Comment on Woolf

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I read Professor Woolf's erudite and ambitious article with great interest. The central argument of the piece – that writing a history of Europe is an impossibly complicated, but still worthwhile, enterprise that would involve the interrelation of many different kinds of history – is one that we would probably all accept. I am more more sceptical about three subplots in Woolf's essay.

First, I felt that Woolf was too keen to arrange historians into neat categories and that his examples were sometimes selective. Fisher and Pirenne are cited as characteristic of the historical response to the violence of European politics after 1914, though both men were born in the 1860s and underwent their formative experience before the First World War (Fisher was a member of the Lloyd George Government). Fisher's history of Europe was published five years before his death; Pirenne's was published posthumously. Lucien Febvre, who led a quiet life between 1940 and 1944, is wheeled out as an example of responses by French historians to the Second World War,[1] but there is no reference to the thoughts that Marc Bloch put on paper between the French defeat and his execution in 1944, nor to the fact that Braudel wrote his most important book in a German oflag.

Second, Woolf talks a good deal about officially sponsored history. He believes that agencies of the European Union have tried to develop a history that emphasises European integration as an inevitable and desirable endpoint and he sees this as reproducing the dangers of teleological history centred on the nation state that was produced during the nineteenth century. Well, history that focused on the formation of the nation state was obviously important in Germany and Italy during the nineteenth century (and, perhaps because of the role that history played in nation formation, governments exercised some power over academic appointments). The preoccupation with the history of the nation state was less marked in Britain, where historians followed a wider range of interests – did not Macaulay write that relations between the sexes were as interesting as relations between the states? State sponsorship of particular historical interpretations has played only a small role in England, where academic preferment is too decentralised to fall under government control, or in France, where academic preferment is subject to rigid and inflexible rules.

As for the ways in which the European Union might reproduce the allegedly teleological patterns of nineteenth-century histories of the nation state, some obvious points might be made. History does not play the particular role in elite education that it did during the nineteenth century – the students who, at the Ecole nationale d'administration or the London School of Economics, are being trained to run the

[1] On relations between Febvre and Bloch during the occupation see Philippe Burrin, *Living with Defeat: France under German Occupation* (London: Arnold, 1997).

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European Union focus on economics, administrative law and international relations. Besides, European integration is not simply a rerun of nineteenth-century state formation. Woolf suggests that the history that accompanies European integration will lack the emotional resonance of nineteenth-century nationalist history. Well, perhaps emotional resonance matters less than it did in the nineteenth century since, to take an obvious example, the European Union does not seem likely to ask conscript soldiers to die in its defence. Finally, official sponsorship of particular historical interpretations usually turns out, except in very repressive societies, to be ineffective or counterproductive. In recent years the European University Institute has certainly encouraged historians to study European integration (or at least to put the words 'integration of Europe' into the titles of their books). There is no evidence, however, that this tendency has produced a shift in the way in which history is studied towards an integrationist interpretation, and indeed an influential work of Eurosceptical history was produced under the aegis of the European University Institute.[2]

Given that Professor Woolf seems to believe that celebratory histories of Europe will replace celebratory histories of the nation state, it should be stressed that national histories are often taught and dicussed in ways that have nothing to do with celebration of the past. One might say that guilt about the past is a defining feature of postwar West German national identity and, in the last decade, discussion of the Vichy regime and especially its role in the extermination of the Jews has become almost obsessive in France.

Those who are interested in official sponsorship of historical interpretations should remember that private agencies have often been more important than the state. Look at the importance of publishers. Philippe Ariès, who earned his living working for an association of tropical fruit importers and never had any academic position, derived influence from his position as an adviser to Seuil.[3] Pierre Nora, another historian on the fringes of formal academic life, played a similar role at Gallimard. Jack Plumb and then David Cannadine derived their importance in Britain largely from their role as historical advisers to Penguin books.[4]

Third, Woolf seems to believe that the historical profession is going through two related crises: an external one provoked by the extent to which history is disseminated by different kinds of media, and an internal one provoked by the uncertainties of the 'linguistic turn'. I am sceptical about all of this. First, historians have been talking about a crisis of their profession for at least thirty years,[5] and Clio is still alive and kicking (crude statistical measures – books sold, students recruited – suggest

[2] Alan Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation State* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[3] Philippe Ariès, *Un historien du dimanche* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

[4] *The Independent on Sunday* recently produced a list of Britain's 'top ten historians'. This list was headed by Cannadine (and also contained his wife); over half of the ten historians cited are currently under contract to Penguin.

[5] Hayden White, 'The Burden of History', in *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978); the essay was first published in 1966. For a brisk dismissal of Anglo-American historiographical neurosis see Gérard Noiriel, *Sur la 'crise' de l'histoire* (Paris: Belin, 1996).

that she is healthier than ever before). Woolf talks of a time when 'the historical profession could claim a monopoly of historical writing'. When was this golden age and which historians does Woolf imagine to have been more influential than, say, Victor Hugo or Charles Dickens? Surely, the importance of professional historians has been increased by the way in which their, sometimes rather banal, reflections are reproduced. Think of the frequency with which Kershaw, Starkey and Schama appear on British television. The increasing prominence of professional historians is reflected in their relations with film makers. There was a time when films subverted or circumvented academic history: in the early 1970s two films – *Lacombe Lucien* and *Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, put forward a new interpretation of Vichy France without much reference to academic history. Now everything has changed. Claude Lanzman's *Shoah* (1985) contained extensive interviews with Raul Hilberg (thus turning a professor at an obscure US college into an international star);[6] Claude Chabrol consulted Robert Paxton when he made *L'Oeil de Vichy* (1993) – indeed Paxton has become so famous that he was recently the object of his own series on the French history channel and he himself has said that he feels like 'a cargo cult'.

As for the 'linguistic turn', well, this is a phrase that actually covers a lot of different things.[7] Often the turn is of 180 degrees that takes us back to old fashioned high politics. In any case, uncertainty is not a quality that one associates with people who use words like 'master narrative'. If anything, historians have been given a greater degree of confidence by the emphasis on texts, discourse and language that goes with the linguistic turn. It is now they, and not historical actors or witnesses, who are the ultimate arbiters of the historical narrative. Historians may not be certain in the sense that they may not believe that it is possible or desirable to establish a clear set of facts, but they do tend to believe that their particular varieties of uncertainty are more interesting and important than anyone else's. The new sense of its own importance that has gripped the historical profession is illustrated by the recent fashion for what Pierre Nora has called Ego-Histoires by leading historians.[8] Historians are increasingly likely to assume that their own lives are significant in themselves or even emblematic of wider currents. In the 1990s, two very different historians – Noel Annan and Luisa Passerini – presented their autobiographies as being those of their 'generation'. Eric Hobsbawm wrote parts of his memoirs (published in 2002) in the first person plural: thus producing sentences that combine self-importance with evasiveness: 'Moreover, after 1956 many of us did leave the party. Why, then, did we remain?'[9]

[6] Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: the Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996).

[7] Miles Taylor, 'The Linguistic Turns in British Social History', *Discussioni*, 1–13.

[8] Pierre Nora, *Essais d'Ego-Histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), see also, for example Alain Corbin, *Historien du sensible, entretiens avec Gilles Heuré* (Paris: La Découverte, 2000), Jacques Le Goff, *Une vie pour l'histoire, entretiens avec Marc Heurgon* (Paris: La Découverte, 1996). Note also the new fashion for historians writing about other recent historians – see Véronique Sales, ed., *Les historiens* (Paris: A. Colin, 2003).

[9] Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 194.

I should like to finish by pointing out that history is a subject that is best defined by its practice. Confusing historiographical theory with history is like assuming that a thorough knowledge of the Queensberry Rules is the same as knowing how to box. In history the general is often particular, and general histories of Europe are often most interesting precisely when they are most idiosyncratic. I do not agree with all of Professor Woolf's arguments but I am intrigued by his intuitions, and I hope that his article might presage some work of general European history on his own part.