‘Yesterday won’t be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago’ (William Faulkner, 1948, *Intruder in the Dust*).

**THREE VISIONS OF CONTEXT AS HISTORY**

Mark Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes

Contact addresses:

Mark Bevir  
Department of Political Science  
University of California, Berkeley  
CA 94720-1950  
USA

E-mail: mbevir@berkeley.edu

and

R. A. W. Rhodes  
Faculty of Social and Human Sciences  
University of Southampton  
Murray Building  
Southampton  
SO17 1BJ  
United Kingdom

E-mail: r. a. w.rhodes@soton.ac.uk

**Biographies**

**Mark Bevir** is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley.

**R. A. W. Rhodes** is Professor of Government at the University of Southampton, UK; and Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.

Introduction

Injunctions to put administrative structures and processes in their context are as common as they are vague. Context covers a multitude of ‘variables’ but commonly most social scientists include history; for example, historical institutionalism has been one of the major intellectual movements of recent years. However, few social scientists spend much time explaining what they mean by history. Trite phrases such as ‘history matters’ are common. Sustained analyses of how and why history matters are less so. Christopher Pollitt (2008, 39) suggests that:

The good ship History was more like a flotilla than a single vessel. The flagship is of traditional design, in which it is easy to assume that what one is hearing is simply ‘how it was’ – a convincing narrative unencumbered by much theory or method. But this is a deceptive appearance ... The theory is principally inductive and inclusive – explanations are produced by constructive attention to many details and aspects ... There is no compulsion to generalize the eventually constructed explanation to many other situations, and no requirement that the form of explanation must be capable of yielding predictions about the future ...

Appearances are indeed deceptive. In this chapter, we give schematic accounts of three rival visions of the notion of historical context: developmental historicism, modernist-empiricism, and radical historicism. For a brief summary, see Table 1.
Each of these visions can form the basis of an appeal to historical context to explain governmental practices. But each vision relies on markedly different theoretical assumptions about history and about social explanation. We have two aims. We want to alert readers to the differences among these three visions and the theoretical issues at stake in choosing between them. We also want to take sides in the dispute between these visions of history. So, we defend radical historicism over both developmental historicism and modernist-empiricism. Our arguments apply to the human sciences in general, but we illustrate them with examples drawn specifically from the literature on government and administration, including our own earlier works as examples of what we mean by radical historicism.

Table 1: Three Visions of History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIEW OF HISTORY</th>
<th>VIEW OF SOCIAL EXPLANATION</th>
<th>VIEW OF THE STATE</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORICISM</td>
<td>Evolutionary</td>
<td>Teleological</td>
<td>National/Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODERNIST-EMPIRICISM</td>
<td>Underlying causal patterns and mechanisms</td>
<td>Formal-economic or sociological</td>
<td>Bureaucratic/Managerial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RADICAL HISTORICISM</td>
<td>Contingent and contestable</td>
<td>Narrative/Genealogy</td>
<td>Decentred/Stateless</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vision 1: Developmental Historicism

In the late nineteenth century, few human scientists defined history and social science in contrast to one another. They thought that valid narratives depended on the systematic, impartial, painstaking and rigorous collection and sifting of facts, and they identified science with just such inductive rigour. For James Bryce, political science took its materials from the historical study of the past before then applying them to the present (Bryce, 1909). Yet, while nineteenth century human scientists emphasized their rigorous inductive methods, they typically collected and sifted facts within a particular framework, which we call developmental historicism.

This developmental historicism owed much to the conjectural histories of the Scottish Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers forged a science of society that explored the development of sociability through the characteristic stages employed in Whig historiography. Developmental historicism also owed much to an organic or romantic outlook that emphasized the ability of living beings to make and remake social life through their activity, where activity expressed purpose, thought, and imagination. The conjunction of Whig historiography and organicism inspired many attempts to study politics within an evolutionary narrative about the unfolding of principles of nationality and liberty along fixed paths (Burrow 1981; Collini et al 1983, chapters 6 and 7). We find such narratives most famously in the Whig constitutional histories of E. A. Freeman, J. R. Green, and William Stubbs. Similar narratives attracted both sides in the dispute between
idealists and positivists. The positivists followed August Comte and J. S. Mill in promoting rigorous scientific methods. They also increasingly identified evolutionary theory as the pinnacle of science, and adopted developmental historicism as a suitable setting in which to situate their empirical findings (Bevir 2002; Collini 1991). It was this evolutionary positivism that Sidney Webb hoped to foster when he founded the London School of Economics in 1895. Likewise, although idealists sought to unpack the absolute as spiritual perfection, they increasingly used Hegelianism and social organicism in ways that made developmental historicism the setting in which the absolute unfolded (den Otter 1996). The Bosanquets drew on this organicist idealism when they confronted the Webbs in the great Edwardian debate about public policy (McBriar 1987).

Developmental historicists told narratives of continuity; of the gradual triumph of the principles of nationality and freedom. They understood the past by locating it in a larger whole, the content and meaning of which typically derived from contemporary notions of nationality and freedom. Their national histories told of incremental changes in the ideas, institutions, and practices of freedom as they triumphed over those of tyranny. Moreover, even when developmental historicists pointed to threats to freedom, they still conceived of its triumph as somehow ensured by an evolutionary process. Progress was built into the order of things. Developmental historicists thus structured their national histories using principles that operated in time either as foundational facts or as unfolding ideals. The most important principles included the nation-state and democratic liberty. They were intimately linked. The prevalent understanding of democratic liberty presupposed an organic community that had reached its highest form in the nation-state.
Whig historians suggested that the English nation had an unbroken continuity located principally in its democratic institutions.

The developmental historicists took the nation-state to be an organic unit defined by ethical, functional, and linguistic ties as well as by a shared past. They usually relied here on historical argument about the evolution of civilizations, not biological arguments about racial characteristics (Mandler 2000, 224-244). They equated civilizations with shared cultural and moral habits or with common social and political institutions. In the English case, this national history emphasized that rule was in accord with precedent and convention, rather than a written constitution, and that these conventions protected civil liberty and local government. The constitutional settlement of 1689 represented the moment when it became clear the monarch had to get the consent of Parliament to raise taxes or make laws. Local government meant there was no place for a centralized and powerful bureaucracy or police. Ancient institutions, such as the monarchy and House of Lords, responded to rising democratic pressures and ensured their own survival even as the power of popular institutions grew and the franchise was extended to greater numbers. This gradual evolution had produced a balanced constitution that allowed for popular participation and respected civil liberties even while it kept checks on excessive power and its misuse.

Developmental historicists made sense of their world with narratives of continuity and progress. They saw these narratives as scientific because they identified science with rigorous inductive studies set in comparative and evolutionary theories. Stubbs wrote that histories should be painstaking ‘chronologies of minutiae’. These chronologies then
could be understood by comparing the origins, development, and present nature of nation-states on an evolutionary scale.

Because developmental historicists fused narrative and science in these ways, they almost never made a sharp distinction between political science and history. Political scientists thought of their subject matter as thoroughly historical. Typically they sought to trace the ways in which ideas or principles had unfolded within the historical evolution of the institutions of a state. Introductory texts to politics often explicitly expounded just such principles or categories (Seeley 1896). Political scientists used the narratives and techniques of developmental historicism to describe and explain political practices, to enlighten the public, and to guide policymakers. Most saw themselves as historians as well as social scientists.

W. H. Greenleaf’s (1983-1987) historical analysis of British government provides a relatively recent illustration of several of tropes derived from developmental historicism. First, he shuns modernist empiricism for philosophical idealism (Greenleaf 1966). The epigram reproduced at the start of each volume is from Bosanquet: ‘We construct our world as an interpretation which attempts to restore the unity which the real has lost by our making its diversity explicit’ (Logic II.ix.I (i)). He describes himself as ‘determinedly old-fashioned’ (Greenleaf 1983 Volume 1, xi) in his views on the study of politics. Like the developmental historicists his focus is history, institutions and the interaction between idea and institutions not the Westminster model and the atomistic categories of modernist-empiricism. He makes his standpoint brutally clear when he argues that although ‘the concept of a genuine social science has had its ups and downs, and it still survives, …we are as far from its achievement as we were when Spencer (or
Bacon for that matter) first put pen to paper.’ Indeed, he opines, these ‘continuous attempts … serve only to demonstrate ... the inherent futility of the enterprise (Greenleaf 1983, Volume 1, 286).

Second, there is a pessimistic moral narrative at the heart of his history – the decline of libertarianism. Greenleaf views the past century and a half as one of government growth; of the triumph of collectivism over individualism. Libertarianism means four things: an inalienable title to a realm of self-regarding action; a limited role for government; the dispersion of power; and the Rule of Law. Collectivism is concerned with the public good, social justice, positive government and the concentration of state power (Greenleaf 1983, Volume 1, 14, 15-20, and 20-23). His four volumes are taken up with documenting why a libertarian and individualist society sustaining a limited conception of government was replaced by the positive state pursuing explicit policies of widespread intervention in the name of social justice and the public good. In other words, in contrast to Whig historiography, Greenleaf’s history of British government relies on a kind of pessimistic negative teleology. He does not tell a story about the gradual progress of the ideas and institutions of British government – the practical wisdom of the balanced constitution. Rather, he documents, and regrets, the decline of these ideas and institutions.

Third, with Whig historiography, Greenleaf understands British government as shared cultural habits and common institutions. He examines change in these habits and institutions by centring his analysis on two unchanging traditions. He believes that ‘the British political tradition as it has developed in modern times', is 'constituted by a dialectic between the two opposing tendencies', between 'two strains' of libertarianism
and collectivism. They are 'an impressionistic working hypothesis of an historical kind', which can be used to pull together the diverse practices and ideas of British political life (Greenleaf 1983, Volume 1, 13). However, despite his allegiance to historical accounts, Greenleaf’s analysis of the British political tradition is, from our perspective, ahistorical because the traditions have fixed cores and remain static. They embody principles that provided the basis for judging the gradual evolution or devolution of the nation’s ideas and institutions. They act as fixed categories with which to make sense of the world in the same way as progress, nationality and freedom made sense of the world for developmental historicists.

Vision 2: Modernist-empiricism

Greenleaf’s pessimism reflects the impact of World War One. The War undermined the faith in progress and reason that had informed developmental historicism. Although images and ideals of progress still appeared after the War, progress was seen as contingent, not a destination of history. The contingent victory of progress depended, for many, on promoting new sciences to guide attempts to resolve social problems. World War One thus encouraged calls for new sciences even as it eroded the narratives of developmental historicism. The new sciences that arose in response relied on an epistemology of modernist-empiricism (Porter 1995; Schabas 1990). Modernist-empiricism was atomistic and analytical. It broke up the continuities and gradual change of older narratives by dividing the world into discrete, discontinuous units. It then sought to make sense of these units by using impersonal mathematical rules or analytical
schemes. It used ahistorical calculations and typologies to replace narrative as a mode of explanation. Today modernist-empiricism has become so dominant that many social scientists take for granted that it is synonymous with common sense or good social science (Bevir 2001).

The rise of modernist-empiricism appears, for example, in the changing arrangements of Herman Finer’s books. In 1921 Finer organized his *Foreign Governments at Work* state by state, with chapters on France, Germany, and the United States. He located the various institutions of any given state relative to that state’s other institutions. He relied on readers using an analytical index of topics to do the work of locating institutions in comparison with similar institutions in other states. In 1932, however, Finer adopted a more modernist-empiricist approach in his major work, *Theory and Practice of Modern Government*. He organized much of this book topic by topic with chapters on constitutions, parties and electorates, and legislatures. He placed far greater emphasis on comparing each institution with similar institutions in other states rather than with other institutions within the relevant state (Finer 1921 and 1970).

Modernist-empiricists brought atomistic and analytical modes of inquiry to bear on the study of government. They crafted a political science that focused on issues of psychology and process, not history. Developmental historicists thought of action as conduct infused with reason and morals. In sharp contrast, modernist-empiricists thought of action as behaviour to be examined either independently of any assumptions about mind or by using theories about the hidden depths of the mind that often overwhelmed reason and morals (Wallas 1908). Even when developmental historicists such as Bryce suggested that political science concerned mental habits, they situated them in historical
narratives about organic communities that evolved to realize principles of nationality and liberty. In contrast, modernist-empiricists such as Graham Wallas used surveys and statistics, often informed by an analytical psychology, to reveal atomistic attitudes and opinions. Also, developmental historicists thought about society and politics as a moral narrative, while modernist-empiricists focused on interests, processes, and functions. Modernist-empiricists even drew on a diffuse functionalism they borrowed from sociology and anthropology. Of course, we can find functionalist reasoning in nineteenth century theorists, including Herbert Spencer. Still, it was only in the early twentieth century that Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe Brown, and others defined functional explanations as scientific compared with historical explanations (Radcliffe-Brown 1924). The functionalists sought to explain social facts by their contributions to the social order as a whole. At times, they paid attention to the relationships between elements of a social whole, which can appear to contradict our claim they atomized that whole. However, they saw the social whole as an abstract, even universal, framework that made possible comparison and classification of atomized units across diverse societies. Functionalism overlapped with a systems approach to organizations in a way that promised to provide a context for atomistic and analytical studies of behaviour and processes independently of an historical narrative.

Modernist-empiricists introduced analytical and atomistic modes of inquiry, and new focuses on behaviour and processes. In Britain, Wallas stands out as a forceful advocate of this version of political science. He denounced older approaches to politics that bore little relation to political reality. He championed instead a political science that used quantitative techniques and based itself in a scientific psychology of habit, emotion,
and non-rational inference. However, even if we forget about Wallas, modernist-empiricism wrought a shift in the study of the British nation-state. The rise of modernist-empiricism transformed the Whig historiography of the developmental historicists into the Westminster model. British students of politics had understood their state as an historical narrative. Now they saw it as an abstract set of institutions that could be compared and classified with other states. Britain was a unitary state characterized by parliamentary sovereignty, cabinet government, party control of the executive, and a loyal opposition. Ironically, just as the Whig narrative was relegated to the background, so the new focuses on behaviour and process highlighted features of British politics that did not fit well with the Westminster model. For example, political scientists noted a decline in the independence of Members of Parliament, the influence of unelected officials, and the activities of pressure groups and the media. The history of British political science is, in many ways, one of successive attempts to fit new data and concerns in a Westminster model that is the legacy of the developmental historicism of the nineteenth century.

Here the First World War also challenged the idea of the nation-state as an expression of an organic unity expressed in popular sovereignty. Even if human scientists still viewed the state positively as expressing a general will or common good, they typically did so for a society that was itself legitimately pluralistic. Ernest Barker and A. D. Lindsay adapted their idealist inheritance, for example, in ways that gave greater credence to pluralism. The erosion of the principle of the nation-state inspired other human scientists to get behind constitutional pieties to explore what they now believed to be the real back and forth of contemporary politics (Wallas 1908). Some of them believed
that social conditions had changed so dramatically that older principles could no longer serve their purpose. They expounded on the need to explore these new conditions and behavioural patterns and craft new principles and institutions for the twentieth century (Wallas 1914). The concept of the nation-state gave way to that of government, which lacked the association with reason and morals that developmental historicists had ascribed to the former. Government was understood in more neutral terms as an aggregation of diverse interests and attitudes found in society, or even as the institutions that articulated, managed, and responded to these interests and attitudes.

The rise of modernist-empiricism did not mean an end to history. What it meant was that history occupied a smaller place in political studies and consequently in debates about public policy. Social scientists used history more as a source of data than as grounds for explaining that data. Theories and explanations relied less on narrative and more on atomization, classification, statistical correlations, or even identification of functions within a system. History continued to attract some attention, especially among political theorists. But increasingly social scientists shunned original historical research, relying on syntheses of existing scholarship to provide the data or background to their studies of the behaviour and processes of contemporary politics.

B. Guy Peters and his co-authors’ (1997 and 2010) modernist-empiricist analyses of state traditions in Western Europe exemplify the approach. At first, Peters and his co-author examined:

reform efforts in the light of different national experiences and state traditions.

Underlying the analysis is the idea that administrative reform should be
understood as yet another example of the importance of social constructionism as a means of understanding the public sector. … The chapter is also closely akin to the ‘new institutionalism’ in the social sciences. … More specifically, the assumptions are similar to those of ‘historical institutionalism’ which argues that there are very long-term and pervasive effects of institutional choices (Loughlin and Peters 1997, 43).

Clarity is not served by using six criteria to distinguish traditions that do not seem to have their roots in historical institutionalism. They are: the legal basis of the state, the character of state-civil society relations, form of political organization, policy style, form of decentralization, and approach to the discipline of Public Administration. They use this mix of concepts to identify four state traditions: Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Napoleonic and Scandinavian (Loughlin and Peters 1997, 46).

On revisiting the topic in 2010, Peters and his new co-author conclude, ‘the list does not follow any single classificatory logic, as it combines geographical, historical and cultural considerations’ (Painter and Peters 2010b, 19). However, they discuss four ‘variables’ that define the traditions: relationship with society, relationship with political institutions, law vs. management, and accountability. They accept that more variables could be included but ‘we believe that these provide sufficient insight to initiate empirical analysis’ (Painter and Peters 2010a, 6-8). This time, they identify nine ‘families or groups of countries, each sharing some common administrative inheritance’: Anglo-American, Napoleonic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Latin American, Postcolonial South Asia and African, East Asian, Soviet, and Islamic (Painter and Peters 2010b, 19). Historical data
are used to fill out these boxes; indeed, history is reduced to a ‘variable’ in explaining public sector reform.

Dennis Kavanagh (1991) is explicit in his account of the uses of history to study British government. It provides source of material; a body of knowledge to test theories; and a means of analyzing political concepts. Peters would agree, so there is nary an explanatory narrative to be seen.

**Vision 3: Radical Historicism**

Radical historicism, like modernist-empiricism, arose in part as a response to the loss of faith in progress and reason that began in the late nineteenth century and became widespread following the First World War. Historicists such as Ernst Troeltsch and Benedetto Croce rejected the developmental perspective that tamed context and change by postulating a continuous development of key principles. Equally, however, they had little use for the analyses, correlations, and typologies of modernist-empiricists because these rarely allowed adequately for context or change. The radical historicists argue that beliefs, actions, and events are profoundly contingent because choice is open and indeterminate. In their view, developmental historicism elided indeterminacy by locating choices in a seemingly stable narrative of progress. Because they queried continuity, they opened the door to scepticism about the possibility of objective historical knowledge. Croce emphasized that history reflects the interests and perspective of the
present. He rejected the retroactive construction of the stability in the narratives of developmental historicism. Radical historicists in general believed the ubiquity of change meant the present might have little, if anything, in common with the past – historical events have their own particular contexts.

Croce’s radical historicism had little immediate impact on Anglophone human sciences. Yet it was an important influence on philosophers opposed to positivism. When logical positivism swept through Oxford, R. G. Collingwood remained a rare champion of a variant of idealist historicism, indebted to Croce (Collingwood 1940 and 1946; but also see Rubinoff 1996). Charles Taylor drew on similar idealist, phenomenological, and historicist ideas to challenge behaviouralism (Taylor 1985). Later Collingwood and Taylor inspired various Anglophone forms of radical historicism in the human sciences as exemplified by their impact on, for example, Quentin Skinner. These radical historicists inspired a return to narrative. Typically, they suggested that the ubiquity of change meant that practices, and the clusters of beliefs or ideas that informed them, were specific historical achievements with little, if anything, in common with our own ways of life. They renounced the possibility of either a universal theory or ahistorical correlations and typologies. In addition, they argued that if we are to understand and explain actions and beliefs, we have to grasp how they fit within wider practices and webs of meaning. They emphasized contextualization in contrast to both deduction and atomization and analysis. Radical historicists thus promoted forms of understanding and explanation that, like the narratives of developmental historicists, are inductive studies of human life in its historical contexts. However, unlike the narratives of developmental historicists, their
counts do not appeal to fixed principles or to reason and progress to define the relevant contexts and link them to the present.

The radical historicist critique of positivism leads to scepticism toward the typologies, correlations, and models of social science. Radical historicists often portray these representations as objectifications that hide the historical nature of the objects they depict and the modes by which they do so.

Similarly, the radical nature of their historicism leads to scepticism toward the narratives of developmental historicists. Radical historicists replace principles of reason, character, and progress, with sensitivity to dispersal, difference, and discontinuity. For example, they reinterpret Locke’s *Two Treatises* as a party-political pamphlet intended to advance Shaftesbury’s opposition to the arbitrariness of the King’s policy, rather than the defining statement of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the constitutional settlement of 1689 (Laslett 1960). Radical historicists also portray the narratives of developmental historicists as products of particular intellectual or ideological contexts. For example, they explain the rise of Whig historiography, and later changes in it, as contingent responses to particular debates about matters such as commerce, rather than as unfolding historical truth (Pocock 1985).

Radical historicists thus offer new narratives of the state. They do so using the same themes of dispersal, difference, and discontinuity with which they challenge principles of reason, character, and progress. Dispersal implies a concern to explore scattered regions and domains within a nation-state: the history of the British state is now that of four nations, not one (Samuel 1999; Davies 1999). Difference implies a concern to
explore how dominant identities define themselves against, competing ones of, say, religion, gender, and race. So, for example, early British identities were forged in opposition to a Catholicism associated with the French (Colley 1992). Discontinuity implies a concern with the ways in which all these varied identities are created and transformed over time. Shifts in the British nation appear to involve novel projections back on to the past, not a continuous development of core themes. They take us from the sense of Englishness forged in Tudor times through the Britishness that arose in 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’ (Colley 1992; Rich 1986; Samuel 1989).

Because radical historicists (and poststructuralists) often represent the nation-state as dispersed, differentiated, and discontinuous, their narratives can appear to be beyond or without the nation-state. Thus, elsewhere we have offered a narrative of the stateless state as networks of peoples (Bevir and Rhodes 2010). Other radical historicists similarly use the notion of dispersal to challenge the nation-state by highlighting transnational links. Ideas, customs, and norms flow across boundaries. Peoples are embedded in all kinds of traditions and practices that are located in overlapping local, regional, and global contexts (Gilroy 1993). Their concern with difference decentres the nation-state into pluralistic peoples. When human scientists invoke collective categories – for example, the principles of developmental historicists or the institutions and ideal types of modernist-empiricism – these categories hide the diverse beliefs and desires that motivate the people they claim to cover. 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 (Gilroy 1991). Their interest in discontinuity challenges the nation-state by revealing as contingent and contestable any identity it might appear to possess across time.

As radical historicists we try to explain the state by reference to historical meanings infusing the beliefs and practices of individual actors. We encourage political scientists to decentre the state and governance and focus on the social construction of practices. We unpack the state into the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals to highlight the contingent and conflicting beliefs that inform the diverse actions that constitute the state. We challenge the idea that inexorable or impersonal forces, norms, or laws define changing patterns of governance. Instead, we argue the state is constructed differently by many actors inspired be different ideas and values (Bevir and Rhodes 2010, 98-99). For example, public sector reform has produced divergent reactions. For the police, the shift from hierarchy to markets to networks poses specific dilemmas. They know how to rewrite the rulebook, manage a contract or work with neighbourhood watch but they struggle to reconcile these ways of working, believing they conflict and undermine one another (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, chapter 9). For doctors, the equivalent shift poses different dilemmas: the key issue is how to preserve the medical model of health and medical autonomy from managerial reforms that stress hierarchy and financial control (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, chapter 8).

**Debating the Visions**

**Radical Historicism vs. Modernist-empiricism**
The validity of modernist-empiricist history depends on the assumption that correlations and classifications constitute valid forms of explanation in social science. Typically, the relevant correlations and classifications are ones that rely on social categories such as class, economic interest, or institutional position. Modernist-empiricist history thus depends, even if only implicitly, on the positivist assumption that we can explain human behaviour by allegedly objective social facts. It is this assumption that allows social science historians to postulate explanations that more or less bypass the meanings or beliefs embedded in action. This assumption allows them to reduce beliefs to intervening variables to which they do not need to appeal directly. It enables them to explain why people wrote master narratives not by reference to the beliefs and the traditions informing them, but by pointing to the functional dictates of nation-building. Similarly, it enables them to explain why people forged nation-states not by reference to beliefs and desires, but by saying that the nation-state was better able to generate the capital needed for warfare.

Because modernist-empiricist history rests on the positivist assumption that we can reduce beliefs and desires to mere intervening variables, it relies on a flawed concept of historical explanation. Modernist-empiricism bypasses the contingent beliefs and meanings that inform actions. It assumes that the concept of causation found in the natural sciences also suits human action. The modelling of history on a scientific concept of causation represents an attempt to claim for a favoured approach to history the prestige of natural science. To talk of explaining nations, actions, and the like by causal laws can sound impressively rigorous when compared to less formal approaches. Surely, however, we should not take the success of natural science to preclude other forms of explanation?³
Crucially, the scientific concept of causation is inappropriate for history because we cannot reduce beliefs and desires to intervening variables. We can explain actions and practices properly only if we appeal to the 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 conscious or subconscious decisions, rather than the determined outcomes of laws or processes. After all, choices would not be choices if causal laws fixed their content. History thus instantiates a concept of rationality that precludes our explaining actions and practices in a way modelled on natural science. Historians must allow, instead, for the inherent contingency of the objects they study, including governance, nations, and their histories.

Of course modernist-empiricist do not always consciously adopt scientism. However, their attempts to craft formal explanations almost always depend tacitly on reified concepts of rationality, institutions, norms, and contexts. These problems reveal themselves in two ways. First, many modernist-empiricist are clearly committed to a reified ontology and to formal explanations. The second – and perhaps more insidious – problem is that many modernist-empiricist are vague – or just plain confused – about their commitments. For example, proponents of historical institutionalism sometimes treat ‘ideas’ as a variable alongside ‘interests’ in a way that clearly gestures towards formal explanations based on correlations between dependent and independent variables. Alternatively, they appeal to mechanisms, structures, and institutions not only to describe patterns of activity but also to suggest that the patterns explain the relevant activity. They
thereby imply that institutions or some other mechanism cause the actions of the relevant agents. These mechanisms are reifications in that they have core properties divorced from the specific influences of time and place. In this way, modernist-empiricists can suggest that concrete activity is determined by the relevant reified mechanism.4

It is worth emphasizing that the issue here is not whether patterns or institutions exist. There are patterns in contingent activity and there is nothing intrinsically wrong about labelling these patterns as ‘institutions’. That said, we would suggest it is better to use the label ‘practice’, if only to remind ourselves of the dangers of reification and determinism. The issue here is whether these patterns explain anything. Even when modernist-empiricists acknowledge the importance of ideas and agency, they are still tempted to ascribe explanatory power to institutions and processes. In so doing, they drift towards reification and determinism. Their explanations appeal to the alleged logic of institutions or mechanisms. The institution or mechanism may be located in history, so the explanation may be temporal in the sense of taking time to unfold, but it is not historical in the sense of appealing to a specific context to account for what happened next. To avoid reifications and determinism, social scientists have to adopt historicist explanations. Proper historical narratives explain social phenomena not by evoking reified institutions and mechanisms but by putting contingent patterns of action in their specific contexts. These narratives are not only temporal in that they move through time but they are also historical in that they locate the phenomena at a specific moment.

Our opposition to reification and determinism reflects our conscious commitment to historicism and humanism. So, we have crafted our aggregate concepts precisely to allow for historicism and humanism (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, chapter 1). Our concept of
'tradition’ captures the impact of historical inheritances on agents, and our concepts of ‘dilemma’ and ‘situated agency’ capture people’s ability to innovate for reasons of their own against the background of a tradition. As humanists and historicists, therefore, we emphasize that patterns of governance arises contingently as situated agents modify their beliefs by drawing on inherited traditions to respond to dilemmas. Their new beliefs lead them to modify their actions, and their new actions then coalesce in new practices and patterns of social coordination (Bevir and Rhodes 2010, chapter 5).

Radical Historicism vs. Developmental Historicism

In assessing developmental historicism, it is important to distinguish a general commitment to narrative as a form of explanation from a specific commitment to narratives that are based on national principles, characters, and traditions. Once we reject modernist-empiricism, we may conclude that a proper grasp of human actions requires something akin to narrative without also concluding that narratives should be framed by appeals to certain principles.

Today, we confront the philosophical collapse of the positivism that informs modernist-empiricist history, with its attempts to explain specific historical actions by reference to middle range or even universal generalizations. This collapse requires us to return to a historicism in which the specifics are explained by being placed in apt contexts composed of yet other actions and beliefs. However, although we return to narrative explanations, we do not return to the developmental historicism of the classic national histories because we do not centre our narratives on given principles, characters, or traditions.
Developmental historicists relied on given principles to guide their narratives. Typically they treated nations as organic peoples formed by common traditions associated with ethical, functional, and linguistic ties as well as a shared past. They implied that these traditions embodied principles that provided a basis for continuity as well as for gradual evolution in the history of a nation. Some of them postulated a racial or biological basis to national traditions. Others conceived of these traditions as products of geographical and other contexts that were supposed to have provided favourable settings in which particular character traits and social practices could emerge. The history of Britain was often told, 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. In turn, all of these characteristics were traced back to Teutonic roots among tribes and village communities in Northern Europe. In addition, developmental historicists often framed the unfolding national characters, traditions, and principles by using organic metaphors or evolutionary theories. At times, they even postulated a more general process of evolution, locating different nations or civilizations at various stages of this process. They implied that all civilizations followed a similar path of development, but different contextual factors resulted in varied characters and traditions and, as a result, some were further along the developmental 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 stressing that the collapse of positivism requires us to use a concept akin to that of tradition. We need the notion of tradition to capture the importance of contexts in explaining beliefs and actions. Because people 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 forms the necessary background to the beliefs people adopt and the actions they seek to perform. Nonetheless, traditions are only an influence on the beliefs that people adopt and the actions that they try to perform. Traditions do not determine or limit the beliefs people can hold. Rather, traditions must themselves be products of situated agency (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, 4-5 and 7-9). 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 the unfamiliar, we have to extend or modify our inheritance to encompass it, and, as we do so, we develop this inheritance. Every time we apply a tradition, we reflect on it, we try to understand it afresh in the current circumstances. 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, therefore, only a starting point, not something that determines or limits later performances. Historians should be wary of representing tradition as an inevitable presence in all the individual ever does in case they leave too slight a role for agency. In particular, historians 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 that tradition in a way that might make it anything but constitutive of their later beliefs and actions.
This analysis of tradition as a starting point but not a destination undercuts the essentialism of developmental historicism’s principles. Developmental historicists equate traditions with fixed cores to which they ascribe temporal variations and even a progressive unfolding. But once we accept that traditions do not have fixed cores, we undermine attempts to narrate national histories as 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 nations themselves can no longer appear as the outer expressions of given traits. On the contrary, the principles associated with any particular nation now appear as the contingent consequences of the various ways in which people have adopted, modified, and rejected their inheritances. Nations do not embody fixed principles that determine their nature, their governance, and the ways in which they develop. Nations are, instead, the constantly changing products of contingent activity.

Conclusions

We set out to show that each of the three visions of history vision relied on different assumptions about history and about social explanation. We have spelt out the differences between them and, most important, the issues at stake when choosing between them. We have defended radical historicism over both developmental historicism and modernist-empiricism. We applaud Macauley’s (1860) sentiments:
There is an old proverb, very homely in expression, but well deserving to be had in constant remembrance by all men, engaged either in action or in speculation - “One story is good till another is told!”

The other story we tell is radical humanism. We argue that we need to explore changes in traditions by examining how their adherents responded to specific dilemmas. We cannot simply postulate, like Greenleaf, static Libertarian and Collectivist traditions into which we slot representative political scientists and practitioners; or produce typologies of Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Napoleonic and Scandinavian states into which we slot individual countries. As Inglis (2000, 112) argues there has been a’ lethal attack’ on modernist-empiricism, from the likes of Clifford Geertz, Alasdair McIntyre and Charles Taylor, which means that using the methods of the natural sciences in the human sciences is ‘comically improper’. Instead, we need to ask how agents developed, modified, and even transformed their inherited beliefs and practices about the institutions and history of government. Context as history is not about collecting source material or testing formal theories but about writing thick descriptions that locate individuals in their webs of significance.
References


Bevir, M. (2000), ‘Historical explanation, folk psychology, and narrative’, *Philosophical Explorations* No. 2 (May), 152-68.


Bryce, J. (1909), ‘Presidential Address to the Fifth Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association’, *American Political Science Quarterly* 3 (1), 10-16.


    Volume 1. The Rise of Collectivism.
    Volume 2. The Ideological Heritage.

London: Methuen.


### Notes

1. On the triumph of a Whigish inductive approach over a Benthamite deductive one see, Collini et al, 1983.

2. W. Stubbs to E. Freeman, 13 April 1858, cited in Otter 2007, 43.

3. For a more detailed discussion of modernist-empiricism, especially historical institutionalism, see Bevir and Rhodes 2010, chapter 2. For a more detailed discussion of narrative forms of explanation see Bevir 1999: 252-62 and 298-306; 2000; and 2006.

4. See for example: Marsh and Hall’s (2007) analysis of the ‘dominant’ British political tradition and their explicit debt to Greenleaf (pp. 220-221).

5. For a discussion of our notion of tradition see Burns 2002; Frohnen 2001; Greener 2011; and Wagenaar 2012. For replies to these critics see Bevir 2001 and 2002; and Bevir and Rhodes 2012.