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How Should National History Be Written?

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National History and the World of Nations: Capital, State and the Rhetoric of History in Japan, France, and the United States. By Christopher Hill. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. 352 pp., $24.95 paperback (ISBN 13: 978 0 8223 4316 5).

Christopher Hill, associate professor of Japanese literature at Yale, analyzes the rhetoric, narrative form and intellectual origins of late nineteenth-century narrative histories, fiction and essays that shaped the creation of national history in Japan, France and the United States. Controversies about history loomed large in debates about contemporary political and social issues. In chapter 1, Hill argues that the writing of national history was a response to global changes in the geo-political order that were shaping capitalism and the international state system and that interacted with domestic crises and upheavals: in Japan, the Meiji restoration; in France, defeat in the war with Prussia, the end of the Second Empire, and the bloody suppression of the Paris commune in 1871; in the United States, post-Civil War national accommodation and demographic and geographic expansion beyond the eastern seaboard and English core. The choice of these three states is because "a triangular comparison resists the reductive, binary conclusions that are likely to develop when investigating phenomena like nationalism…" (p. x).

These changes and crises forced new attention to the relationship between state and nation in all three countries. Local circumstances alone do not explain why national history writing appeared in many countries at this time and emphasized development stages with a clear-cut structure of past, present and future. The ubiquity of national history is a consequence of the "heterogeneous structure of a single, global modernity that was established as the capitalist market and international state system" (p. 35) became universal.

Most of the book is devoted to the examination and explication of selected texts that broadly fit into the themes stated in chapter 1. For France, Hill describes the debates and discourse on decline and regeneration and the solution expected from colonial expansion in books such as the primary school best-seller *Tour de France* (1877), Victo Hugo's *Quatrevingt Treize*, essays by Ernest Renan and his adversary Hippolyte Taine, and others. In the United States, the core concerns were expansion, borders, the new immigration, and Americanization, which itself was framed in terms of racial theories and the lasting ties and legacy of the initial English-New England and East Coast settler relations. Key texts are by historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Josiah Strong, novelists like Mark Twain and Henry James, Woodrow Wilson and John Fiske. There is a similar cast of Japanese writers from the Meiji era, for example, Fukuzawa, who advocated an "enlightenment and civilization" developmental stage history in *All the Countries in the World.*

There is a fundamental flaw in Hill's reductionist explanation of culture, in this instance the writing of history. The most enduring theme for American history since its first settlement, a theme not mentioned by Hill, is American exceptionalism. It refers to the belief that the United States as a country and as a

people have distinct qualities and institutions that in the eyes of God and history have singled it out for the mission to spread its values and institutions for the benefit of other states and nations. Historians have shown that American exceptionalism was already foreshadowed by John Winthrop on the deck of the Arabella in 1630 when he addressed his fellow Puritans in his sermon ''a Modell of Christian Charity.'' Others showed that this theme was articulated by political leaders and Presidents in inaugural addresses from George Washington to the present, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. showed how it was yet again used by the neoconservatives and George W. Bush as a justification for the war on Iraq. The larger point here is that American exceptionalism, as with Christianity, the key tenets of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, English common law, and so on, persists over hundreds of years and bridges temporary crises, the ups and downs of the world economy, war and peace, and other shorter-term trends conjured up by intellectuals for explaining culture. Similarly, an enduring French cultural theme that penetrates its culture and historical consciousness, rooted in the Enlightenment, has been Liberté, Égalité, and Fraternité, exported by Napoleon's armies to Europe and by France's ''mission civilizatrice'' to its colonial subjects. In fact, every school and public building in France, not to mention textbooks, monuments and public holiday celebrations, are living embodiments of this consciousness. Hill's focus on a limited time period and selected texts does not capture these enduring cultural themes that shape the historical consciousness of a people.

Hill has a tendency for obscure and convoluted explanations: ''The seemingly universal and borderless narrative of history as intercourse in histories of civilization breaks down into two tropes that can be reconciled only through an inverted naturalization of the nation as an epistemological category'' (p. 68). The two tropes referred to are trade and war. I have no idea what ''inverted naturalization of the nation as an epistemological category'' means. Another example is found in Hill's conclusion, where he writes that ''…national history in this period…supplied an alibi for the wave of formal colonization that began in the 1870s, but to stop with this conclusion would miss the more basic point that the framework of historical interiority and apposite, otherly national spaces provided by the inversion cannot account for the systemic, rather than national, integration carried out through the international system of markets and states'' (p. 271).

I wish Hill had stopped precisely where he decided to continue. His additions strike me as empty professional ritual. Broad themes such as globalization, international system of markets and states, and the like are vague and can be filled with almost any content. They are not explanations. To make plausible cause and effect linkages from political events and socio-economic conditions to ideologies and symbolic systems, a great deal more intellectual work and energy have to be expended on concrete, specific events and institutions that bring abstractions down to earth.

Hill's methodology for intellectual history is grounded in literary criticism. In his discussion of nationalism in the Third Republic, Hill refers to both the defeat of France in the 1870–1871 war and Renan's much quoted insight that ''the existence of a nation is an everyday plebiscite…'' (p. 251). It would be appropriate to mention in this connection that when Alsace was lost to Germany in 1870, thousands of Alsatians, whose native language was a German dialect, emigrated to France rather than live in the new German state, and that in 1914, the German army drafted thousands of Alsatians but sent them to the Russian front because it feared that they would refuse to fight against France (Ritter 1985). These events give a concrete meaning to Renan's ''everyday plebiscite'' and the force of French culture in defining the French nation.

One of the book's themes is how settler societies grapple with immigration issues and with their relationship to the metropole. In *The Founding of New Societies*, Louis Hartz (1964) provides a model for comparative study of this topic, contrasting the United States, Canada, Australia and South Africa as English settler societies dealing with these issues. A modest, concrete, but powerful intellectual apparatus used by Hartz and his collaborators is an appropriate tool for such comparative analysis. I believe Hartz is a more useful model to follow for intellectual history than Hill's methodology.

References

Hartz, Louis. (1964) *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada and Australia.* New York: Harcourt Brace & World.

Ritter, Jean. (1985) *L'Alsace.* Paris: Press Universitaires de France.