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Journal
Journal of the Philosophy of History, 1

Author
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Publication Date
2007

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National Histories: Prospects for Critique and Narrative

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Published in: *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 1 (2007), 293-317.

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II. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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National Histories: Prospects for Critique and Narrative

A classic national history narrates the formation and progress of a nation-state as a reflection of principles such as a national character, liberty, progress, and statehood. Such histories present the state as both reflecting and moulding national consciousness. What are the prospects for national history today?

Several recent books carry an aura of nostalgia for national histories. Stefan Collini, Peter Mandler, and Julia Stapleton have all written wistfully about classic national histories, their role in national life, and even the nation itself. Of course, their nostalgia has different tones. Stapleton adopts a belligerent tone; she seeks to champion the work of intellectuals who wrote in and of the nation even as national histories went into decline during the twentieth century; she asserts the importance of local and concrete affiliations as opposed to multiculturalism and universalism.[1] Mandler has a more upbeat and revisionist tone; he argues that popular history flourishes today, but he distinguishes this popular history from academic history, and he suggests that the latter is more marginal than it once was; he renounces the myths of national destiny, but his narrative suggests that such myths gave academic history a glorious but perhaps irretrievable position in national life.[2] Collini adopts an aloof tone of ironic, even scornful detachment; he is dismissive of the alternatives to national histories and yet also of the viability of the classic national history; he defends the public voice of the historian while arguing that this voice needs be more essayistic and selective and while hinting that the result will be a better, less mythical, and more cultivated understanding of the national character and its history.[3]

Why, one might ask, do accounts of the decline of national histories give off an aura of nostalgia for just such histories? The nostalgia arises partly because the authors offer external social and historical explanations for the decline of national histories: national histories have waned, it seems, less because of their own failings than because of the changes in society.[4] The nostalgia arises in addition because the relevant changes in society are one's about which the authors are at best ambivalent: national histories have waned, it seems, because society has gone to the dogs. Once we thus dissect the aura of nostalgia, we are better able to appreciate how seductive it can be. Personally I find it easy to brush-off Stapleton's opposition to a more multicultural Britain, but I have some emotional sympathy for Mandler and Collini's ambivalence about intellectual populism, the professionalisation of historical studies, social science, mass media, and dumbing-down.

The seductive nature of nostalgia should not obscure the fact that we are not being given valid arguments for the revival of classic national histories. Empirical accounts of the decline of national histories and even nations rarely will have philosophical or normative implications for the validity and desirability of national histories and nations. The fact that we do not like an X that has replaced Y cannot of itself give us a reason to revive Y. We would have a reason to revive Y only if we thought Y itself was good, intellectually valid, or at the very least better than X in a situation where it and X were the only two alternatives available to us. It is unlikely, of course, that Collini, Mandler, or even Stapleton intend to offer a philosophical defence of classic national histories. To the contrary, they are typically rather evasive about the intellectual validity of such histories. It is rather more likely, however, that this evasiveness is connected to the nostalgia in their work and so to the impression that they sympathise with such histories. On the one hand, Collini, Mandler, and Stapleton share an almost Whiggish distrust of abstract principles and so formal assessments of the validity of different approaches to history. Yet, on the other, the impression that they are loosely sympathetic to classic national histories only gains additional credence from the ways in which their views thus echo the very Whiggism that pervades so many classic national histories and the vision implicit therein of the role of history in national life.[5]

It is one thing to debate whether or not historical conditions have altered so as to leave little space for the production and consumption of classic national histories, and it is quite another thing to offer a philosophical analysis of the intellectual validity of such histories. Let us focus, in what follows, on the question of the reasonableness of the idea of a national history.

What does philosophy tell us about the validity of national histories? I want to approach this question in a way that will continue to engage the nostalgia of Collini, Mandler, and Stapleton. This nostalgia owes much to their ambivalence about not only populism and the mass media but also social science and technocracy. To begin, I will reinforce this ambivalence by offering a philosophical analysis of the failings of social science history. Yet, as I have suggested, ambivalence towards what has replaced the classic national histories does not validate such histories. To the contrary, I will argue that a philosophical analysis of the failings of social science history should lead us to recover narrative as a form of explanation, but not to tie narratives to apparently given principles of character, nation, or liberty; instead our narratives should make use of a pragmatic concept of tradition. Thereafter I will go on to consider the implications of rejecting both social science history and the developmental historicism that characterises the classic national histories. I will suggest that we are left with a radical historicism that lends itself to perspectival critique and decentered narratives.

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There is a fairly common narrative of the fate of national histories. This narrative begins by emphasising the extent to which national histories arose as a tool for nation building, and it thereby highlights the extent to which the master narratives found in so many national histories of the nineteenth century embodied grand principles of nation, liberty, and progress. This narrative then goes on to suggest that these master narratives fell out of favour during the twentieth century for various reasons. One reason is that the academic discipline of history became increasingly professional: historians demanded greater rigour, and adopted narrower temporal and topical foci. Another reason is that the wider public lost interest in the past, at least as a guide to identity or action: the elite turned to the social sciences for guidance, while the masses turned to new forms of popular entertainment – history itself, it might even be said, became entertainment to be consumed as heritage, computer game, family genealogy, or commemorative celebration.[6]

Historical arguments appeal to various causes to account for the apparent decline in national histories. Many of these causes are independent of the reasonableness of the idea of a national history: the epistemic reasonableness of a historical narrative does not vary, for example, according to whether or not consumers would want to read it. Yet, one of the causes invoked does raise epistemic issues. Historians point to the replacement of history by the social sciences as the inspiration for our attempts to understand social life, and also to direct it through public policy.[7] We might add here that the social sciences had a dramatic impact upon history itself: they inspired new ideas of historical evidence, sources of evidence, methods of analysing evidence, and theories with which to account for evidence. Arguably their impact extended from practices that were self-consciously labelled “social science history” to the rise of social history as an alternative focus to elder political and diplomatic histories. Anyway, the point is that the rise of social science history raises epistemic issues for the classic national history. It seems that an argument showing the validity of social science history would imply that national histories declined because the social sciences offer us superior forms of knowledge. Alternatively, the suggestion that social science history is invalid might give us reason to reconsider the merits of national histories even if not to be nostalgic for such histories.[8]

We need to be careful here how we characterise social science history. Scientific aspirations arose before the purported decline in national histories. In Britain, David Hume’s History of England was itself an attempt to instantiate a sceptical and scientific approach to history in accord with the ideas of the Enlightenment and in opposition to notions of the ancient constitution, contract, and resistance.[9] Nonetheless, the modern social sciences can perhaps be associated with the later rise of a modernist empiricist epistemology in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Although many Enlightenment thinkers associated a scientific spirit with a search for generalizations across societies, typically they prescribed a historical method as that by which to reach generalizations; they sought to provide scientific accounts of the historical development of human societies. In contrast, modernist empiricists later adopted more atomistic and analytic modes of inquiry. Modernist empiricists increasingly took an atomistic stance to particular institutions and practices, separating them out from their national context, and then analysing them in comparison with similar units from other nations in order to generate correlations and classifications that were thought to explain them. Social science history can refer, at least for our purposes, then, to approaches to history that draw more or less heavily upon techniques of analysis and concepts of explanation derived from modernist empiricist or even positivist styles of social science.

Social science history prompts distinctive approaches to both the study of earlier national histories and the crafting of new ones. The emphasis falls in both cases on the importance of cross-national and perhaps trans-historical regularities and classifications, ideally supported by quantitative correlations. Consider the study of earlier national histories. Social science history might encourage attempts to develop systematic accounts of the construction of national histories across a number of states. These accounts might correlate the number of such histories produced or some of their allegedly key features with, say, the genre of representation, the year in which statehood was established, or the level of economic development. Perhaps social science historians might explain the production of master narratives by reference to their correlation with specific institutional conditions. Perhaps they might explain the demise of such narratives by means of a correlation with the rise of professional associations of historians or the entry of women into the profession. Similarly, social science history might encourage attempts to craft new national histories based on comparative forms of analysis. These analyses might explain the rise and development of nations by reference to correlations and typologies that provide macro-historical contexts for diverse cases. Perhaps the rise of the nation state might be explained, for example, by means of a correlation with the increasingly capitally intensive nature of warfare.[10]

The epistemic validity of social science history depends, then, on the implicit notion that correlations and classifications constitute valid forms of explanation within the human sciences. Typically, the relevant correlations and classifications are ones that rely on social categories such as class, economic interest, or institutional position. Hence social science history depends, to be more precise, on the assumption that we can explain human behaviour by reference to allegedly objective social facts. This assumption allows social science historians to postulate explanations that more or less bypass the meanings or beliefs embedded in action. It allows them to reduce beliefs to intervening variables to which they do not need to appeal directly. Therefore, instead of explaining why people wrote master narratives by reference to their beliefs and the traditions informing them, social science historians might do so by pointing to the functional dictates of nation-building. Or instead of explaining why people forged nation sates by reference to their beliefs and desires, social science historians might do so by saying that the nation state was better able to generate the capital needed for warfare. No doubt few social science historians want to claim that class, economic interests, or institutional norms really generate actions without passing through human consciousness. Rather, they want to imply only that the statistical correlations between, say, the capital costs of warfare and the rise of nation states, or the rise of master narratives and the consolidation of states, allows us to bypass beliefs and desires. They want to suggest that belonging to a class or fulfilling a role gives one a set of beliefs and desires such that one will act in a given way. In this view, to be a state actor just is to have an interest in securing the capital needed for warfare so as to be able to expand that state and protect it from the expansion of others.

Social science history assumes that we can reduce beliefs and desires to mere intervening variables. Yet this assumption has been decisively undermined by the many philosophical challenges to positivism that have flourished since the 1960s.[11] Many of these challenges derive from the rejection of the possibility of pure experience. A range of philosophical arguments have emphasised that propositions or beliefs do not have a one to one correspondence to the world, but rather refer to the world only within actual contexts, where these contexts might be language games, paradigms, webs of belief, or discourses. All these arguments suggest that experiences always embody prior theories. Experiences always involve something like categorisation; individuals identify objects or events as instances of a category that is defined in relation to other concepts. Even our everyday accounts of our experiences embody numerous realist assumptions such as that objects exist independently of us, persist through time, and act causally upon one another. The impossibility of pure experience implies, contrary to social science history, that we cannot reduce beliefs and desires to mere intervening variables. When we say someone X in a position Y has given interests Z, we necessarily bring our particular theories to bear in order to derive their interests from their position and even to identify their position. Someone with a different set of theories might believe that someone in position Y has different interests or even that X is not in position Y. The important point here is that how the people we study saw their position and their interests must depend on their theories, which might differ significantly from ours. X might have possessed theories that led her to see her position as A, not Y, and her interests as B, not Z. For example, some state actors might believe that they should promote global peace and justice even at the expense of securing the capital resources needed to sustain warfare.

Social science history appears to presuppose a flawed concept of historical explanation. It seeks to bypass the contingent beliefs and meanings that inform actions so as to find correlations between social facts or so as to model social facts on the basis of assumptions about rationality. More generally still, it often appears to assume that the concept of necessary causation found in the natural sciences also fits human actions and so history. The modelling of history on a scientific concept of causation seems to have two main attractions. Sometimes it represents an attempt to claim for a favoured approach to history the prestige of natural science: talk of explaining nations, actions, and the like by causal laws can sound impressively rigorous when compared to less formal approaches. At other times it springs from lax thinking: its proponents rightly recognise that there is a universal feature of explanation such that to explain something is to relate it to other things, and this leads them wrongly to assume that the relationship between explanans and explanandum also must be universal, where the prestige of natural science ensures they then identify this universal relationship with the scientific concept of causation. The main attractions of social science history seem to derive, therefore, from the prestige of the natural sciences. Surely, however, we should not take the success of natural science to preclude other forms of explanation?

The scientific concept of causation is inappropriate for history since, as we have found, we cannot reduce beliefs and desires to intervening variables. We can explain actions and practices properly only if we appeal to those beliefs and desires that inform them. When we explain actions as products of reasons, we imply that the actors concerned in some sense could have reasoned differently, and if they had done so, they would not have acted as they did. Because actions and practices depend on the reasoned choices of people, they are the products of decisions, rather than the determined outcomes of laws or processes; after all, choices would not be choices if causal laws fixed their content. Hence, history instantiates a concept of rationality that precludes our explaining actions and practices in ways that embody the concept of causation that operates in natural science. Historians have to allow for the inherent contingency of the objects they study, including nations and their histories. History is about understanding and interpretation.

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The nostalgia of much recent writing on national histories derives in part from ambivalence about social science history. If the rise of social science and technocratic policy-making were wrong-turnings, then perhaps – if we only could – we should turn back and recreate a lost era of public intellectuals and national histories. Again, if we cannot properly elucidate the rise and changing nature of nations by means of comparisons, correlations, and classifications, perhaps we should do so through narratives of their development. Yet, the emphases here should fall on the "perhaps". When we question the validity or desirability of some Y that has replaced an X, we might give ourselves reason to reconsider X, but we do not give ourselves reason to champion X. Nostalgia for classic national histories is justified, in other words, only if such histories are philosophically valid. The classic national histories instantiated a developmental historicism: they told narratives framed by principles of nation, liberty, and progress. I want briefly to describe such developmental historicism before then suggesting that although narrative is a valid form of explanation, we should not frame narratives by reference to such principles.

Developmental historicism inspires distinctive approaches not only to the crafting of national histories but also to the study of earlier national histories. The emphasis falls in both cases on fidelity to the inherited, and arguably inherent, characters and traditions of particular nationalities. In this view, a nation embodies a specific and typically unique character or spirit that manifests itself in particular traditions and customs. The British, or at least the English, nation often is portrayed, for example, as restrained, tolerant, pragmatic, and more social than political. Hence developmental historicists do not attempt to reduce any given national history to a broader generalization based on cross-national correlations or classificatory systems. To the contrary, they rely on a narrative form of explanation; more particularly, they tell narratives that explore national histories in terms of the local characters and traditions of the relevant nations.

Equally, developmental historicism might encourage accounts of previous national histories as themselves being expressions of the character and tradition of a nation. In this view, the master narratives of old were written by historians who drew sustenance from the very identities that informed their histories; these historians mined the local character and traditions of their nation so as to find wisdom therein, and they thereby acted as the guardians of the national spirit. In the case of Britain, developmental historicists might argue, for example, that the grand historians of the nineteenth century – A. V. Dicey, Leslie Stephen, J. R. Seeley, and others – shared an affinity for the very British identity they reproduced in their writings; they shared the strong moral sense, the love of liberty, and the respect for justice and fair play that they found exhibited in British history. Developmental historicists might add that even in the twentieth century, historians such as Arthur Bryant, G. M. Trevelyan, and A. L. Rowse captured in their work similar ideas of an English or British character, ideas that proved important in fostering the national spirit exhibited in the Second World War.[12] In this view, national histories participate, at least when they are well-conceived and well-written, in the cultural foundations of the nations whose histories they tell. Hence, developmental historicists might conclude that a proper narrative explanation of these national histories should refer to just those identities and traditions which they themselves evoke as the guiding principles of the nation.

When we consider the epistemic reasonableness of developmental historicism, it is important to distinguish a general commitment to narrative as a form of explanation from a specific commitment to narratives based on appeals to national principles, characters, or traditions. It is arguable, for example that the failings of social science history establish that a proper grasp of human actions requires something akin to narrative, but that does not imply that narratives should be framed by appeals to certain principles. Let us turn first, then, to a general analysis of narrative as a form of explanation.

One common way of distinguishing history from natural science is to define natural science in terms of causal explanation and history in terms of understanding or empathy.[13] These definitions suggest that historians try to reconstruct objects, but not then to explain them. In contrast, historians often conceive of their narratives as explanations that point to the causes of actions. Indeed, scholars from all sorts of disciplines use the word "cause" to describe the explanatory relationship between the entities or events they study. When they do so, they use the word "cause" to point to connections of the sort characteristic of explanation in their discipline without thereby conveying a philosophical analysis of the connection. Therefore, to reject social science history is to imply that history relies on narrative conceived as a form of explanation or understanding that evokes connections different in kind from those of the natural sciences. What are those connections? How do they explain actions?

Narrative explanations typically relate actions to the beliefs and desires that inform them.[14] Their abstract form is: an action X was done because the agent held beliefs Y according to which doing X would fulfil a desire Z. These narrative explanations postulate two types of connections. The first relates actions, beliefs, and desires to one another so as to show they fit together. We might call these conditional connections. Conditional connections typically relate agents' beliefs to one another, including their beliefs about the effects of their actions, so as to make sense of the fact that they thought the actions would fulfil one or more of their desires. The second type of connection embodied in narrative explanations is that which relates desires to the actions that they motivate. We might call these volitional connections. Volitional connections enable us to make sense of the fact that agents moved from having desires to intending to perform actions and then to acting as they did. Crucially conditional and volitional connections are neither necessary nor arbitrary. It is because they are not necessary that history differs from the natural sciences. It is because they are not arbitrary that we nonetheless can use them to explain actions.

Conditional connections relate agents' beliefs and desires to one another so as to make sense of the fact that they thought an action would fulfil one or more of their desires. Conditional connections exist when the nature of one object draws on that of some other. The latter conditions the former, so they do not have an arbitrary relationship to one another; but equally the former need not follow from the latter, so they do not have a necessary relationship to one another. More particularly, conditional connections exist when beliefs and desires reflect, develop, or modify themes that occur in others. A theme is an idea suggested by the specific character of several beliefs and desires. Any belief or desire gives us intimations of associated ideas that might or might not have been picked up by the person involved. When they are picked up, they become themes that link the relevant beliefs and desires. Because conditional connections are not arbitrary, themes must be immanent in the objects they bring together. Similarly, because conditional connections are not necessary, themes must be given immediately by the content of the beliefs and desire they connect. Historians do not identify a theme as an instance of a general law defining a fixed relationship between the objects they are considering. Rather, they describe a theme solely in terms of the content of the particular objects it relates to one another. When people cannot see the conditional connection between two objects, we can bring them to do so only by describing other beliefs and desires that fill it out, not by reference to a covering law.

Volitional connections enable us to make sense of the fact that agents moved from having desires to intending to perform actions and then doing so. They exist when a will decides to act on a desire and then does so. Our beliefs and desires typically give us all sorts of grounds for doing all sorts of things. The will then selects the particular actions we are to perform from among the alternatives thus presented to us. It forms an intention to act by deciding which action we should perform out of the many we have grounds for performing. It is necessary to postulate the will here because of the space that separates desires from intentions. This space suggests that we should conceive of the will reaching a decision in an unrestricted process in which previously formulated intentions, current preferences, and future possibilities interact with one another. The decisions the will then makes give us our intentions. Although our decisions give us intentions, we can act on such intentions only because of the ability of the will to command us so to do. Once we have decided to do something, we still have to command ourselves to do it. The will has to instigate a movement of the body, a calling to mind of a particular memory, or some such thing. Volitional connections come into being when the will operates so as to transform one's stance towards a given proposition first from being favourable to it to a decision to act on it and then to a command so to do. Typically, however, historians do not speculate on psychological questions about how the will operates, but rather take volitional connections for granted. Narrative explanations thus consist largely of implicit or explicit accounts of the themes that link all kinds of actions, beliefs, and desires to one another; that is to say, they locate beliefs, actions, and practices in their particular historical contexts.

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Today we confront the philosophical collapse of the positivism that informs social science history with its attempts to explain historical particulars by reference to mid-level or even universal generalities. This collapse requires us to return to a historicism in which particulars are explicated by being placed in appropriate contexts composed of yet other particulars. However, while we thereby return to a narrative form of explanation, we need not return to the developmental historicism of the classic national histories; we need not centre our narratives on apparently given principles, characters, traditions, or nations.

Developmental historicists relied on apparently given principles to guide their narratives. Typically they conceived of nations as organic units constituted by common traditions associated with ethical, functional, and linguistic ties as well as a shared past. They then implied that these traditions embodied principles that provided a basis for continuity as well as for gradual evolution in the history of a nation. While some of them postulated a racial or biological basis to national traditions, others saw these traditions as products of geographical and other contexts that were supposed to have provided favourable settings for the emergence of particular character traits and social practices.[15] The history of England was often narrated, for example, in terms of a national character that was supposed to encompass individualism and self-reliance, a passion for liberty, a willingness to pursue enterprise and trade, and a no-nonsense pragmatism, all of which in their turn were sometimes traced back to Teutonic roots among the tribes and village communities of Northern Europe. In addition, developmental historicists often framed the unfolding of national characters, traditions, and principles using organic metaphors or evolutionary theories.[16] At times, they even postulated a more general process of evolution such that they were able to locate different nations or civilisations at various stages of the process. They implied that all civilisations followed a broadly similar path of development, but that different contextual factors had given rise to varied characters and traditions such that some were currently further along this path than others. One fashionable reason for comparing different nations was precisely to clarify the nature of this general path of development.

It is worth emphasising that the collapse of positivism requires us to deploy a concept akin to that of tradition to capture the importance of contexts in explanations of beliefs, actions, and practices. Of course, there have been philosophers who believed that the individual was wholly autonomous; they argued that people are able to come to hold beliefs and so act independently of specific contexts. But the concept of autonomy has been made implausible by the powerful arguments against positivism and the idea of pure experience. No doubt people come to believe the things they do only in the context of their own lives. Nonetheless, because people cannot have pure experiences, they must construe their experiences in terms of prior theories. Because they cannot arrive at beliefs through experiences unless they already have a prior set of beliefs, their experiences can lead them to beliefs only because they already have access to tradition.

A tradition constitutes the necessary background to the beliefs people adopt and the actions they seek to perform. Nonetheless, we need not adopt the particular concept of tradition that typically informs developmental historicism.[17] To begin, we might offer a counter-factual argument against the very idea that traditions define limits to the beliefs people later might go on to adopt. Imagine counter-factually that we could identify limits imposed by traditions on the beliefs individuals could adopt. Because traditions would impose these limits, they could not be natural limits transcending all contexts. Moreover, because we could identify these limits, we could describe them to those individuals who inherited the relevant traditions, so, assuming they could understand us, they could come to recognise these limits, and thereby understand the beliefs they allegedly could not adopt. However, because they could understand the sorts of beliefs these limits preclude, and because there could not be any natural restriction preventing them from holding these beliefs, they could adopt these beliefs, so these beliefs could not be beliefs they could not come to hold. Perhaps one aspect of this counter-factual argument might still appear to need justifying, namely, the assumption that the individual affected by a limit could understand our account of it. Surely, however, we have no reason to assume that people cannot translate between sets of beliefs no matter how different they might be. When the individuals concerned first approached our account of the limit, they might not have the requisite concepts to understand us, but surely they would share some concepts, perceptions, practices, or needs with us, and surely they could use these as a point of entry into our worldview so as eventually to understand us.

The foregoing counter-factual argument establishes that traditions only ever influence, as opposed to deciding or restricting, the beliefs that people adopt and the actions that they attempt to perform. This means that traditions must be products of the undetermined agency of individuals. Perhaps this insistence on the fact of agency will seem incompatible with a rejection of autonomy and an insistence on the unavoidable nature of tradition. However, our reasons for evoking tradition allow for individuals modifying the beliefs and practices they inherit. Just because individuals start out from an inherited tradition does not imply that they cannot go on to adjust it. Surely, the ability to develop traditions is an essential part of our being in the world. We are always confronting slightly novel circumstances that require us to apply tradition anew, and a tradition cannot fix the nature of its application. When we confront an unfamiliar situation, we have to extend or modify our inheritance to encompass it, and as we do so, we thereby develop this inheritance. Every time we apply a tradition, we reflect on it, we try to understand it afresh in the light of the relevant circumstances, and we thus open it to innovation. Change occurs even when people think they are adhering to a tradition they regard as sacrosanct.

While tradition is unavoidable, it is so only as a starting point, not as something that determines or limits later performances. We should be wary of representing tradition as an inevitable presence in all that the individual ever does in case we thereby leave too slight a role for agency. In particular, we should not imply that tradition is in anyway constitutive of the beliefs people later come to hold or the actions they later seek to perform. Although individuals must set out against the background of a tradition, they later can extend or modify it in a way that might make it anything but constitutive of their later beliefs and actions. Hence, we should conceive of tradition primarily as an initial influence on people; the content of the tradition will appear in their later performances only in so far as their agency has not led them to change it, where every part of it is in principle open to change.

This analysis of tradition as a starting point but not a destination undercuts the fixity, even the essentialism, which typically characterises the principles evoked by developmental historicists. Often developmental historicists equate traditions with fixed cores to which they then ascribe temporal variations or even a progressive unfolding. No doubt, there are occasions when we legitimately can point to the persistence through time of an idea. Equally, however, we might choose to concentrate on a tradition in which no idea persists over time. We might identify a tradition with a group of ideas widely shared by a number of individuals even though no one idea was common to all of them. Alternatively, we might identify a tradition with a group of ideas that passed from generation to generation, changing a little each time, so that no single idea persisted from start to finish. Indeed, we usually will encounter difficulties if we try to define a tradition by reference to some fixed core. We will do so both because individuals are agents who play an active role in the learning process and because we cannot identify limits to the changes that individuals can introduce to the beliefs they inherit. Because people often want to improve their heritage by making it more coherent, more accurate, and more relevant to contemporary issues, they often respond selectively to it; they accept some parts of it, modify others, and reject others.

Once we accept that traditions do not have fixed cores, we undermine many attempts to narrate national histories in terms of apparently given character traits or principles. We can no longer appeal to fixed principles to define the past and relate it to the present in a continuous process of development. National characters, national traditions, and even nations no longer appear as the outer expressions of given traits. Rather, the principles associated with them now appear as the contingent consequences of the various ways in which people have adopted, modified, and rejected their varied inheritances. Nations do not embody fixed principles that determine their nature or the ways in which they develop. They are instead the constantly changing products of a human agency that is in its turn indeterminate.

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We are at a critical juncture in the study and production of national histories. Neither social science history nor developmental historicism retains epistemic legitimacy. Our faith in them has dwindled along with our beliefs in pure experience and ineluctable progress. Social science history has fallen before a revived historicism: the beliefs and actions people adopt are saturated with their particular prior theories, so we can explain them properly only by relating them to their specific contexts, not by appeals to trans-historical correlations and classifications. Developmental historicism has fallen before a growing sense of contingency: human agency is indeterminate, so we can narrate shifts in contexts properly only if we depict them as open-ended, not as determined by allegedly given principles. We require ways of studying earlier national histories and crafting new ones that allow appropriately for both historicism and contingency – we require a radical historicism.[18]

Let us start with the prospects for studies of earlier national histories. As we have seen, social science history suggests we might seek to correlate the production of national histories with other alleged social facts such as the level of economic development, while developmental historicism suggests we might understand the content of earlier national histories as itself being a reflection of the character or tradition of the relevant nation. Both suggest that their own perspective is neutral, whether as science or the expression of a shared tradition. In contrast, radical historicism might prompt us to offer perspectival critiques of many national histories. It might lead us to debunk earlier national histories by narrating them as contingent products of specific historical contexts. Of course, social science history and developmental historicism can inspire criticisms of earlier national histories: perhaps a social science historian might argue that an institution which national historians represent as a product of the national character is in fact explained by a trans-national correlation covering similar institutions in other nation states; and perhaps a developmental historicist might argue that a national historian has miss-interpreted the character or tradition at the heart of their nation, maybe seeing tolerance where there is really class-prejudice. However, even if social science history and developmental historicism can inspire such criticisms, we might contrast their type of criticism, conceived as a kind of audit, with the perspectival critique prompted by radical historicism.

An audit embodies a concern to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a national history with respect to specific facts or judgements. While an audit can be a perfectly acceptable mode of evaluation – notably if it is aware of its own historicity and contingency – it still limits criticism to what we might describe as faultfinding. The critic lists one or more faults, big or small, in a national history so as to pass judgement on its merits from a perspective that at least gestures at a given set of facts or judgements from which that history departs.

Radical historicism supplements faultfinding with perspectival critique. It finds fault, of course: it suggests that many of the histories told by social science historians fail adequately to elucidate people's motivations since these historians assume that motivations can be read-off from correlations; and it suggests that the master narratives of developmental historicism fail properly to acknowledge the diversity of the characters, identities, customs, and traditions found in a nation. Nonetheless, radical historicism takes historicism and contingency seriously in a way that situates such faultfinding in a perspectival critique.

Consider the implications of the particularity of our own perspectives as critics of any given national history. Once we allow that our criticisms are not based on given facts, but rather infused with our own theoretical assumptions, we might well become somewhat hesitant to find fault; we might be wary of treating our particular theoretical perspective as a valid one from which to judge others. This hesitation might give rise to self-reflexive moments in our presentations of our studies of earlier national histories, and these moments might suggest that our criticisms arise against the background of theoretical commitments and concepts that others might not share. It might lead us to be reflexive about the source of our authority, for while we can not avoid taking a stance in a way that commits us to the epistemic authority of some set of beliefs, we might at least recognise that this authority is provisional and justified within a contingent set of concepts, and we might even recognise that we are offering a narrative that is just one among a field of possible narratives. In this way, we would move from faultfinding to critique. Instead of evaluating others in terms of apparently given facts, judgements, or concepts, we would find ourselves either juxtaposing rival narratives or asking what should follow from a set of concepts that we happen to share with those with whom we are engaging.

Consider now the implications of the particularity of any given national history as the object of our critique. All too often national histories present themselves as based on given or neutral narratives based on secure empirical facts or scientific theories. Critique consists less of an audit of its object, than in the act of unmasking its object as contingent, partial, or both. It might unmask the contingency of its object by showing it to be just one among a field of possible narratives. It might unmask the partiality of its object by showing how it arises against the background of an inherited tradition that is held by a particular group within society and perhaps even serves the interests of just that group. We might also add here that critique almost always overlaps with some of the faults we find, for by unmasking the contingency and partiality of national histories, it typically portrays them, even if only tacitly, as being mistaken about their own nature or even as eliding their own nature in the interests of a group or class.

So, critique privileges unmasking over evaluation. Unmasking typically occurs through either philosophical or historical analysis. Critique can deploy philosophical analysis to unpack the conceptual presuppositions of a national history and to highlight elisions, contradictions, and gaps within these presuppositions. Much of this essay has been an attempt to sketch just such a philosophical critique of positivism in social science history and essentialism in developmental historicism. However, critique also can deploy historical analysis to unpack the roots of these presuppositions and other related ideas in particular traditions, debates, or other contexts. When national histories attempt to ground their correlations or narratives in allegedly given facts about social or national life, they efface the contingency not only of the practices of which they tell but also of themselves as particular modes of knowing. Critique can show how these modes of knowing – developmental historicism and social science history – are themselves historically contingent. It can show how representations of the nation that present themselves as neutral or scientific are in fact temporally and culturally circumscribed. We move from faultfinding to critique, in other words, when we shift our attention from an audit of a national history in terms of a given set of facts or judgements to the use of philosophical and historical analyses to bring into view the concepts and theories that inform it. Arguably, such critiques already appear in various studies of the production of national identities in the heritage industry, the history of historiography, national imaginaries, and popular culture.

It is worth emphasising that perspectival critique does not imply a pernicious relativism. Although the idea that all narratives embody particular perspectives or assumptions does undermine the ideal of absolute certainty, we can relinquish this ideal and still avoid a pernicious relativism. Even if we have to give up epistemologies such as verificationism and falsificationism, we still might defend an account of justified knowledge that refers to the comparison of rival narratives; we still might defend the reasonableness of some narratives, and not others, by reference to shared normative rules and practices by which to compare rival accounts of agreed propositions – as opposed to given facts. Perhaps this account of justified knowledge will appear problematic as a guide to how to deal with the relatively high levels of incommensurability that exist between widely different approaches to history, such as, say, social science history, developmental historicism, and radical historicism. If we disagree about the relative merits of narratives, we might try to draw back from the point of disagreement until we find a common platform – consisting of ways of reasoning, standards of evidence, and agreed propositions – from which to compare the narratives. The worry is, of course, that different approaches to history might give rise to rival forms of explanation and varied standards of evidence. Perhaps the nature of justified knowledge might be part of what is at issue. Even if historians disagreed about the nature of explanation and justified knowledge, however, they still might engage with one another. Because approaches to history seek to explain human beliefs, actions and practices, they presumably include the claim, at least implicitly, that they might be applied successfully to explain the beliefs, actions, and practices of earlier historians. Each approach might provide an account of the experience and fate of the others. The reasonableness of an approach could consist in its ability to provide a better account of developments, problems, and stumbling blocks of other approaches than can those others themselves. Hence, perspectival critique, far from leading to a pernicious relativism, can be seen as a way of overcoming relatively high levels of incommensurability by offering historiographical narratives of rival approaches to the radical historicism upon which it typically relies.

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To argue that perspectival critique does not entail relativism is forcefully to raise the question, what alternative national histories radical historicists might craft today? This question gains further importance from two related considerations. First, critique typically lacks purchase unless it is combined, at least tacitly, with an appeal to a better alternative: since we have to act, we have to hold a web of beliefs on which to act, so we cannot forsake our current beliefs unless a better one is available. Secondly, as we have seen, radical historicist critiques of earlier national histories typically make the claim that these earlier histories failed to capture all of the varied identities and practices adopted by peoples, and this claim, in its turn, relies, at least implicitly, on the evocation of narratives revealing more of the plurality of these identities and practices.

Radical historicists will return to narrative forms of explanation akin to those of developmental historicists, but their narratives will eschew the old appeals to apparently given principles, characters, and customs; they will replace overly essentialist concepts of tradition with more pragmatic ones. What difference might this make for the national histories they craft? One difference arises over what it means to conceive of identities, traditions, or nations as concrete, social realities. Although radical historicists might allow that traditions are embedded in practices, which are, of course, part of concrete social reality, they will not concede that particular identities, traditions, or nations are natural kinds, with definite boundaries by which we might individuate them. There are no natural or given limits to particular nations by which we might separate them out from the general flux of human life. The border of a nation does not clearly appear with those who are descended from some group, who live within some territory, who are citizens of some state, who speak some language, or anything else of the sort. The problems of individuating nations are most clear when we distinguish them from states: nations can aspire to a statehood they do not possess, and states can cover only part of a nation or be multinational. National identities are typically based on ethnicities, symbols, memories, myths, and other constructions whose salience crosses geographical borders. Yet radical historicism suggests that we cannot treat as natural kinds even those nation-states with fairly clear-cut territorial domains such as Britain with its maritime boundary. Of course, states have borders associated especially with the limits to their sovereign authority over a population and their commercial and other activities. Nonetheless, we need to learn to conceive of a state's borders as porous and vague. Even populations and commerce constantly escape any one political authority as in weak states or states with multi-level governance, and as with much migration and trade.

Where we locate the border of a nation, and so how we conceive of it, is a pragmatic decision that we can justify only by reference to the purposes of our so doing. It is we who postulate borders so as to demarcate the domain of our historical inquiries or to draw attention to those features of the flux of human life that we believe best explain one or more object or event. Hence, when radical historicists craft national histories, they are likely to pay special attention to the production and crossing of borders. Boundaries appear as constructed not natural, and as porous not fixed. Radical historicists highlight, first, the constructed nature of borders. Their national histories might include accounts of the processes by which national identities have been constructed in concrete historical contexts. Perspectival critiques are, in this respect, a contribution to alternative national histories that narrate the ways in which peoples construct nations through the production of a historiography and also historical images and myths in other media such as novels and films.[19] Radical historicists highlight, secondly, the porous nature of borders. Their national histories might include accounts of transnational flows, including diasporas and exiles. The history of the British state can be told as that of at least four nations, to which we might add the exchanges associated especially with Europe and Empire.[20]

Another difference between radical historicism, with its pragmatic concept of tradition, and developmental historicism, with its more essentialist one, appears in their characteristic analyses of the conventions, shared understandings, or interactions that are found within traditions, practices, or nations. No doubt, practices exhibit conventions and nations often have relatively stable customs. Yet, we can conceive of these conventions and customs as emergent entities, rather than as constituting or structuring the relevant practices or nations. Therefore, we might accept that participants in a practice or members of a nation often seek to conform to the relevant conventions or customs, but we also might point out, first, that they do not always do so, and, second, that even when they do, they still might misunderstand the conventions and customs. Hence, we should not take conventions and customs as having a constitutive relationship to practices or nations. To the contrary, we have seen that individuals are agents who are capable of modifying – and who necessarily interpret – the beliefs that they inherit, and so, by implication, the actions that are appropriate to any practice in which they participate. This argument does not imply that everyone is a Napoleon who, as an individual, has a significant effect on the historical direction a nation takes. It implies only that people are agents who are capable of modifying their inheritance and so acting in novel ways. When they do so, they are highly unlikely to have a significant effect on a nation unless other people make similar modifications, and even then the changes in the nation would be unlikely to correspond to any that they might intend. Nations rarely, if ever, depend directly on the actions of any given individual. They do consist solely of the changing actions of a range of individuals.

All dominant national characters and traditions are constantly open to contestation and change. They do not constitute the nation. To the contrary, they arise as contingent products of processes of contestation and change. Hence, when radical historicists craft national histories, they are likely to pay special attention to these processes. National characters and traditions appear as diverse and discontinuous. Therefore, radical historicists highlight not just the production and crossing of borders, but also, thirdly, the plurality of the identities and customs found within any nation. When historians invoke collective categories – the principles, characters, and traditions of developmental historicists, as well as the correlations and classifications of social science historians – these categories are liable to hide, wilfully or otherwise, the diverse beliefs and desires that motivated individuals. Peoples include racial and gender differences, and differences within races and genders, that are neglected if we lump them together as a more unified nation.[21] So, radical historicists might explore the ways in which dominant identities elide, and even define themselves against, others. The rise of some British identities can be told, for example, in terms of an overt opposition to a Catholicism associated with the French.[22] Radical historicists highlight, fourthly, discontinuity as identities are transformed over time. Shifts in the British nation appear, for instance, to involve novel projections back on to the past, rather than a continuous development of core themes. Prominent national identities changed dramatically from a sense of Englishness forged during Tudor times, through the Britishness that arose during the wars against France, on to the invention of an Imperial mission, the elegiac invocation of the shires, and, we might now add, New Labour's vision of "Cool Britannia".[23]

When radical historicists represent the nation as constructed, transnational, differentiated, and discontinuous, perhaps they might describe the result as a history beyond, or even without, the nation. Their narratives of social construction denaturalise the nation, showing it to be the imagined product of specific historical processes. Their narratives of transnational flows disperse the nation, highlighting the movement of ideas, customs, and norms across borders. Their narratives of difference fragment the nation, exhibiting some of the plural groups within it. Their narratives of discontinuity interrupt the nation, revealing ruptures and transformations through time. Is a denaturalised, dispersed, fragmented, and interrupted nation even remotely close to what is normally meant by a nation? Far from being nostalgic for national histories, perhaps it is time we started to tell the histories of networks of peoples. Perhaps we should craft histories of all sorts of overlapping groups only some of whom attempted, more or less successfully, to construct national imaginaries and to impose those imaginaries on others.

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[1] J. Stapleton, Political Intellectuals and Public Identities in Britain since 1850, Manchester, 2001. Also see now J. Stapleton, Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth Century Britain, Lanham, MD, 2005.

[2] P. Mandler, History and National Life, London, 2002. Also see now the even more revisionist P. Mandler, The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair, New Haven, 2006.

[3] S. Collini, English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture, Oxford, 1999.

[4] I have attempted to chart some of the changing ways in which nations have been represented in M. Bevir, 'Political Studies as Narrative and Science, 1880-2000", Political Studies 54 (2006), 583-606.

[5] It is perhaps relevant here that Mandler's first book was a sympathetic appreciation of Whiggism: see P. Mandler, Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830-1852, Oxford, 1990. Stapleton's was, similarly, a sympathetic appreciation of the political thought of a late Whig: see J. Stapleton, Englishness and the Study of Politics: The Social and Political Thought of Ernest Barker, Cambridge, 1994. Collini's coauthored second book, likewise, conveys sympathy for a Whig approach to the study of politics: see S. Collini, D. Winch and J. Burrow, That Noble Science of Politics, Cambridge, 1983.

[6] Mandler is fairly welcoming to the popular consumption of history as entertainment: see Mandler, National Life. Collini is less respectful and even rather surprised by such 'public fuss': Collini, English Pasts, 2.

[7] Mandler, National Life.

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[8] It is perhaps relevant that Collini's first books were on an early British sociologist and nineteenth-century notions of a political science, and that they suggested there was something amiss with the ambition to explain social life in terms set by a modernist science. See S. Collini, Liberalism and Sociology: L.T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880-1914, Cambridge, 1979; and Collini, Winch and Burrow, Noble Science. It is perhaps relevant too that Stapleton's first book, which began as a doctoral thesis supervised by Collini, exhibits a clear sympathy for Ernest Barker's attempt to defend a Whiggish and historical approach to the study of politics in the face of the rise of such modernist science. See Stapleton, Englishness and the Study of Politics.

[9] D. Forbes, Hume's Philosophical Politics, Cambridge, 1975: 125-92.

[10] C. Tilly, Coercion, Capital, and European States, 990-1990, Cambridge, MA, 1992.

[11] Useful overviews include R. Bernstein, The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory, Philadelphia, 1976; and B. Fay, Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science, Oxford, 1996.

[12] See Stapleton, Political Intellectuals.

[13] Thus the well-known debate over whether or not narrative explained revolved around the issue of whether or not narrative could be assimilated to a strictly causal or a covering-law form of explanation associated with the natural sciences. See, in particular, the classic argument that narrative is a sketchy or partial version of the nomological-deductive form of explanation, as found in C. Hempel, 'The Function of General Laws in History', Journal of Philosophy 39, 1942: 35-48. For a general account of the debate, see M. Murphy, 'Explanation, Causes, and Covering Laws', History and Theory 25, 1986, Beiheft 25: Knowing and Telling History: The Anglo-Saxon Debate, 43-57.

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[14] Recent discussions of narrative include M. Bevir, 'Historical Explanation, Folk Psychology, and Narrative', Philosophical Explorations 3, 2000: 152-168; J. Bruner, 'Narrative and Metanarrative in the Construction of the Self', in M. Ferrari and R. Sternberg, eds., Self-Awareness: Its Nature and Development, New York, 1998: 308-331; A. Juarrero, Dynamics in Action: Intentional Behaviour as a Complex System, Cambridge, MA, 1990; and P. Roth, 'Narrative Explanation: The Case of History', History and Theory 27, 1988: 1-13.

[15] See, for Britain, P. Mandler, '"Race" and "Nation" in Mid-Victorian Thought', in S. Collini, R. Whatmore and B. Young, eds., History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750-1950, Cambridge, 2000: 224-244.

[16] On evolutionary narratives in the nineteenth century, see especially J. Burrow, Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory, Cambridge, 1966. For their resonance in Whig historiography, see J. Burrow, Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought, Oxford, 1988.

[17] For an example of the divide between relevant concepts of traditions see M. Bevir, 'On Tradition', Humanitas 13, 2000: 28-53; and B. Frohnen, 'Tradition, Habit, and Social Interaction: A Response to Mark Bevir', Humanitas 14, 2001: 108-16.

[18] I hope that the content of 'radical historicism' will be clear from what has gone before and what follows. For a philosophical defense of some of its leading themes, see M. Bevir, The Logic of the History of Ideas, Cambridge, 1999.

[19] Cf. R. Hewison, The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline, London: Methuen, 1987; E. Jones, The English Nation: The Great Myth, Stroud, UK, 1998; J. Garrity, Step-Daughters of England: British Women Novelists and the National Imaginary, Manchester, 2003; and J. Richards, Films and British National Identity, Manchester, 1997.

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[20] Cf. R. Samuel, 'Four Nations History', in Theatres of Memory, vol. 2: Island Stories: Unraveling Britain, London, 1999: 21-40; N. Davies, The Isles, Oxford, 1999; and P. Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, London, 1993.

[21] Cf. P. Gilroy, There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation, Chicago, 1991.

[22] L. Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837, New Haven, 1992.

[23] Cf. Jones, English Nation; Colley, Britons; P. Rich, Race and Empire in British Politics, Cambridge, 1986; and R. Samuel, ed., Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity, Vol. 1: History and Politics, London, 1989.