

The Undivided Past: History Beyond Our Differences

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David Cannadine's title, with its reference to 'the undivided past', may seem to suggest some Platonic idea of a Rankean straw man who aspires to a consensual and 'definitive' history of a unitary past; but what we have here is something very different – something that might indeed be construed as a quite revolutionary gesture. For Cannadine is advocating nothing less than a change in historiographical direction, and a change that implies the adoption of an explicitly avowed ideological positioning. That is something which might well find favour with many contemporary theorists, but which must surely surprise (and possibly shock) all but a minority of practising historians, for whom a supposed (however spurious) detachment from *any* ideology has long been accounted a disciplinary virtue.

Professor Cannadine's overall argument is, then, that historians, together with other academics, have too often been complicit in underpinning a Manichaeian model of the world – a world, that is, characterised by divisions, and above all distinctions between 'them'/ bad and 'us'/ good. And that unwholesome model has been publicised – effectively rendered the orthodoxy – by political leaders and mass media, for whom it is of course convenient. For such simple messages, providing as they often do a confirmation of identity by means of differentiations and exclusions – these surely are what the conformist members of a patronised public can best understand. But they are pernicious, as seeming to justify further strife, and as militating against the understanding of our commonality and shared humanity which should be our goal for the future.

Furthermore, the divisive Manichaeian model is simply not true – it does not provide a valid description of our actual experience; and its untruthfulness and invalidity can be demonstrated through historical analysis. This is what Cannadine then sets out to do, by examining – each in a separate chapter – six contenders for

the role of exclusively providing identity: religion, nation, class, gender, race, and civilisation.

The first chapter on religion, then, has sections on 'Pagans and Christians', 'Christianity and Islam', and 'Catholics and Protestants'; and the theme that runs throughout is the traditional emphasis on simplistic divisions and mutual hostilities – a perspective that often recurs in partisan histories, at the expense of a much more complex picture that would highlight the heterogeneous nature of each main category, and – most importantly – the widely lived reality of tolerance between peoples who have declined to be assigned identities on the strength of their religious beliefs alone. In the case of Christianity, some of Jesus's own reported words concerning the division of 'sheep' from 'goats' – an implicit warning about future promotion to heaven or relegation to hell – are contradicted by other more conciliatory recommendations of his own. But it is divisiveness that has often taken precedence in the record, owing partly to historians' propensity to present triumphalist accounts of Christianity's defeat of 'paganism', or their partisan reports of extremists, whether Catholic or Protestant, or their (often politically motivated) resort to models of ideological and cultural conflict. And that has served to bequeath an over-simple story of difference and conflict – a story that is invalidated, or at least may and should be counterbalanced, by the evident co-operation and mutual toleration often shown within (ethnically, racially, and theologically) mixed communities through the centuries. As with contemporary news-reporting, a 'crusade' may serve conviction politics, and make for exciting copy; but alternative, more nuanced stories may offer preferable outcomes.

Such concerns lead to a discussion of nationhood in chapter two, and here too historians have played important roles – both in underpinning the establishment and then the maintenance of a sense of national identity, and also in periodically challenging that concept's validity. By indicating some of the bewildering complexities of inter-national politics, Cannadine clarifies the relatively recent emergence of 'the nation' as a 'unit of collective loyalty' (p. 69) (the term 'nationalism' having been coined only in the 1790s), and the enduring territorial, racial, and linguistic instability of such a constructed entity. The price of its popular acceptance – encouraged by a pragmatic emphasis once more on exclusiveness and otherness – has been rivalry and war; so the historian's function here might be to promote a cosmopolitanism and internationalism that probably already corresponds more accurately than 'nationhood' to the lived experience of diverse, inter-mixed, multi-ethnic, and mobile peoples in our postmodern globalised world.

Identities are still required, though; and in the search for that elusive 'selfhood', resort has more recently been had to class, gender, and race. Some of these seem to fit better than others the author's overall theme of attaining a history 'beyond our differences', or perhaps some are simply better shown to be relevant to his argument. At all events, the chapter on 'class' is centred on a critical survey of Marxist historiography; and while that admittedly returns us to the problem of Manichaean distinctions – this time between capitalist and bourgeois, East and West, and (inevitably) them and us – it may leave us wondering how 'class' as a generalised concept can ever be transcended. (Even as I draft this, in April 2013, a new more finely calibrated class structure for Britain has been proposed.)

The question of gender too (the subject of chapter four) remains unresolved. Again we are given a useful summary of, more particularly, feminism and feminist historiography; but, again, quite how historians in the future should treat the subject(s) in their efforts to heal divisions is far from clear. Perhaps that is the point, and a recognition of complexity makes as good a start as any. And complex the matter is shown to be, with distinctions between feminists who have applied themselves variously to differences of (biological) sex and (culturally determined) gender, with the seemingly basic polarities of male and female blurred almost beyond utility, and with the lived experience of gender relations world-wide as diverse (and as remote from the abstruse subtleties of academic theorising) as ever. This, then, is one more area where any rigid definitions, distinctions, and categorisations are shown to be unhelpful and invalid – though just how, in the interest of a 'common humanity', to proceed without their use remains unclear.

Yet a heightened sensitivity to our use of language must itself be beneficial, and so I am, newly sensitised, alerted to the author's introduction on page 168 of 'the black American poet Audre Lorde'; and I wonder about the need for, or propriety of, those adjectives. For race, too, is clearly shown to be a wholly inadequate ground for definition of oneself or others – no better, though perhaps more often used, than class or gender.

David Cannadine's narrative here may be construed as one of ultimate progress, inasmuch as the 20th-century horrors of European racialist imperialism, German Nazism, South African apartheid, and American bigotry – all with their spurious claims of 'racial superiority' – have been largely superseded by cosmopolitan liberalism; race now seems to be decreasingly likely to be adopted, either by individuals or nations, as their major defining characteristic. But that encouraging story is of course only partial, and remains unfinished; so the author's advocacy of histories that emphasise commonalities and shared humanity remains in this context as important as ever.

This is not least because 'race' has often been seen to provide one of the underpinnings of 'civilisation' itself. That much used and abused word is the subject of the penultimate chapter; and once again it is complexity by which above all we are confronted. In short it would seem that the word 'civilisation' has, since the 18th century, been most used in contradistinction to 'barbarism'; and in that sense it has unsurprisingly been appropriated for self-interested purposes (not least during two world wars). What is perhaps most interesting and informative (and precautionary) in Cannadine's account here is that, after long usage for incitement to patriotic partialities, the term had seemed to lose all traction after the end of the Cold War and the discarding of previous rivalries and oppositions between East and West, Communist barbarism and democratic civilisation; but the effects of its subsequent resuscitation in the post 9/11 context of civilisational 'clashes' have indeed proved dire. As with other oppositional categories and antagonistic bipolarities, historically based invalidations may have little chance against political expediencies and the seemingly widespread popular penchant for simplistic analyses; and the Manichaean-index has barely yet recovered from the assaults of self-serving Bush/Blair fanatical extremism. So the lesson here – or one of them – is the need to highlight the impossibility in practice of establishing any clear-cut or viable distinctions, and to promote (as Cannadine does here) a salutary scepticism towards any claimants to 'absolutist' values.

Except one's own of course! Therein lies one of the intellectual paradoxes of our time – and it is one that may have discouraged historians, as well as others, from including ethics within their disciplinary purview. But the point surely is, as David Cannadine himself makes clear, to remain open to discussion and an ongoing conversation with alternatives. And his own input into current historiographical conversations is much to be welcomed. For too long, as he insists, historians have tended to underpin a divisiveness that panders to attitudes best repudiated; and where attention has been shifting in the required direction, it has usually been in other disciplinary areas. It is time, then, for historians to catch up with their academic colleagues, and embrace an ethical framework for their subject that might lead to a preferable future, switching from a longstanding concentration on the seemingly more newsworthy themes of sectional interests, confrontations, and conflicts, to a concern with humanity's essential unity, inter-relatedness, and amity. (Some historians of Israel/Palestine are already showing the way here.)

This book is written with the author's characteristic eloquence and lucidity, and it provides an extremely useful synthesis of work, much of it very recent, on the topics identified in the six chapters; and as such, it acts not so much as a coherent argument as an exemplification of what is being argued. With such breadth it would be churlish – as well as unrealistic – always to expect references to original sources rather than second-hand reports, though their absence might be a cause of some frustration. But the main point is the message: that the historiographical agenda should be to renounce a previous emphasis on division and difference, and to promote understanding and celebration of our 'common humanity'. Who can disagree with that?

The author would like to thank the reviewer for a very generous, thoughtful and perceptive review.

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2013/apr/11/undivided-past-history-cannadine-review> [2]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-undivided-past-history-beyond-our-differences-by-david-cannadine-8560114.html> [3]

New Statesman

<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/03/reviewed-undivided-past-david-cannadine> [4]

Scotsman

<http://www.scotsman.com/the-scotsman/books/book-reviews-the-undivided-past-history-beyond-our-differences-fractured-times-culture-and-society-in-the-20th-century-1-2853092> [5]

Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/edb5b2ea-84d3-11e2-891d-00144feabdc0.html> [6]

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/books/review/the-undivided-past-by-david-cannadine.html> [7]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/the-undivided-past-history-beyond-our-differences-by-david-cannadine/2002442.article> [8]

Irish Times

<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-undivided-past-history-beyond-our-differences-by-david-cannadine-1.1349181> [9]

Wall Street Journal

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324482504578453071098757176.html> [10]

RSA

<http://www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2013/common-humanity-making-us-vs.-them-history> [11]

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[5] <http://www.scotsman.com/the-scotsman/books/book-reviews-the-undivided-past-history-beyond-our-differences-fractured-times-culture-and-society-in-the-20th-century-1-2853092>

[6] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/edb5b2ea-84d3-11e2-891d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2Wk7HngOM>

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[8] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/the-undivided-past-history-beyond-our-differences-by-david-cannadine/2002442.article>

[9] <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-undivided-past-history-beyond-our-differences-by-david-cannadine-1.1349181>

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