

# Fear of Plurality: Historical Culture and Historiographical Canonization in Western Europe

*Maria Grever*

## Introduction

One of the greatest challenges facing us today is to rethink the construction and transmission of historical knowledge in an increasingly globalizing world. Today's relationships to the past have become richer and more pluralistic, but also more labyrinthine and fragmented. The unprecedented plurality of perspectives and worldviews affects everybody. Hence, some opinion leaders in Western countries have been expressing generalized feelings of "moral panic" about the demise of the nation-state, proclaiming the need for more patriotic history. Others point to a crisis of Western imagination and the long-term effects of the postmodernist annihilation of objective truth, which pose profound challenges for any historian. How can we represent the common past of any community in a global age of fading national identities, mass migration and an Internet accessible to the general public? (Geyer and Bright, 1995; Mazlish 2005; Bentley 2005) How are we to value historiographical traditions and genres in this context? What are the consequences for assessing "canonical forerunners", periodizations, and the boundaries between the "trivial" and the "scholarly"? In recent decades, new historical fields, methods, and objects of research have renewed and enriched the history of historiography. Moreover, narrating history is no longer the privilege of professional historians. Beyond the academic arena, there has been a rapid growth of heritage institutions, museums, theme parks, historical films, digitalized archives, and websites, with people digging into the past, searching for their "roots" or experiencing "living history" (Lowenthal 1985 and 1997; Ribbens 2002). Every day, the Internet attracts thousands of visitors, representing various publics who can acquire knowledge of the past without the help of teachers or museum guides. This fascinating latter-day phenomenon, in particular, is weakening the once allegedly "universal" role of the historian as *the* authority on history.

Yet, although we realize, for instance, that the concept of the singular writer is male-biased, it remains a highly attractive notion in the light of recent historiographies of canonical historians. And despite the flourishing field of global history and the promise of the Internet, the traditional political history of the nation has become extremely popular again. In the face of an increasingly diverse population, Western countries are seeking to revitalize their national identities. Local and central governments are attempting to control the teaching of history, the culture of commemoration, and the contents of research agendas.<sup>1</sup> Political leaders are particularly interested in bolstering national pride (Grever 2008). For instance, the French president Nicolas Sarkozy has deliberately encouraged emotional solidarity with the nation. Immediately after his election in May, he decreed that a young hero of the Resistance, Guy Môquet, be commemorated in all French high schools on October 22, the anniversary of his death, by reading aloud his farewell letter. Môquet, a seventeen-year-old member of the Young Communists, was one of twenty-seven French hostages executed in 1941 in revenge for the assassination of a German officer by Resistance fighters. In the eyes of Sarkozy, Guy Môquet represents the *grandeur* of a man who sacrificed himself for a higher purpose, his heroic dedication setting a good example for today's French youth, who can be proud of him. Several teachers refused to read the letter, accusing Sarkozy of manipulating history for political ends and reducing the complex history of the Resistance to a caricature.

This year, the Dutch government decided to impose a national canon drafted at the behest of the Ministry of Education and to found a National Historical Museum where this canon will be on display. Although the canon committee – consisting of well known academic historians and literary scholars – maintained a distance from national pride and national identity, the public at large and the press eagerly interpreted their work in this way. The canon contains fifty “windows” on Dutch history and culture, offering guidelines for the primary and secondary schools.<sup>2</sup> The topics selected belong to

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1 For a recent example of the usage of historical scholarship for political ends in France, see Schor (2007). For more information, see also [www.concernedhistorians.org](http://www.concernedhistorians.org).

2 Entoen.nu – de canon van Nederland: rapport van de commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon (2006). The report can also be found online. The eye-catcher is a chart with 50 windows. Behind each window is a short story, illustrating the significance of the relevant component of the canon. Via *subtopics*, a canon window opens out, as it were, offering insight into the possibilities for expansion in the education sector. First, suggestions for related subjects are listed for the primary education sector. The preference of the committee in this respect lies with storyline topics. Following on from this, suggestions for

the history of politics, ideas, art and, in a few cases, technology and economics. Slavery, colonialism, and multiculturalism are fairly well represented, but mostly as political and emancipatory landmarks rather than as structural elements of Dutch history. (Grever 2007a; Mak 2007, 131) Long-term social, economic and cultural transformations are largely absent. Women hardly play a role. Only three out of fifteen personal entries concern women: Aletta Jacobs, the first Dutch female doctor, medical pioneer, pacifist, and a key European feminist; Annie M.G. Schmidt, writer of well-known children's books; and Anne Frank, the Jewish girl from Germany who kept a diary when she went into hiding with her family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

There is a strong, unmistakable tendency to re-ideologize national history, resulting in a codification of one-dimensional interpretations, a re-invention of commemorations and a restoration of mythical images, complete with old-fashioned male hero-worship. The staying power of national narratives is striking. It is also remarkable that many academic historians are inclined to support the imposition of a canon, convinced as they are that young people know far less about national history than they should. Against this background of renewed nationalism and the political instrumentalization of the past, we urgently need to reconsider the parameters of the history of historiography. This article is just a modest beginning. In the first section, I shall outline the canonical structures of the historical discipline and its impact on the history of historiography. Next, I will reflect on the issue of representability with regard to what Hannah Arendt has called the difficult problematic of plurality. Finally, I will argue why the concept of *historical culture* may be able to provide us with a deeper understanding of the canonization of historiographical studies, making multiple past relationships more visible.

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themes for secondary education can be selected to broaden or deepen the view from the window. The subtopic *Past and Present* contains suggestions for comparisons between past and present. The section References contains further information on the subject. The category *Places to Go* lists possible excursions. It is followed by references to relevant books for the young and background literature. Web links lead to informative websites.

## 1. The canonical structures of the historical discipline

The historians of political thought Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk (2001, 7) have pointed to a “vertical” dimension in their field, as opposed to the more “horizontal” preoccupations of cultural and intellectual history. The vertical dimension refers to the practice of disciplines whose subject matter consists of theoretically inclined modes of thinking, for its practitioners often answer questions set by their predecessors. The horizontal dimension points to the practice of addressing a contextualized or contextualizable set of intellectual problems. With regard to canonization, they consider the vertical dimension to be “the cardinal sin” of their discipline, albeit also part of its genetic code.

This distinction is highly relevant to the history of historiography, although I do not completely agree with their judgmental approach to the vertical dimension. Historians have all too often ignored predecessors in their fields in order to foreground their own novelty, a phenomenon that Donald Kelley (1991, 14) has called the chronic “amnesia” of historians. Furthermore, the continuation and transmission of ideas and practices over generations is one of the most rewarding experiences for scholars and writers. More importantly, without some pre-established frame of reference, it is almost impossible for any author to connect with the reader, and vice versa. Yet both historians’ critique points to a specific vertical dimension, a dimension conditioned by strong national preoccupations that partially determines *who*, in different contexts, the authors are who make it into the canon. The history of political thought, in particular, is very much associated with the transformation of political society in the modern world that coincided with the emergence of the Western nation-states. In fact, modern political society implied both the making of history and its narration. (Pocock 1998)

Hence, nineteenth-century historians by and large agreed on the history of the nation-state as their principal and proper subject. The emergence of a “new history” in the 1820s and 1830s, particularly in France, implied the history of political subjects and the history of the majority; in sum, the projection of a male and democratic model of citizenship to buttress the construction of the nation – “men like ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> For instance, Romantic historians such as Augustin Thierry, who also valued the history of customs, trades and traditions, focused on the struggles of conquered peoples. He credited the

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<sup>3</sup> Rigney (1990, 6) cites Jean Sarazin, *Du progrès des études historiques en France au dix-neuvième siècle* (Strasbourg 1835). See also Kelley (1987).

Gallo-Romans with upholding the ideal of liberty. In his view, these “forefathers” of France were later identified with the Third Estate (Breisach 1983, 240 and 243). I will return to this Romantic historiography in the next section.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the increasing emphasis on the political history of the nation – together with the standardization of national languages – resulted in a certain fragmentation of the erstwhile European canon. From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, men and women of letters commanded a “transnational” European body of historical knowledge with informal and open modes of acquiring and transferring knowledge (Rang 1998, 57; Davis 1980), based on the Greek and Roman classics, while intellectuals cultivated a culture of classical quotations. A fascinating transitional figure in this respect was Germaine de Staël (1766–1817). Although publishing on the history of political and civic life during the Revolutionary years, she positioned the history of a country “in a geographic and national extraterritoriality” with extensive descriptions of her travels (Smith 1998, 31–32). With the rise of the nation-states after the Napoleonic wars, the European continent disintegrated into national territories and peoples with distinct *national* bodies of historical scholarship (Grever 2007b), a process that Michael Geyer (2007, 257) has recently labeled the “pillarization” of Europe. Professional historians with university chairs produced narratives with different and often competing national plots, vaunting the superiority and longevity of their own country. Yet, in all these narratives, the national character functioned as a semi-psychological entity linked to political purposes (Renan 1882, 54).

Political history thus created a chain that fettered successive generations of canonical historians to heroic aspects of the national past. This vertical structure marginalized other voices, hampering the translation of enacted events into stories. Yet the *real* tragedy, to quote Arendt (1968, 6), occurred “when it turned out that there is no mind to inherit and to question, to think about and to remember.” The stunning point concerning gender, however, is that generations of women historians have published historical works. I remember the precise moment when I read Bonnie Smith’s article on women historians in *The American Historical Review* – the autumn of 1984. I was excited and astonished to read all those names of women historians and the many titles of their books, which were unfamiliar to me. When I studied the situation for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Netherlands, I discovered that many Dutch women had been involved in historical practice

as well, several of whom supported the national project with their writings in genres such as historical novels, biographies, drama, feminist historiography, and – after 1900 – historical dissertations (Grever 1994 and 1997).

In the 1980s and 1990s, many gender specialists examined the history of historiography. Since then, new or reprinted textbooks on mainstream historiography have devoted a few lines or paragraphs to gender. For instance, Michael Bentley's recently reprinted textbook *Modern Historiography* (1999, reprints 2000, 2002 and 2003) mentions two women historians and makes a few remarks on gender.<sup>4</sup> But gendering historiography cannot simply be a matter of a few amendments with some names and themes. In the chapter "Towards an Historical 'Profession'," for example, Bentley completely ignores a gender perspective. Apart from the fact that interesting women historians have been excluded, which is a democratic argument, we cannot fully understand the process of professionalization without gender, which is a methodological argument. The chapter contains not a single footnote referring to historiographical studies and articles that reveal how gender shaped the construction of the historical profession.

A few years ago, the editors of the thematic issue "History Women" of the journal *Storia della Storiografia* (2004, 8) resolutely asserted that "The study of European historiography as a product of historians functioning within a precisely defined professional as well as cultural and epistemological context has to be expanded in new and critical ways." They continued, noting critically, "Above all, it should be interrogated from the point of view of gender, an investigation which even the most outstanding seminal works have failed until very recently to do." Indeed, lists of canonical historians are still overwhelmingly present in the textbooks.

One of the reasons for the resilience of the historiographical canon is the recurrent representation of historians as forerunners and innovators, and the national framing of these pioneers. Up to a point, gender specialists have used the same kind of rhetoric: "the first woman historian so and so, entering the profession in this time and place". This approach is not only finalistic and anachronistic; it also easily results in an epic concentration on the same writers, while marginalizing alternative, subversive interpretations. Again and again, historians are depicted as isolated geniuses, doing the work of old men, of what has been called the "House of Lords" (Myers 1989). These narratives obscure other historians such as women, working in influential non-academic settings such as the household or the salon, and informal textual

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<sup>4</sup> A good example, however, is Howell and Prevenier (2001).

networks such as travel writing (Smith 1998, 83–102; Tollebeek 2004). According to Siep Stuurman (2000), we should study *modes of discourses*, which might allow us to discover a plurality of languages and perspectives. This horizontal approach might also enable us to study the making and gendering of historiographical canons. I shall now briefly reflect on one discursive issue that deeply influences canonization: representability.

## 2. Historical representability and the category of gender

The nineteenth-century rise of national historiography presented itself in the guise of an impartial, scientific history, founded on the critique of large quantities of sources. The composition as well as the professional code of the historical “guild”, however, demonstrated its gender-biased involvement in buttressing the nation. Nevertheless, in order to better understand canonical processes we need to take a closer look at the nature of this professionalized historiography.

Within the Rankean discourse, professional historians strove for a synthetic and what I have called “healing” historiography (Grever 2000a). In their writings, they came to terms with the traumatic shock of the French Revolution, the years of the Terror and the Napoleonic wars. They focused on presentable stories, “dramatic, narratable events” of appropriately dignified topics – matters of state and the lives of political leaders (Rigney 2001, 68 and 98). In these canonical narratives of political history, nations govern the plot, functioning as the principal actors. Nations rise, prosper, decline or survive, generating a finalistic emplotment of steady progression through time, represented by exemplary events, “great” protagonists and “classical” ideas (Ricoeur 1984, 197–198). In his historical novel *War and Peace*, (1865) Leo Tolstoy accused these dramatizing historians of showing only (re)presentable aspects of the past, not the contingent and chaotic reality, the disorientation and alienation, the horrors of war and battles. (Runia 1995) Indeed, this kind of historical representation relies on “the representability of events, and not on their reality as such” (Rigney 2001, 3–4).

In her intriguing book *Imperfect Histories*, Ann Rigney elaborates on the influence of that other discourse, which had stressed the alterity of the past and the historicity of experience: Romantic historicism. Others have labeled this discourse *histoire sauvage* (Tollebeek 1994, 33) because of the variety of

historical practices, the lack of institutional power, and the contributions of novelists, civil servants, priests, journalists, men and women. Romantic historicism emphasized plurality and historical imagination, the idea that there are more stories to be told about the past and the understanding of “a possible disjunction between relevance and representability.” Rigney (2001, 98) explains how during the post-Revolutionary period, the “silences of history” evoked historians’ awareness of their limited power to write about the lived experience of the past, an awareness that is still the source of an aesthetic sensation. It is rather curious that she analyzes neither the gender aspects of the representable past, nor how the curtailing of *histoire sauvage* by the emerging professional field affected women.

In her review article on Bonnie Smith’s *The Gender of History*, Rigney (2001b, 78) criticizes Smith for being too schematic, and putting a huge burden on the concept of gender “as an interpretive grid with which to chart a historiographical dark continent.” But isn’t Rigney herself rather rigid in going the other way, completely disregarding gender in her own book? Why not explore the silences in the history of historiography from a gender perspective as well? Perhaps Smith overemphasizes gender perspectives, and perhaps she sets up too sharp a dichotomy between the professional historian and the amateur. But in her captivating book she amply explains how the professional historian evolved in the private sphere of family, sex, and marriage, and how this gendered context provided the standards for what was important and unimportant, a perspective that has been elaborated by many other historians.<sup>5</sup> The historical profession became well defined by the routines of university life, disciplined research in archives, participation in professional associations, and functional importance to the nation-state. This practice was sustained by a genealogy of heroic historians – coupled with absent, inferior, unoriginal female partners – as the “founding fathers” of the field. Amateu-rism was simultaneously considered a useless derivate of scholarly history, practiced mainly by women.<sup>6</sup> Her view of women’s historical writing as the acting out of trauma is a challenging one, breaking taboos and silences about women’s at times extreme circumstances. I believe we should both continue and extend Smith’ trajectory with more research and theory about the representability of the past and its impact on historiographical canonization. This theme should be at the top of our research agenda.

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5 To name just a few of many publications, see Kish Sklar (1975), Davis (1980), Scott (1988), Goggin (1992), Baym (1995), Tollebeck (1993), and my own historiographical work.

6 See also my review of Smith’s *The Gender of History* (Grever 2000b).



But how are we to refashion a history of historiography that acknowledges trauma and the unrepresentable, making women more visible as subjects? Some experiences and phenomena are too complex to narrate (Goldenberg 1996), too disturbing to constitute a narrative identity.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Geertje Mak (2007, 130 and 135) argues that unequal gender relations and sexuality have played a pivotal but mostly invisible role in the formation of the very categories on which public (political) identities and conflicts have been based. Of course, canonical histories are the heroic stories of a presentable past, both producing and reproducing gender asymmetries. Apparently, the mainstream history of historiography often takes these gendered canonical histories for granted, ignoring less familiar, less prioritized, and more subversive texts. It would be worthwhile to study what strategies historians, both male and female, have devised to write about experiences that are poorly recorded or refer to hidden acts or barely noticeable processes, or about what discursive modes have been developed to deal somehow with an unbearable past. Smith (1998, 38–39) illuminates how the systematic subjection of women, including beatings, rape, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and incest, generated specific historiographical genres. Runia (1995, 261) demonstrates how the traumatic experiences of the many lying wounded on the battlefields and the literary codification of historiographical conventions *interacted* with and influenced each other.

I recommend three approaches to dealing with these complex issues. First, historians of historiography should investigate not merely the social but also the psychological circumstances of historical writing and its human embodied practices in order to be able to take full account of the contents and form of historiography. Second, we need a pluralistic approach in order to overcome the constant temptation to construct canons on the basis of the supposed influence of “forerunners”. Just like any other past, the history of historiography is – in the words of Hannah Arendt (1968, 243 and 257) – an open, contingent, and unpredictable process in which other transformations with other outcomes were possible. A plurality of perspectives (gender, genre, discipline, class, and ethnicity) broadens and deepens our understanding of canonization processes. It also makes us aware of the impossibility of writing a “complete” history from a single point of view. This applies to gender as well. We need to review the occasions and contexts in which this category does or does not work, and what other categories might be more relevant to historiographical canonization. Third, if we wish to sustain this pluralistic

<sup>7</sup> For Paul Ricoeur's concept of „narrative identity“, see Wood (1991), 32.

approach, we would do well to use the umbrella concept of *historical culture*, because it offers possibilities to overcome lists of established male “forerunners” and inferior female “amateurs”. Furthermore, this concept also encompasses non-textual practices. The purpose is neither to do away with all tradition nor to produce a counter-canon, but to design frameworks that appreciate multiple past relationships and historiographical diversity.

### 3. Historical culture

Initially inspired by research on history education and didactics, the concept of historical culture generally refers to people’s relationships to the past at a variety of levels and the manner in which these relationships are articulated and organized in schools, universities, museums, heritage institutions, media, schoolbooks, ideologies, traditions and attitudes (Rüsen 1994; Schöne-mann 2003 and 2006, Demantowsky 2005, Grever 2008). I think it is important to stress that *historical culture* refers on the one hand to a new field of research and on the other hand to a specific perspective.<sup>8</sup>

The field of research implies the study of narratives and infrastructures: the production and reproduction of historical knowledge and understanding as well as the social infrastructure of the field of history (such as museums, history curricula, national holidays and other memorial observances) – all of which provide the conditions that are necessary for people to deal with the past. “Dealing with the past” encompasses different shapes of historical consciousness as ways to articulate personal and collective identities, i.e. building, maintaining and dismantling social memory, traditions of commemorating and remembering, and acknowledging different types of historical interests (aesthetical, academic, political, commercial and popular). Studying historical culture embraces sub-disciplines such as the history of historiography, the study of historical consciousness, history teaching and heritage education, and the role of the media. In this way the concept reveals the interaction between material and immaterial culture, and the connections between high and popular historical culture.

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<sup>8</sup> See also Maria Grever, ‘Historical culture in a globalising world. Research program Center for Historical Culture’, Erasmus University Rotterdam [www.fhk.eur.nl/english/chc-research](http://www.fhk.eur.nl/english/chc-research) (March 7, 2007).

The perspective can be summarized as meta-history: the study of the cultural and historical praxis as a whole. It provides us with a holistic view on the pursuit of history, clarifying the interactions between different actors in the field, and the possible differences between national contexts of historical cultures. In this way, the umbrella concept of historical culture also covers the “horizontal” dimension of historiographical canons: the modes of discourse and socio-ideological contexts.

What does this historical culture perspective mean for the history of historiography? To fully understand the making of historiographical canons it would be very interesting, for instance, to link the emerging discipline of history in the nineteenth century to the various, sometimes contested, imaginations of the past articulated by many individuals and groups. For most people, the national framework gradually became dominant, marginalizing other local or transnational loyalties. Nevertheless, a number of groups, such as religious minorities, conservatives, local movements, socialists, and feminists, continued to maintain a multiform relationship to the past combining national with transnational alliances. Although Geyer (2007, 264) argues that the socialist and feminist movements of the late nineteenth century “remained first and foremost internationalist in that they retained organizational autonomy along national lines,” the fact remains that these movements crossed national borders and generated specific international traditions and cultural codes.

The interaction between material and immaterial (historical) cultures in the nineteenth century process of creating distinct national identities became evident in the erection of statues of classical heroes, the founding of open air museums, the setting up of festivals of national costumes, the preservation of villages attractive to tourists, and the celebration of origin myths. Myths and heroes played a significant role in defining the national community and solidifying the legitimacy of its political leaders, as well as in the canonization of specific past relationships. Famous examples in Western Europe include Hermann the Cheruscan for the Germans, Vercingetorix for the French and Julius Civilis for the Dutch. While idealized concepts of folk culture played a crucial role in the promotion of national character, “museumization” was an important tool used to educate people for the nation-state and its colonies. This last process implied the removal of objects from their original local or regional contexts in order to preserve them for future generations in and outside museums, a de-localization of objects that served the construction of new national settings. An interesting example was the 1898 Dutch Exhibition

of National Costumes, held on the occasion of the coronation of Queen Wilhelmina. According to Ad de Jong (2001, 619), the costumes on display were no longer simply “national” in the sense of indigenous, but also symbolized national unity.

All of this had an enormous impact on the public. Politicians, local elites, writers, artists, historians, men and women were involved in the monumentalization of the nation, giving it its historical justification. They frequently projected the national character onto these exemplars of national virtue, raising money to erect statues and organize national festivities (Tacke 1995, 31). The growing engagement of various groups and individuals resulted in the formation of national mnemonic communities that synchronized the commemoration of specific events guided by a national calendar (Zerubavel 2003, 4–5). And yet, the articulation of nationally oriented collective memories often sparked vigorous public clashes over the “ownership” of history (Davis 1999) as well. These quarrels not only reveal the conflicting claims of gender, class, ethnic or religious groups and the possible submission of alternative modes of discourse, they also demonstrate both the polyphonic character of the past and its unrepresentable aspects.

Museumization, monumentalization, and ritualization supported and justified the construction of the nation-state. It is worth examining the historic relationship between these popular articulations and the formation of the academic historical profession. Indeed, the nation-state buttressed the professionalization of the historical discipline, but – no less importantly – it also established the tradition governing the transmission of specific historical knowledge: topics, heroes, chronologies and periodizations. Just as they are today, professional historians were very interested in controlling the transmission of historical knowledge, in creating what they viewed as a meaningful *popular* historical culture. They participated in all kinds of committees, advising on monuments, commemorations, and implementing history curricula in the schools. In this way they drew the boundaries between what they conceived of as popular and “scholarly” history. They helped to prepare the public to consume specific canonized versions of the national past, while at the same time creating a market for their own books.

One of the reasons for the resilience of historiographical canons is the history of the little-noted close relationship between popular culture and the historical profession. Another is the constant tension between the public’s need for an optimistic or at least meaningful, history with which they could identify and a complex and contingent history based on professional research

and standards. For instance, from Dutch research we know that Jewish women were sometimes sexually assaulted while hiding in the houses of Dutch families during the German occupation (Withuis 1995, 43–46). Other historians have discovered that some 500 Dutch soldiers who were involved in the colonial wars in Indonesia had also participated in the *Waffen SS* a few years before (Van Esterik 1984; Verrips 1998). How many Dutch people are truly familiar with these facts, however? The appeal of heroic and simplistic national histories is immense, and this certainly remains true today. Jeremy Black (2005, 1) is right to warn us about the discrepancy between “the questioning ethos and methods that are central to the modern notion of scholarship,” and history as it is appropriated and used by the state, the media, and the national collective memory, “in which the emphasis is rather on answers, with public myths providing ways to make sense of the past.”

## Conclusion

The current “memory battles” in Europe point to a different socio-mental topography of the past. The coordinates of collective memory are changing. Particularly in Western European countries, the idea of the nation is disintegrating; Europe as a whole has become a continent of immigration, but its public image and historical identity seem “whiter” than ever as its colonial past is cast into oblivion. With regard to gender, most young people perceive feminism as an outmoded movement, at best something from a remote past. Western governments increasingly consider women’s emancipation to be one of the major accomplishments of their national history, emphasizing the supposedly archaic character of Islamic communities for not acknowledging equal rights for women. Geertje Mak (2007, 129–130) explains that the status of women traditionally provides a yardstick in public debates to measure the advancement of Western civilization, which is often considered the final capstone of Enlightenment progress.

Many countries fear increasing diversity. Despite the fact that essentialist theories have not proven successful, there is a growing resistance to pluralism in public debates and even within the historical discipline. But today’s globalizing society is pushing historical culture in that direction, although some scholars have their doubts. According to Stephan Berger (2007, 65–66), national historical writing will continue to be an important mode of history for

a considerable time to come. This view affirms the perceptions of the sociologist Frank Lechner (2007), who asserts that scenarios positing the erosion of the nation-state have been rather overstated. Focusing on the Dutch case, he shows how the redefinition of national identity takes the form of reflexive discourse, varies across sectors and over time, and intertwines with local and global pressures. He concludes that nations have a future in globalization. From this point of view, the crucial question for Berger (2007, 65) is how to deal with current national narratives, as they have proven extremely explosive, reactionary and dangerous in their consequences since the nineteenth century. These narratives have all too often mobilized the masses for war and genocide by presenting tendentious or distorted understandings of the past. Berger therefore recommends a fundamental reflection on how national narratives have worked in the past by comparing national narratives across Europe and beyond. In this way, he hopes that national narratives will be de-essentialized. In his view, historians should also strive to replace a single, homogenous national history with many different national narratives, thus pluralizing narratives within the nation-state.

Although I appreciate Berger's standpoint, his analysis seems overly centered on the nation-state, suggesting that a global history perspective excludes national history. The point is not that nations and national histories will remain significant, but how they will be re-imagined, re-theorized and re-written in a global context. National histories must be reconfigured as interacting and overlapping networks that are an integral part of the evolving global network. A new world history calls for new national histories. When that happens we will almost automatically get a plurality of national histories and a (greater) plurality of significant themes, actors, and voices within those national histories. Inspired by William McNeill (1986), Jerry Bentley (2005, 77) bases his version of ecumenical world history on what Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1988) have called "large-scale empirical narratives – as opposed to totalizing, a-historical meta-narratives deriving from specific ideologies – that build a framework useful both for understanding the development of larger global orders and for contextualizing the experiences of particular lands, peoples, and societies." This kind of world history not only takes the world seriously, but also historicizes nation-states and supra-national or local communities, treats its various peoples with respect, and sheds light on its dynamics.

The task for historians now is to live up to their scholarly responsibilities without underestimating people's fears, to make sense of the past by assessing

its positive and darker episodes and by acknowledging local, national, and global developments and encounters as well as the simultaneity of several modes of discourse. Hence, we need to reevaluate both the plurality of perspectives that opens historiography in light of the newly evident complexity of the human relationship with history (Roberts 2005, 51) and the meaning of responsible public uses of the past. Finally, examining modes of discourse would be an excellent starting-point for making women more visible as subjects. The aim, however, is not encyclopedic or complete coverage, i.e., adding female “forerunners” to the grand Book of Historiography. We also need to reflect more carefully on the occasions and contexts in which the category of gender does or does not work, and on what other categories are also relevant for the history of historiography. Otherwise, gendering historiography will turn out to be a spasmodic and unconvincing quest, perpetuating canonization processes and obscuring gender relations in history.

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