

NATIONALIZING HISTORY AND THE CHALLENGE
OF DISCORDANT TEMPORALITIES¹

NATIONAL HISTORY AND THE WORLD OF NATIONS: CAPITAL, STATE, AND THE RHETORIC OF HISTORY IN JAPAN, FRANCE, AND THE UNITED STATES. By Christopher L. Hill. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2008. Pp. xvi, 351.

ABSTRACT

Christopher Hill's *National History and the World of Nations* reminds us of the conjunctural moment of an emerging world market in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the promise it offered for vitalizing a "world history" yet to be written. More importantly, it supplies the silhouette of a radically different interpretive approach, formed by the force of a centrifugal perspective that—through its concentration on how France, the United States, and Japan were simultaneously motivated to construct representations of self-identity in national narratives—converged to disclose the possibility of a wider world no longer held hostage to the geopolitical category of the "West." Hill's account shows that the impulse behind the formation of national history employed different strategies to imagine a singular linear historical narrative of national identity that aimed both to remove the spectacle of coexisting, different, multiple temporalities and to weld large and regionally disparate populations into a single people who, in a new time, would be instructed to recognize themselves in the nation's story. In Hill's reckoning, national history in France, the United States, and Japan appears simply as another name for *historical necessity* that sought, through processes of naturalization and nationalization, to overcome the unstable and uneven relationship between state and capital but that failed to conceal the deeper reality of determinations demanded by the relations of capital at the local and international levels.

Keywords: nation, narrative, space, time, circulation, communication, interaction, inversion

During the late 1930s, philosophers of the famous (or infamous, depending on one's political perspective) Kyoto School complained that Japan and other non Euro-American nations had different histories that did not correspond to the temporal rhythms and flow of linear trajectories and progressive unfoldings associated with historical representation in the West. By that time, the category of "nation" and the figuration of national narratives conformed very much to the templates established in the nineteenth century and constituted the mark of the newly acquired status of modernity. Hence, the paradox of having been socialized in a political form signifying the attainment of modernity and the achievement of a process that granted membership in the world market and entry into "world history" at the same time that the form itself was being put into question. Kyoto philosophers seized their moment as the occasion for redefining Japan's world-historical mis-

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sion to rid Asia of white Western imperialism and liberate its various societies for independent nationhood under a new regional arrangement of hegemonic authority called the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Under Japanese supervision, the new regional authority would create a spatial site for capitalism and a different temporality for its productive operations, which, it was believed, would transport a hitherto absent Asia, languishing invisibly in the eclipse of Western colonialism, into the light of modernity and put it on an equal footing with the West.

Japanese thinkers in the late 1930s, responding to what Ernst Troeltsch named the “crisis of historicism,” reinforced the conviction that they were living through a crisis in historical thought manifest in the production of an excess of history and the runaway relativization of values it unleashed. Moreover, it was observed that this excessive production of history was principally derived from accelerated and progressive specialization among the disciplines resulting in a collapse of whatever coherence history may have once commanded. It is important to note that the primary structuring unit of historical practice was the nation. In the Japanese assessment, the present thus required a rethinking of historical practice capable of conforming to a new philosophy positioned to provide a coherent image of world history that would make historiography once more meaningful and its values free from the oblivion of relativism. This task was assigned to a new philosophy of world history, which would overcome a crisis-ridden historicism of European consciousness dominated by a regime of abstraction by returning to the concreteness of “real life.”

Even though this prescient critique of Eurocentrism has become common sense since World War II, especially through the intervention of Edward Said’s powerful anticolonial argument, there still prevails a persistently nagging emphasis on the centrality of Euro-America and the consistent effort to take us back to reaffirming its cultural centripetality and vocation to structure the rest of the world. The publication of Christopher Hill’s *National History and the World of Nations* not only reminds us of the conjunctural moment of an emerging world market and the promise it offered for vitalizing a “world history” that Marx had earlier declared had yet to be written. It also supplies the silhouette of a radically different interpretive approach, formed by the force of a centrifugal perspective that—through its concentration on the construction of how France, the United States, and Japan were simultaneously motivated to construct representations of self-identity in national narratives—converged to disclose the possibility of a wider world no longer held hostage to the geopolitical category of the “West.” Hill’s account shows that the impulse behind the formation of national history employed different strategies to imagine a narrative of the nation that would be able to weld large and regionally disparate populations into a single people who would, in time, be instructed to recognize themselves in the nation’s story. Yet this move to stamp each individual with an indelible national identity conferring membership in the same national community could function as a powerful displacement, in view of capitalism’s indifference to distinguishing one worker from another and its desire for social deracination, which would guarantee retention of labor by christening each individual as French, American, or Japanese, expected to work and die for the nation.

Hill thus recalls for us precisely how, in the nineteenth century, the nation-form was bonded to history and its identification of nationhood, reflecting the Rankean agenda of a positivist historical practice to make the nation-state the place where the "moral energies" are enacted and the secret of history revealed. His purpose is to recuperate the circumstances that accounted for the productive relationship between nation-state form and narrative in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Specifically, he is concerned with demonstrating the ways newly formed nations sought to represent their "histories" as a condition for gaining entry into and participating in a Hegelian configuration of "world history," winning membership status in the system of sovereign states and access to the world market as its space of interaction, intercourse, and competition. It was this history and its attending demands, lost or repressed in the later appeal to a "crisis of historicism," that Japanese, committed to finding a new philosophy of world history, were pledged to reconfigure in a new spatial and temporal register. Hill's explanation of the nineteenth-century project of nationalizing history in the United States, France, and Japan surely manages to prefigure the later attempt to realign the global system.

Hill's immediate goal is not to write a comparative history in the conventional sense but to provide a perspective capable of understanding how disparate nation-states in the nineteenth century came together in a new "worldly" configuration by focusing on what constituted the shared common ground. The importance of his program, apart from pairing an Asian society with a European country and the United States, is to illustrate how the "incomparable," the irreducible nation, can, in fact, be submitted to an explanatory strategy that utilizes the very claims of exceptionalism that are supposed to discourage it. Hill's solution is to concentrate instead on the national histories constructed to represent what had only recently come into existence by "territorializing history" and "historicizing territory," directed at founding a specific space and temporalizing it.² The constructing of national narratives in all three environments was foremost a practice of writing, observable in diverse sorts of genres but ultimately professionalized in the disciplining of historical knowledge. The act of composing national history was already authorized by the Hegelian proposition that history and its knowledge is primarily a national phenomenon. Hegel, it should be remembered, had originally envisaged in the *Aesthetics* the everyday, everywhere, as the primary unit of historical practice but later changed his mind by transmuting history founded on experience into knowledge he assigned to the category of the state. If in this circumstance experience proved to be only immediate and transitory and memory temporally imprecise, history's knowledge could declare superior status owing to its correspondence to measurable time (the dominion of chronology), which constituted one of its principal assertions of empirical authority. The competition between these conflicting temporalities was conveyed through the categories of the nation-state (history) and the everyday (memory/experience), the latter standing in as both the locus of an experience not yet completed (perhaps only in the last instance), as Benjamin recognized, and the place of collective memory that

2. Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (London: Verso, 2000), 114. Also, Harry Harootunian, "Shadowing History: National Narratives and the Persistence of the Everyday," *Cultural Studies* 18, no.2/3 (March/May 2004), 181-200.

remains unassimilated to the nation, as Halbwachs observed. What appeared to be at stake was a Hegelian conception of history that seeks to arrest the ravages of time, as its banishment appears to be identified with the state's vocation and the subsequent project of national history. The surfacing of different temporalities would continue to persist and fill the present with a plurality of reminders and traces of coexisting times, which would constantly appear in the spectral figure of untimeliness always positioned to challenge the domination of national time. Hill recognizes that the act of constructing national narratives was especially preoccupied with the task of removing the spectacle of multiple and alternative temporalities for the smooth and untroubled linear trajectory of a singular national time.

In Hill's reckoning, the instrumentality of national history "performs . . . the ideological labor" of seeking to "naturalize" the new division of the world comprised of markets and sovereign states derived from prior political formations (xiii). This was accomplished by fixing the spatial opposition of the individual nation in the larger framework, especially in its relationship to other nations, and supplying a temporal matrix for the "inevitable" appearances of new forms of organizing the human community through the mediation of capital and state. Moreover, he adds, the larger framework personified by capital and state offered immunity to the new nation-state against the threat of alternate communities by dissipating and displacing challenges to its claims, against the "ravages" of discordant times. If modernity is reducible to the nation-state, then the case for a singular modernity needs no further explanation. The nation was produced by a world conjuncture of the new in the crucible of an emerging world market and a state system now aligned with it.

Hill acknowledges that each of his three nations was already furnished with a state before being overtaken by the identification of a specific nationality, and each too had recently come out of the experience of wrenching political upheaval that altered the political shape of its polity: France had witnessed the collapse of the Second Empire and what proved to be the momentary utopian headiness of the Paris Commune; the United States had concluded a devastating and catastrophic civil war; and Japan had just weathered the surprising overthrow of a somnolent but long-lived feudal order under Tokugawa domination for a restoration of direct imperial authority of the Emperor Meiji, now dedicated to the world-historical task of transforming society from top down. Hill is, I believe, correct in linking these traumatic political events to a subsequent preoccupation with unification and integration promised by the binding identification with nationality. But there is a noticeable temporal asymmetry among these three events, especially in view of Japan's late arrival on the scene of modernity, despite the effect of emphasizing nationality as the guarantee for recovering a lost unity providing a commonly shared goal and experience in reaching it. Japan, unlike France and the United States, burst on the global scene of nations in the late 1860s, after casting off a long-standing feudal regime that had successfully kept the country isolated from the currents of economic, political, and cultural modernization that had catapulted western Europe and the United States into modernity. Both France and the United States, it is important to recognize, possessed political systems that had already exceeded the decentralizing constraints of the feudal paradigm. The principal ef-

fect of the defining political events was to induce not simply amnesia about a failed and unwanted immediate past but a forgetfulness toward the lived present, which would permit the possibility of representing national history from the vantage of the future. Accordingly, the construction of national histories designed to displace the moment of political turmoil and uncertainty entailed employing specific rhetorical strategies and narrative forms to explain the new nation's relationship to its contemporary world. Hill proposes that this move required accounting for the nation as a new kind of community and the world as the space for the expansion of capital. He is sensitive to the contradiction of nation and its narrative serving as the principal placeholder of capitalism, which, on its part, observed no national boundaries. But this recognition proved consistent with a practice of writing and representing that was less concerned with explaining facts and deeds than with envisaging the chronotopic dimensions of the new nation-form, that is to say, fixing the relationship between its spatial and temporal operations. In the rhetorical deployments of national histories, Hill sees how France, the United States, and Japan were driven by a common "crisis mentality," whereby social, economic, and political problems coalesced into "'national' calamity" provoking calls to change national character before it was too late and insisting on the "displacement" of concrete considerations of structure by the promotion of abstractly vague moral visions indifferent to all kinds of exclusions steeped in racism, technocracy, and philosophy of history. All of the troubles of the present were hurriedly swept aside, Hill says, for the "diagnosing" of problems associated with the "ill-defined" nation-form (27). But here, nation and national narratives assured the temporal immanence of a shared present over different pasts and an uncertain future. What is important in Hill's accounting is how questions of the present are resituated in the "continuum of time," mapped now on the broader narrative of the nation, that will continue into the future unless resolved by the nation: "National history must work constantly to suspend the contradiction between temporalized arguments on national progress and steadfastly atemporal definitions of the nation in its ideal form because such a suspension allows structural problems in the economy and politics to be banished from debate" (28). But we already know from Hegel that a condition of such a suspension was the expulsion of time itself.

Hill's quest for national narrative is divided into the search to identify its spatial and temporal functions. The changing international system in the late nineteenth century and the expansion of the world market set up a dialectical relationship between national space and time. The historical impulse that drove the particular (nation-state) into a confrontation with the universal, in a period dominated by the desire for "accelerating integration of the international state system and world market," created a process that demanded representation and comprehension (44). What thus appeared evident was a conception of history capable of explaining the development of a new territorial form and a conviction that the nation-form now signified its political representation reflecting a universalizing historical process. This spatialization or territorialization of history presupposed a necessary universal temporal equivalence, which situated nation-states (modern societies) in a historical register distinguished from societies that had not yet acquired status in the international system. Hill shows how this universalizing space in the na-

tion-form and its standardization of a proper historical temporality (aided in the late nineteenth century with world standard time) resulted in inserting Japan in the world (after more than two centuries of “seclusion”) by popular writers and journalists like Fukuzawa Yukichi. Fukuzawa, a tireless translator of Western histories of progress, embraced the category of “civilization” (*bunmei*) in order to transmute what he considered a “backward” populace into productive workers and citizens. For Fukuzawa and his generation of liberal writers writing in the 1870s and 1880s, the goal Japan should pursue was the transformation of the nation into a replica of the “West,” already the agreed-upon personification of the universal model for emulation. At the same time, Fukuzawa and others directed their energies toward formulating a program of reform that would lead to producing the people of a unified nation, a “nationality” characterized by uniform customs and identities across a regionally divided and linguistic and sociologically heterogeneous territory. Japanese writers and thinkers were persuaded that only the form of civilization, which embodied a progressive history, could capture and represent these new goals. With the Japanese example, more than perhaps both the French and American instantiations, Hill demonstrates how the dream of modernity depended first upon its proper representation in form before the actualization of achievement.

Hill follows this trajectory of figuration and representation in the United States. During the late nineteenth century, intellectuals in the United States, a settler country since its colonial origins, had good reason to worry about their current situation. Disclosing deep anxiety over the flow of immigrants and the porosity of the national borders, it was this explosive combination of preoccupation with settler history and the status of a “native” white population confronting the challenges posed by the wave of immigration that produced a lasting obsession with “exceptionalism” (83), which seemed to have also surfaced at the same time in France and Japan, with enduring effects down to our present. Hill proposes that the settler mentality, especially, lurked behind the seizure of territory in the Western hemisphere and supported a spatial scene evidenced by constantly shifting borders. Like Japan, the United States constituted a regional transformation spurred by world history. The acquisition of newly expropriated lands promoted the rapid capitalization of agriculture and its immediate connection to the world market; and with both the expansion of agricultural and industrial production after the Civil War came the massive immigrations from Europe. Sensitive to the political and economic instabilities implicated in settlement and seizure, writers turned to assessing the consequences of the failure of territorial expansion to yield a unified nation and began looking for those conditions capable of producing the elusive national unity. Here, Hill re-contextualizes the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, Josiah Strong, and others who sought to explain the relationship of territorial expansion in representing the nation’s narrative. Strong put forth an argument that yoked national history to race, whereas Turner located the process of “Americanization” in the steady growth of national territory. Both acknowledged the force of expansion in national history but also foresaw the shortcomings of their restrictive versions. The problem dogging their respective visions was the shared conviction that the expansion of the national space stemmed from “networks of

circulation" (86), which thus meant either a continuing source of heterogeneity (feared by Strong) or diminution when its pace slowed (Turner).

Hill observes in this aporia a parallel with Japan's experience of constructing a national history out of the category of civilization and the liberal failure to resolve the problems imperiling the nation by making it the site of permanent crises. Owing to the coiled relationship of liberalism and capitalism in all three nations, the liberal state faced periodic economic crises and unscheduled breakdowns that, by the 1930s, led to forms of fascism and regulationism. Despite this defect, Turner's famous "frontier thesis" remained a classic attempt to counterattack the dangers of the discourse on Anglo-Saxon entitlement and its valorization of the real American "native" advocated by people like Strong. In place of the Anglo-Saxon claim to authentic native status and the ill effects of racial criteria, Turner recommended the implied assimilation inscribed in his vision of "Americanization" as a way of putting America in the world. Characteristically pessimistic and preternaturally parochial, Strong, who had taken the United States out of the world, put it at the end of world history; Turner, a better Hegelian, saw the United States as the culmination of world history and perceived in the American experience the center of an inevitably universal destiny. Ironically, both visions were impaired.

In France, the representation of the national narrative at the onset of the Third Republic oscillated between the poles of decline and rejuvenation. The nation had just lifted itself from the ruins of national defeat by Prussia and the momentary revolutionary upsurge of the Paris Commune and its bloody aftermath. A quarter of a century later, the French were still being described by writers like Charles Peguy as a "vanquished people." Hill points to the persistence of a "rhetoric of decline" and how it had spilled over into French thinking in these years (1870s). What appeared most troubling was the felt sense of loss, especially of territory, which many contemporaries read as a sign of decadence and national degradation.

Here, the example of France differed sharply from either Japanese or American experiences, since the process of constructing a national history was in reality a reconstructive act, and the search for a unifying cement in the face of defeat and traumatic social division required a re-narrativization of a national history that already existed but had failed to hold. Moreover, the very nature of the French experience in the 1870s required mobilizing greater resources for forgetting the immediate past than in either the United States or Japan. France exemplified the most universalized particular within the frame of worldly national histories—what historian Jules Michelet named the "pilot of the ship of humanity" in 1831 (120). As a result of this conceit, intellectuals in the United States were pressed into worrying over whether their national histories conformed to the universalistic models circulating at the time, whereas Michelet fifty years earlier vocalized the conviction that no discrepancy separated France from the universal (121).

On their part, the Japanese differed from both the United States and France in their effort to compensate for having arrived late on the scene by literally appropriating the forms signifying universalism. Hence, civilization was seen as the process of the Japanese nation, and its new history authorized a narrative of development upholding both material and spiritual practices imported from

the West. In this narrative, residues of received traditions were re-employed as “ready-mades” to mediate the course of the future.

While these differences should imply no overt comparison but rather only inflections on the same theme, the presumption of actualizing the universal in history contrasted with both the uncertain Japanese and American claims and the subsequent French effort to reconfigure its national history in the latter nineteenth century. Hill argues that this new start was inaugurated with the enunciation of a “Rhetoric of Will” bolstering unity that aimed at forming a “second France” promoted by the colonial lobby to compensate for the loss of national space and the resulting shrinking of national history (135, 139, 146-147). At the heart of this reconstruction of the new figure of a unified France, G. Bruno’s *Tour of France by Two Children: Duty and Fatherland*, designed as a manual for reading but in actuality a primer of the new patriotism, inaugurated what became a countrywide movement reaching down to the grass roots. Augmented by a cooperative school system, this campaign was dedicated to socializing children in the idiom of patriotic sentiment, which recalled the contemporaneous profession of Japan’s schools to teach national morality and ethics.

Bruno’s text was one among many that endeavored to redirect the effort to restore the lost national unity by making it an integral part of the education of French children. A new impulse for acquiring a colonial empire, coupled with a devotion to fulfilling the declaration of commitment, constituted the content of a “Rhetoric of Will” calling for the regeneration of a “second” France in the name of national unity (126). Hill reasons that the very appeal to a program affirming the founding of a “new” France was the historical index of distance separating France from the universal model. The journey of Bruno’s two brothers encompasses the whole of France, making its totality visible and comprehensible. Loving the nation, according to the boys’ teacher, is not enough and must be constantly reinforced by self-sacrificing acts (128). But the movement serves as trope, a metonym, as Bruno’s emphasis on childhood and journey is made to stand in for national “regrowth” and “renewal,” and ultimately a reconciliation of the regions through mutual interdependence recognized more as organic than as the product of intervention. Accordingly, this reconciliation was slated to be achieved through the medium of an educational program targeting the removal of deficiencies in the interest of establishing a commonality realized through “material and unmaterial circulation” (132).

The parallels with Japan and the United States are noticeable in the opposition to anything that threatens to inhibit circulation, which, in Hill’s thinking, refers to those barriers that might impede the progress toward the goal of modernity. The revival of imperialist expansion accompanied this program to grasp the totality of national space as a unity, since it was widely believed in the years after the Paris Commune that colonial possessions were necessary to restoring France’s “health.” Hill compares this imperial thrust with Turner’s image of the expanding frontier that represented the beginning and end of American national history. French colonial expansion was envisioned as a “space” to manage national history without politics (144). But Turner’s open conception of nationality was replaced by a new coercive attitude toward those who wished to become Americanized. It is at this

point that Hill envisages the representation of the nation as the effect of an inversion of a social space that reappears in a delimited and marked territory, which permits the “unfolding of national history.” The importance of this principle of inversion is its tendency to eliminate political disagreement over what defines the nation-form. I shall say more about this below.

Hill’s second major division involves a consideration of the temporality of the nation-form and its location in the narrative of time. Even though he concedes that the conduct of national space and time conform to the same epistemological ground, since both enable naturalizing the social space and displacing questions regarding the political institutions of the nation-state, the operation of time is still distinct from its spatial counterpart and necessary for the completion of the nation. Its principal contribution is to supply the national community with a proper historical narrative. If, as Hill argues, nationalizing of space required welding together the disparate regionalisms that comprised France, Japan, and the United States into a geographical unity, the agency of time would perform similarly to remove the residues of uneven temporalities lived regionally. Nothing was more dangerous to the national project than the coexistence of multiple temporalities and their train of cultural forms in the present, or more disruptive than the incidence of what Ernst Bloch described as “contemporaneous non-contemporaneity” (*ungleichzeitigkeit*). The achievement of national unity depended upon the removal of all temporal obstacles to the continuity of circulation—integration and differentiation. It signaled the imperative to eliminate all traces of uneven time and the residues of past rhythms—a radical clearing away of the clutter of different times for simple linearity and the progress it embodied. The objective was to eradicate all signs of contingency and threat of alternate units of political space. But, as Marx observed, the present is not homogeneous, transparent to itself, and the form of abstract linearity cannot reduce the concept of progress to a simple, uniform time. This move became particularly compelling when the nation form became aligned with capitalism and began to incorporate its system of social metabolism, starting with the working day and its reorganization of the everyday through its repetitive and circular accountancy of time. Here, it should be noted, the linearity of national time would function to contain the different temporal moments of the capitalist process: production (linear), circulation (cyclical), and reproduction (organic).

It is important that Hill calls attention to the heterogeneity of development as a danger to the uniform national plot line because of its openness to alternative conceptions of community. He is, moreover, rightly concerned with recent accounts predisposed to the containment and repression of such instants of temporal heterogeneity for the installation of a national time shared by all because they overlook the struggle within the nation for the establishment of uniform time and the difficulty involved in erasing the unevenness lived within the everyday. In fact, the presupposition of a uniform and homogeneous time—a common temporality—allowing people who do not know each other, living in different parts of a city or country, to read a daily newspaper or novel in common to bring into being a “national present”—overstates the case and actually works to recuperate the ideology of the nation and its desire for unity and uniformity.

In this respect, Hill grasps how a deeply an atemporal national narrative presented a completed story by enlisting allegory in its construction as a device to replace time by a rhetorical assertion emphasizing the inevitability of the nation. But what links the three national histories together in the temporal register is their relationship to capital and the installation of the world market, whereby the allegorical operation managed often to recount stories that also underscored the centrality of capitalism in the everyday life of the nation. In other words, the national allegory was less a function of countries striving to shed their colonial and semi-colonial status than the mark of a global system of nation-states and their relationship to the world market (and by extension to a conception of world history) (168). Hence, the allegories confront the problem of moments of individual and collective access to nationality and the structure of a double story—two temporal sequences of events—to resolve the problem posed by contingency and rupture in the national history. The point Hill wishes to underline is the occurrence and recurrence of crises in the present, always denoting different temporal rhythms, and their permanent occupancy in these liberal nation-states. Employing the apparatus of allegory and rupture in the construction of national history permits charting the trajectory from national present to the future. The tactic, accordingly, closes off the possibility of alternative conceptions of the human community and the singularity of a national subject. In fact, Hill explains that such alternatives to the nation were consigned to the nation's past, as a kind of failed prehistory but still necessary for its later, triumphal completion. Allegory allows him to stage the portrayal of the doubling of individuals and nation coming to consciousness as subject and Subject through a dialectical interaction. Tropes like "inversion," "intercourse," "integration," and "difference" are mobilized to further elucidate how the nation is figured into a national unit in a world that is now asserted to possess a specific order (59). Intercourse called attention to a constellation of terms that designated "exchange," "communication," "interaction" for Japanese in the Meiji period, committed, as such, to locating in the category of civilization a framework for comprehending the principal phenomenon of human society, which in the latter half of the nineteenth century was reflected in economic activity that ratified the nation's communal existence.

With this move, the Japanese were replicating the combination already fixed in the European experience that explained the emergence of "society" from the world economic matrix and the international state system. Histories of national intercourse thus manufactured the imagined unity and the people through "an all-encompassing narrative of progress" (59). But the pivotal trope for Hill is "inversion," which, like circulation and intercourse, originates from collapsing the "economic and political conditions of formation of the nation-state," its putative real history, into an imaginary that authorized composing national history as a narrative of progress (69). Although the operation immediately recalls the inversion of the commodity fetish, whereby subject becomes object and the historical circumstances attending its production are effaced, Hill's usage is closer to a Japanese practice conceived in film theory that remotely echoes its Marxian genealogy. In film, the scene is foregrounded to explain what has occurred and serves as the active agent of either event or action, which remain either recessive or absent.

What becomes inverted in this process is the nation itself, from the product of contingent historical conditions signifying an uncertain unity into a self-evident unit, which now claims for itself to have existed well before the organization of the world system of state and market. In this transaction the nation wins its unique, irreducible status yet shares with other nations a similar form; its difference is recorded by a history that narrates both its origins and the achievement of subsequent progress as a completed story. The inversion thus produces the nation as an *a priori* category that permits the appearance of what Hill calls “interiority” anchoring national characteristics since the time of origins. Its corollary is the diachronic unfolding of these characteristics in the progressive story line of the nation as a naturalized process. Like the commodity, its real circumstances of production have been eradicated for a fixed, synchronic countenance that serves to write over a real narrative of formation that will show the history of the nation as a contingent event bound to a specific moment. What is erased by the figure of national history is the conjunctural present. In this transformation, there doesn’t appear to be an equivalent motive to explain the “mystery” of the commodity form’s capacity to invert subject into object and thus conceal the ceaseless desire to produce surplus labor and value.

While this inflection of inversion raises problems of great complexity in grasping the project of national history, Hill is correct in his decision to explain the importance of an operation aimed at securing interiority and the effect of naturalization. But to have demonstrated the real congruence between capitalism’s radically secular conceptual organization of time and the constructing of national history would have disclosed, according to Daniel Bensaid, a consolidation that resulted in “the representation of a rigorously immanent history” (74). National history, in any case, not only provided the national space with a narrative, but a linear story line committed to weeding out all signs of heterogeneity and the alternatives it sheltered in the interest of fabricating both a “national present” and an image of progress to supplant the moment of its creation and the historical present that provided the occasion for its representation. Hill reminds us that, as an epistemology, “national history is deeply antipathetic to time,” if time includes historical alternatives to the history of the nation-state (157).

Hill has written a compellingly brilliant and complex book that, above all else, recalls for use the often forgotten fact that the very conventions of historical practice, now firmly institutionalized in countless ways, and our historical consciousness derive from the desire of nations to claim the authority of their irreducible identity before the specific political and economic conjunctures that effectively facilitated and shaped their formations as spatial and temporal units of operation. Not only is he able to illustrate the intricate effects of interiorization and naturalization, so vital to the project, but also what it was forced to exclude. At the heart of his analysis of national history is, I believe, a paradox: how to counter capital’s penchant for endless expansion beyond borders and its necessary production of unevenness with the nation’s valorization of an origin and linear time removing the stain of contingency and untimeliness at the same time it remained in the thrall of capitalism. In this respect, national history in France, Japan, and

the United States was simply another name for *historical necessity* that led, through naturalization and nationalization, to the supersession of the unstable and uneven relationship between state and capital. But the “national morphology” failed to conceal the deeper reality determined by the relation to capital at both the local and international levels. What was made to appear external to the nation was a relationship intrinsic to the foundation of national state and society. It was the force of time itself that undermined the sutured imaginary produced by the spatial and temporal strategies. Policing national borders, it seems, was easier than controlling the unscheduled intrusion of uneven and non-contemporaneous temporalities demanded by the nation’s commitment to homogeneous linearity. This was especially true in view of a historical present filled with constant reminders of mixed times poised to disrupt all stabilities and fixed identities and shatter the dream of national unity. “In the play of untimeliness and its uneven and unequal relations, what appears as progress from one angle, depending on a determined temporality, is able to conceal a regression according to another temporal regime.”³ Capitalism, in any case, ultimately made available the temporal template for the nation and its narrative with its capacity to utilize and overcome the inheritance of *contretemps* with a system constituted of different moments of time coordinated as a unified movement. In fact, capitalism’s talent for changing guises and forms, simultaneously present and spatially coexistent in its various phases, provided a virtual mirror for the nation-state.

While it would be important for the utility of Hill’s perspective to explain the subsequent political destinies of his three examples, this subject is not part of his study. What Hill leaves unsaid in this criticism is the nation-state’s bonding with capitalism and capitalism’s unfailing habit to produce and reproduce unevenness. By extending his accounting and assessing the falling out of effects in the 1930s, it would be possible to determine whether subsequent history affirms or disconfirms the experience that prompted the creation of national history. It is enough to say of this truly original study that while Hill fully recognizes the impossibility of a comparative perspective based on linear and homogeneous time, he has shown how the impulse to implement its regime offers the prospect to see the failure to extinguish the spectacle of recurring heterogeneous temporalities as the subject of comparison. But beyond showing how these discordant times persisted to defy effacement, he has opened the way to envisioning a “non-linear representation of historical development” that makes possible genuine “comparative research.”⁴

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3. Daniel Bensaid, *La discordance des temps: Essais sur les crises, les classes, l'histoire* (Paris: Les Editions de la Passion, 1995), 237.

4. Daniel Bensaid, *Marx for Our Times*, transl. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 22.