

change behaviour is useless. But knowledge that changes behaviour quickly loses its relevance. The more data we have and the better we understand history, the faster history alters its course, and the faster our knowledge becomes outdated.

Centuries ago human knowledge increased slowly, so politics and economics changed at a leisurely pace too. Today our knowledge is increasing at breakneck speed, and theoretically we should understand the world better and better. But the very opposite is happening. Our new-found knowledge leads to faster economic, social and political changes; in an attempt to understand what is happening, we accelerate the accumulation of knowledge, which leads only to faster and greater upheavals. Consequently we are less and less able to make sense of the present or forecast the future. In 1016 it was relatively easy to predict how Europe would look in 1050. Sure, dynasties might fall, unknown raiders might invade, and natural disasters might strike; yet it was clear that in 1050 Europe would still be ruled by kings and priests, that it would be an agricultural society, that most of its inhabitants would be peasants, and that it would continue to suffer greatly from famines, plagues and wars. In contrast, in 2016 we have no idea how Europe will look in 2050. We cannot say what kind of political system it will have, how its job market will be structured, or even what kind of bodies its inhabitants will possess.

## A Brief History of Lawns

If history doesn't follow any stable rules, and if we cannot predict its future course, why study it? It often seems that the chief aim of science is to predict the future – meteorologists are expected to forecast whether tomorrow will bring rain or sunshine; economists should know whether devaluing the currency will avert or precipitate an economic crisis; good doctors foresee whether chemotherapy or radiation therapy will be more successful in curing lung cancer. Similarly, historians are asked to examine the actions of our ancestors so that we can repeat their wise decisions and avoid their mistakes. But it almost never works like that because the present is just too different from the past. It is a waste of time to study Hannibal's tactics in the Second Punic War so as to copy them in

the Third World War. What worked well in cavalry battles will not necessarily be of much benefit in cyber warfare.

Science is not just about predicting the future, though. Scholars in all fields often seek to broaden our horizons, thereby opening before us new and unknown futures. This is especially true of history. Though historians occasionally try their hand at prophecy (without notable success), the study of history aims above all to make us aware of possibilities we don't normally consider. Historians study the past not in order to repeat it, but in order to be liberated from it.

Each and every one of us has been born into a given historical reality, ruled by particular norms and values, and managed by a unique economic and political system. We take this reality for granted, thinking it is natural, inevitable and immutable. We forget that our world was created by an accidental chain of events, and that history shaped not only our technology, politics and society, but also our thoughts, fears and dreams. The cold hand of the past emerges from the grave of our ancestors, grips us by the neck and directs our gaze towards a single future. We have felt that grip from the moment we were born, so we assume that it is a natural and inescapable part of who we are. Therefore we seldom try to shake ourselves free, and envision alternative futures.

Studying history aims to loosen the grip of the past. It enables us to turn our head this way and that, and begin to notice possibilities that our ancestors could not imagine, or didn't want us to imagine. By observing the accidental chain of events that led us here, we realise how our very thoughts and dreams took shape – and we can begin to think and dream differently. Studying history will not tell us what to choose, but at least it gives us more options.

Movements seeking to change the world often begin by rewriting history, thereby enabling people to reimagine the future. Whether you want workers to go on a general strike, women to take possession of their bodies, or oppressed minorities to demand political rights – the first step is to retell their history. The new history will explain that 'our present situation is neither natural nor eternal. Things were different once. Only a string of chance events created the unjust world we know today. If we act wisely, we can change that world, and create a much better one.' This is why Marxists recount the history of capitalism; why feminists study the

formation of patriarchal societies; and why African Americans commemorate the horrors of the slave trade. They aim not to perpetuate the past, but rather to be liberated from it.

What's true of grand social revolutions is equally true at the micro level of everyday life. A young couple building a new home for themselves may ask the architect for a nice lawn in the front yard. Why a lawn? 'Because lawns are beautiful,' the couple might explain. But why do they think so? It has a history behind it.

Stone Age hunter-gatherers did not cultivate grass at the entrance to their caves. No green meadow welcomed the visitors to the Athenian Acropolis, the Roman Capitol, the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem or the Forbidden City in Beijing. The idea of nurturing a lawn at the entrance to private residences and public buildings was born in the castles of French and English aristocrats in the late Middle Ages. In the early modern age this habit struck deep roots, and became the trademark of nobility.

Well-kept lawns demanded land and a lot of work, particularly in the days before lawnmowers and automatic water sprinklers. In exchange, they produce nothing of value. You can't even graze animals on them, because they would eat and trample the grass. Poor peasants could not afford wasting precious land or time on lawns. The neat turf at the entrance to chateaux was accordingly a status symbol nobody could fake. It boldly proclaimed to every passerby: 'I am so rich and powerful, and I have so many acres and serfs, that I can afford this green extravaganza.' The bigger and neater the lawn, the more powerful the dynasty. If you came to visit a duke and saw that his lawn was in bad shape, you knew he was in trouble.<sup>50</sup>

The precious lawn was often the setting for important celebrations and social events, and at all other times was strictly off-limits. To this day, in countless palaces, government buildings and public venues a stern sign commands people to 'Keep off the grass'. In my former Oxford college the entire quad was formed of a large, attractive lawn, on which we were allowed to walk or sit on only one day a year. On any other day, woe to the poor student whose foot desecrated the holy turf.

Royal palaces and ducal chateaux turned the lawn into a symbol of authority. When in the late modern period kings were toppled and dukes were guillotined, the new presidents and prime ministers kept the lawns.

Parliaments, supreme courts, presidential residences and other public buildings increasingly proclaimed their power in row upon row of neat green blades. Simultaneously, lawns conquered the world of sports. For thousands of years humans played on almost every conceivable kind of ground, from ice to desert. Yet in the last two centuries, the really important games – such as football and tennis – are played on lawns. Provided, of course, you have money. In the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro the future generation of Brazilian football is kicking makeshift balls over sand and dirt. But in the wealthy suburbs, the sons of the rich are enjoying themselves over meticulously kept lawns.

Humans thereby came to identify lawns with political power, social status and economic wealth. No wonder that in the nineteenth century the rising bourgeoisie enthusiastically adopted the lawn. At first only bankers, lawyers and industrialists could afford such luxuries at their private residences. Yet when the Industrial Revolution broadened the middle class and gave rise to the lawn-mower and then the automatic sprinkler, millions of families could suddenly afford a home turf. In American suburbia a spick-and-span lawn switched from being a rich person's luxury into a middle-class necessity.

This was when a new rite was added to the suburban liturgy. After Sunday morning service at church, many people devotedly mowed their lawns. Walking along the streets, you could quickly ascertain the wealth and position of every family by the size and quality of their turf. There is no surer sign that something is wrong at the Joneses' than a neglected lawn in the front yard. Grass is nowadays the most widespread crop in the USA after maize and wheat, and the lawn industry (plants, manure, mowers, sprinklers, gardeners) accounts for billions of dollars every year.<sup>51</sup>



Credit 1.9

#### 9. Petit-bourgeois paradise.

The lawn did not remain solely a European or American craze. Even people who have never visited the Loire Valley see US presidents giving speeches on the White House lawn, important football games played out in green stadiums, and Homer and Bart Simpson quarrelling about whose turn it is to mow the grass. People all over the globe associate lawns with power, money and prestige. The lawn has therefore spread far and wide, and is now set to conquer even the heart of the Muslim world. Qatar's newly built Museum of Islamic Art is flanked by magnificent lawns that hark back to Louis XIV's Versailles much more than to Haroun al-Rashid's Baghdad. They were designed and constructed by an American company, and their more than 100,000 square metres of grass – in the midst of the Arabian desert – require a stupendous amount of fresh water each day to stay green. Meanwhile, in the suburbs of Doha and Dubai, middle-class families pride themselves on their lawns. If it were not for the white robes and black hijabs, you could easily think you were in the Midwest rather than the Middle East.

Having read this short history of the lawn, when you now come to plan your dream house you might think twice about having a lawn in the front yard. You are of course still free to do it. But you are also free to shake off the cultural cargo bequeathed to you by European dukes, capitalist moguls and the Simpsons – and imagine for yourself a Japanese rock garden, or some altogether new creation. This is the best reason to learn history: not in order to predict the future, but to free yourself of the past and imagine alternative destinies. Of course this is not total freedom – we cannot avoid being shaped by the past. But some freedom is better than none.

## A Gun in Act I

All the predictions that pepper this book are no more than an attempt to discuss present-day dilemmas, and an invitation to change the future. Predicting that humankind will try to gain immortality, bliss and divinity is much like predicting that people building a house will want a lawn in their front yard. It sounds very likely. But once you say it out loud, you can begin to think about alternatives.

People are taken aback by dreams of immortality and divinity not because they sound so foreign and unlikely, but because it is uncommon to be so blunt. Yet when they start thinking about it, most people realise that it actually makes a lot of sense. Despite the technological hubris of these dreams, ideologically they are old news. For 300 years the world has been dominated by humanism, which sanctifies the life, happiness and power of *Homo sapiens*. The attempt to gain immortality, bliss and divinity merely takes the long-standing humanist ideals to their logical conclusion. It places openly on the table what we have for a long time kept hidden under our napkin.

Yet I would now like to place something else on the table: a gun. A gun that appears in Act I, to fire in Act III. The following chapters discuss how humanism – the worship of humankind – has conquered the world. Yet the rise of humanism also contains the seeds of its downfall. While the attempt to upgrade humans into gods takes humanism to its logical conclusion, it simultaneously exposes humanism's inherent flaws. If you start with a flawed ideal, you often appreciate its defects only when the