and so fit somewhere in between

	<b>Key Factor</b>	<b>Time-scale</b>	<b>Big Question</b>	<b>Concept of Progress</b>	<b>Details</b>
Whig Historians	Great Men	Short-Term Factors	Where have we come from?	Peaceful, evolutionary progress	The driving force of history was individuals acting with free will.  History was a story of progress leading up to high point of the present age: the past judged on present day values. (Macaulay)
Marxist Historians	Economics	Mid-Term Factors	Where are we going?	Violent, revolutionary progress	Economic forces dictated the overall strategy of history; individuals just provided the tactics. (Marx)
Annales Historians	Geography	Long-Term Factors	Are we going anywhere?	Question the whole notion of progress	Individuals and societies are merely short-term ripples on mid-term waves subject to long-term tides.

## **A Practical Approach**

1. Avoid the two extreme views of determinism and chaos theory.

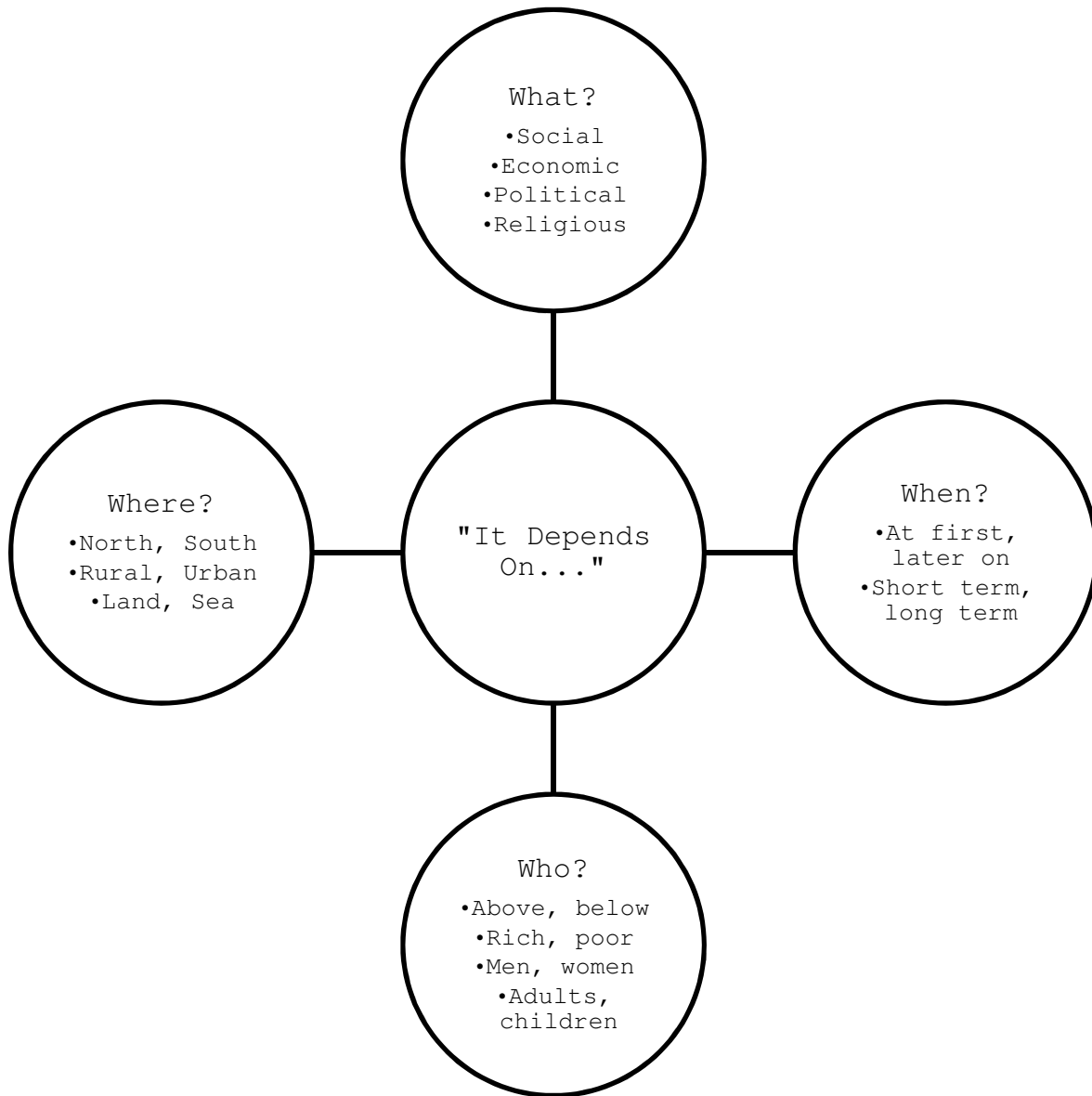
2. Instead, draw elements from both of these extremes

Historians will tend to occupy a middle ground between these two positions, both chronologically and thematically.

- Like the determinists, historians will look at long-term factors (e.g. Annales School of historians, who consider the impact of geography and climate as a key factor in causation).
- Like the chaos theorists, they will look too at short-term factors (AJP Taylor, who loved to stress the role played by the "Great Man" coming along at the right time).
- By looking at a broad range of factors, they will be broad ranging thematically. Hence they will look at such things as economics (favored by Marxists who see all history as the history of class struggle), politics, geography (Annales) and the role of individuals (AJP Taylor).

By adopting a middle ground, and accepting that history is all about debate, we have to resign ourselves to the fact that there are no final answers or golden rules, only an ongoing cycle of question and answer, leading to progressively deeper understanding about the way people behave in certain circumstances.

## Categorizing Factors



### Approach 1: Basic

Take one branch, base essay around it:

1	What?	Social
2		Economic
3		Political
4		Religious

1	Who?	Upper Class
2		Middle Class
3		Working Class

1	When?	Short-Term
2		Mid-Term
3		Long-Term

**Approach 2: Sophisticated**

Combine Branches

1	What?	Religious	Catholic
			Protestant
2		Military	Army
			Navy
3		Social	Men
			Women

1	When?	Short-Term	Political - Personality of ruler
			Social / Economic - bad harvest
2		Mid-Term	Economic - Industrialization
			Social - Population Growth
3		Long-Term	Geography / Climate
			Political / Constitutional - Undemocratic

Resources Adapted from: <http://www.activehistory.co.uk/historiography/>