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Itineraries of British History as Centre and Periphery

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If European history is a problematic term,[1] then British history is even more so. For much of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, British history was perceived as national history of global importance, even before historians began emphasising the interaction between the local and the global. Moreover, British history has also been differentiated from continental Europe, often presented as representing values opposing those of Europe.[2]

However, since the imperial turn in the last quarter of the twentieth century, along with many other historiographical shifts, British history, and often Britain itself, is no longer seen as the "historical persona" that shaped the world order but, increasingly, as a persona shaped by the empire.[3] Moreover, when the United Kingdom, often referred to as Britain, is understood as a complex of islands on the perimeter of Europe comprising four "nations", the idea of a centre, in this case England, and a periphery, ordered according to its cultural and political proximity to this centre, adds many more layers to the complexity of the concepts of nation, empire, centre and periphery. Furthermore, one might ask whether Britain, let alone England, is it at the centre or on the periphery of Europe? Moreover, if British history is considered not in terms of space but through the interrelations of cultural, institutional and economic bonds, of networks and connections, it becomes clear that local and global scales of historical interpretation interact in shaping ideas of England, Britain, Europe, the empire and the world.

This article argues that historiographical trends in twentieth-century historiography have placed, and often misplaced, Britain at the centre or on the periphery, depending on the historical circumstances of the historians themselves, who have projected current concerns and cultural aspirations onto the past. It will thus demonstrate the role of historiography in shaping perceptions of Britain's place in the world, and indeed the interplay between centre and periphery in emphasising Britain's ability and power to continue shaping the world. Above all, it aims to show the ways in which Britain constructs and is constructed by the world, focusing on several exemplary publications that have become central to British historiography. It underscores that British historians, more so than their European counterparts, begin their analyses by positioning Britain at an imaginary

centre from which the nation can control or inspire the world. The centrality of Britain's place in the world remains at the core of their preoccupations, even for those historians who challenge the view that Britain's global importance is enduring and still relevant. Yet, despite the fact that some historians imply that Britain's history should be the centre of the world, others just as dynamically focus on the formation of Britain by the world.

The Whiggish tradition and England

In Whiggish histories of England, "England" was often used interchangeably with larger entities, such as Great Britain, the United Kingdom or even the empire.[4] This was the case of the emblematic work, at least in terms of its popularity, of G.M. Trevelyan, for whom England was a model state because its institutions and traditions were unprecedented on the world level. Trevelyan, like many other Whiggish historians before him, such as Freeman, Froude and Stubbs,[5] endorsed English exceptionalism, crediting it for the fact that the British became a united nation with an ingenious language (English) and parliamentary government, and that they were the first to revolt against absolutism (the Glorious Revolution). In that sense, England was a beacon of morality and achievement for the rest of the world because England "evolved in the course of centuries a system which reconciled three things that other nations have often found incompatible – executive efficiency, popular control, and personal freedom".[6] Moreover, while imperial history in the Whiggish universe was distinct from imperial history, this history too was permeated by the triumphant spirit of English/British achievement for the rest of the world. Moving beyond the idea of the "civilising mission" that characterised imperial histories during the nineteenth century, early twentieth-century British imperial historiography implied that Britain "had the moral capacity to shape a better world and help dependent peoples advance towards self-government".[7]

The beginning of the twentieth century also witnessed historians who framed British history from a different angle, albeit working at the margins of the historical profession and writing history as activist journalists. The Hammonds, for example, offered an unromanticised image of the Industrial Revolution, sparking a long-lasting debate – that ran until the 1970s – about the rise or fall of living conditions.[8] Moreover, they set the agenda for the study of social history, placing the Industrial Revolution at the centre of the formation of modern societies.

During the interwar period, many contradictions shaped the historian's sphere, both historically and historiographically. On the one hand, the expansion of the British Empire coexisted with growing national independence movements around the empire. At the same time, the dominant traditional historiography existed alongside influential historians and other intellectuals of the left, who, by the eve of the Second World War, were producing

works that increasingly challenged this image.[9] After the war, British Marxist historians launched the pioneering journal *Past and Present*.[10] In their many works, they emphasised the interconnectedness of Britain, the empire and Europe.[11] As Geoff Eley notes, *Past and Present* was committed to internationalism and set the agenda for comparative studies of societies through European-wide and interdisciplinary collaborations with sociologists and anthropologists.[12] However, despite the fact that by the 1960s and 1970s British Marxist historians had become "brand names" for British historians at home and, especially, abroad, Whiggish history continued to dominate university and school curricula for many years.[13]

Becoming a nation and voices from afar

Postwar British history underwent cataclysmic changes that transformed essentialised self-perceptions of the nation. After a brief period of postwar triumph, lasting from the end of the war until the early 1950s, Britain was confronted by the loss of empire and its diminished influence in Europe and the United States, becoming increasingly immersed "in a culture of national self-supply".[14] From 1945 until the 1970s, the Britain, with the loss of empire underway and overshadowed by the rising dominance of the United States, increasingly began to resemble other European nations. As David Edgerton argues, this "generated national rather than imperial histories, a nationalist critique of cosmopolitan capitalism and a powerfully nationalist declinism".[15] Edgerton suggests that a new national UK emerged from the empire and the global liberal economy. Few historians articulated this idea of the self-reliant British nation better than A.J.P. Taylor – a historian of mainly European history and one of the first public historians with his own television programme – who contributed a volume of the *Oxford History of England* series in 1965.[16] Taylor rather provocatively claimed that the term "British" had no historical meaning, excluding from his Anglocentric world the other nations of the island while questioning the role of the empire and Commonwealth in the nation's conscience. On the contrary, Taylor, as a historian of Europe, called for the study of European history and of the relations of England (here understood as Britain) with it.

The most acute response to Taylor came ten years later, in 1975, in J.G.A. Pocock's influential article "British History: A Plea for a New Subject".[17] It argued for a new understanding of British history as the product of the broader "Atlantic archipelago", emphasising the pluralistic history of a group of civilisations on the Anglo-Celtic border, marked by English political and cultural hegemony. Although English dominance set the rules, it could not eliminate the plurality and diversity of these cultures. Pocock sought to renew the term "British history" to include, alongside England, not only the other three nations of Scotland, Wales and Ireland but also to expand and encompass the history of civilisations shaped by British presence and influence across the world. This history should be a history of interrelations and networks, not a history of hegemony over subalterns nor a

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history of an imposed civilising mission.[18] Pocock stressed the importance of the historian's tangential gaze, which could eliminate the tension emanating from ethnocentrism and nationalism. He called on historians of Britain from the other three nations, as well as from the Commonwealth and other parts of the former empire, to adopt this tangential view towards British history in order to reach a more inclusive perspective on the varieties of cultures within the historical British universe. A historian of Britain "would virtually need a tangential sense of identity to adopt, since both ethnocentrism and nationalism entail a high degree of commitment to a single and unitary point of view."[19]

Some historians[20] have observed that Pocock was writing from New Zealand at a time when many peoples of the Commonwealth felt betrayed by the mother country, which had joined the European Economic Community two years earlier and had overwhelmingly voted, in a referendum in the same year Pocock's article was published, to remain in the EEC. Britain's official economic policy prompted the demise of the imperial trade preference system that discriminated in favour of British producers – even if the British in question lived on the other side of the planet.[21] In many ways, citizens of Australia, New Zealand and Canada felt that they were the true Britons, upholding Anglo-Saxon virtues under arduous conditions. At the same time, however, these developments also encouraged another restatement[22] of their own sense of national consciousness as well as the study of their own history as independent from Britain, in which they would honour their hybrid identities. Pocock placed the white colonial periphery at the centre of Britishness just as it was disappearing from the metropolitan consciousness.

Social histories: Britain, a centre and generator of history?

From the 1960s to the 1990s, social history proliferated in Britain and in Europe. Social history adopted a confident, almost belligerent, attitude towards all other fields of historical analysis, seeking to "transform historical practice by generating a new, more holistic understanding of past societies – a 'total' history".[23] This development was partly driven by the popularity of, and was enriched by, the work of the Annales school in France and British Marxist historians, who by that time, in many of their works, promoted a global interdisciplinary approach to social history that emphasised material life, class and society.[24] It was also based on the various interpretations of the concept of the *social*, which in many cases included historians' efforts to uncover the lived experience of the household and the home as well as patterns of consumption in work and leisure.[25] Where did social historians of this period place Britain in the world?

Eric Hobsbawm's work on British social history stands out among Marxist historians. This is evident not only in his famous nineteenth-century trilogy,[26] where Britain interacts with Europe and the world as primus inter pares, but also in *Industry and Empire*, his widely

used university textbook on Britain.[27] In this book, Hobsbawm emphasises the universal dimension of British history, based on the appeal of the Industrial Revolution. Already in the introduction, he famously declared that "an entire world economy was … built on, or rather around, Britain, and this country therefore temporarily rose to a position of global influence and power unparalleled by any state of its relative size before or since, and unlikely to be paralleled by any state in the foreseeable future".[28] He further argues that, between 1870 and 1815, "British industry expanded into an international vacuum", while also acknowledging that parts of the "underdeveloped overseas world" had been cleared by the activities of British navy.[29] Elsewhere, he notes that "British policy destroyed the local textile industry in India as a competitor with Lancashire".[30] Despite acknowledging the destructive means through which Britain became a world centre, and, moreover, the appalling social consequences of the Industrial Revolution at home and abroad, he places Britain at the centre of the world for much of the nineteenth century. He also emphasises that Britain's industrial economy grew out of the country's commerce with the underdeveloped world, thus wealth came from the periphery. This interpretation has since been challenged by influential historians, who, in a national and peripheral framework, emphasise the unique historical circumstances, such as agricultural production, population growth as well as technological progress, that produced the "wonder" of the Industrial Revolution. [31] Hobsbawm maintains a central role for the British Industrial Revolution by underlining its uniqueness and its power to shape the world,[32] in a tone that some might interpret as patriotic or even nationalistic. Yet, he was among of the first to place the Industrial Revolution in a global framework, albeit in a way distinct from contemporary global histories concerned with the interconnectedness of microhistory, material culture and cultural history in relation to economic history.[33]

Decline?

The debate over British decline permeated many postwar histories written during the final decades of the twentieth century. By and large, these works implied that Britain's position should be measured against its strongest imperial moment. The revival[34] of the decline debate made a particularly strong impression in the early 1980s, during the dominance of Thatcherite policies, which sought to frame the present as a moment of crisis requiring a decisive remedy – a crisis, it was argued, caused by the welfare state and the loosening of traditional social norms.[35] Within this context on the alleged need for Britain's economic position in the world to be restored, Correlli Barnett, in his famous *The Audit of War*,[36] argued for extensive technological education and industrial reconstruction, blaming a negligent elite for having undermined the country's strength. A few years earlier, Martin Wiener, in his very influential *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*,[37] had also charged Britain's elites with responsibility for national decline, contending that their humanistic education fostered a disdain for industry and thus contributed to

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deindustrialisation. However, these interpretations were fiercely challenged by many historians, who provided evidence that both deconstructed the idea of Britain as a nation in postwar decline and contradicted the arguments that charged Britian's elite for shortcomings in technological education and tolerating the expanded welfare state. Edgerton has consistently sought to dismantle this deeply entrenched tradition of declinism, providing an alternative account of Britain's science, technology, industry and militarism, seeking to place British history on a sounder footing than the narratives at the base of declinist and welfarist histories.[38] Peter Mandler also challenged the notion of a backwards-looking rural elite, as proposed by Wiener, by highlighting that rural societies, and Britain's rural elite, can be modern and outward-looking.[39] William Rubinstein demonstrated that British elites trained in a humanistic education were actively engaged in the stock exchange and commerce and were not inherently hostile to industrial activities.[40] Over the next two decades or so, the debate over British decline continued to engage many historians both from the left[41] and the right. They not only argued for and against the idea but also engaged in many other questions concerning the nature of the state and Britain's place in the world. The debate permeated many aspects of historians' work, such as the legitimation of the state through economic policies, the nature of the elites and their responsibility for the nation's place in the world, the coexistence of a warfare and a welfare state as well as the cultural aspect of commerce and consumption.[42] By the beginning of the twenty-first century, it was broadly accepted that, despite a relative decline, Britain remained, for much of the twentieth century, an unusually internationalised and globalised economy and society as well as a robust military state.[43] Nevertheless, an entire generation of historians continued to argue that Britain's historical role in the world – whether expressed through its industrial classes, intellectuals, or elites – had fostered an enduring imaginary of a leading position from which Britain had supposedly fallen. This imaginary often obscured a clear understanding of Britain's actual present place in the world.

It is typical of some general histories of modern Britain that became standard textbooks during the 1990s to echo the decline debate while placing social and economic historical issues at the centre of their analysis. A characteristic example is Martin Pugh's *State and Society*, which opens with a part titled "The Loss of Confidence, 1870–1902" and closes with one called "The Era of Reaction and Decline, 1970–1997".[44] The book presents Britain as a nation whose imperial reach has receded, leaving it in a reluctant relationship with Europe. The idea of globality is a ghostly remnant attached to a national history. Its main argument addresses the reasons why Britain ceased to be a global dominant power, treating it as an autonomous European nation with global connections. Britain, as a historical actor, both imposed rules on the empire and was in turn shaped by it. Pugh critically explores whether this was useful for Britian. In a way, the book addressed Britain as a postcolonial member state of the European Community, whose imperial past was

deemed responsible not only for humanitarian abuses but also for economic losses. In the closing chapter of the 2005 edition, reflecting on the loss of Hong Kong in 1997, Pugh concludes that Britain's future necessarily lies in turning towards Europe, while in the most recent 2022 edition a whole chapter analyses the effect of Brexit. The decline issue remains, though.[45]

Significant others and Britain: The case of Europe

The 1980s witnessed a renewal of historiographical approaches and methods that dynamically transformed global historiography. Cultural history and the linguistic turn changed the nature of the historical agenda worldwide, moving it beyond institutions and economic units, and away from viewing social strata as uniform blocks, towards a consideration of the identities and peculiarities of people in history. For Britain, a number of groundbreaking publications during the 1980s became pivotal in addressing the importance of language in shaping historical events as well as the multiple levels defining social identities of groups and individuals. [46] At a moment of rapid globalisation and interdependence, older alliances that had traditionally bound societies, such as nation, empire or confederation, came under renewed scrutiny, revealing the pivotal role of historical agents who had been silenced. Moreover, this prompted a broader re-examination of the idea of the nation in most European countries: the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the war in Yugoslavia, the regionalist demands for independence, including in Britain, all brought the idea of the "nation" back to the centre of historical debate.

For British historiography, one pioneering work that reworked older ideas about the nation was Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*,[47] which expounds on how a sense of Britishness was shaped to unite the peoples of Britain against various external enemies. Colley, a historian of Welsh origin, writes with a semitangential gaze on Britain, having worked at Yale and Princeton. She belongs to the generation of historians trained at Oxford and Cambridge who entered British academia after the 1980s, when Thatcher cut funds to British universities. As a member of the academic elite, Colley approached the formation of Britishness not in the same manner as Pocock, who looked at who should be considered "British", but by questioning whether Britishness itself was an identity forged largely through contrast with continental Europe. *Britons* was published in 1992, the year of the Maastricht Treaty, which once again sparked heated debates over Britain's relationship with the European Union. Colley argued that since eighteenth century, particularly after a series of wars with France, the inhabitants of different areas and nations in Britain and Ireland acquired a form of national consciousness. They identified as Protestants resisting the Catholicism of continental Europe, as Britons competing with their commercial rivals (especially, the French), and as Europeans who were civilising agents in the conquered colonies. In that sense, they acquired a consciousness of rivalry against the other beyond Britain's shores, particularly with those right across from those shores.[48] The

fear of invasion from Europe remained vivid until the Second World War, whether from France or the Nazis. Furthermore, as Colley notes, "every major war in which Britain participated after 1700, with the exceptions of the American War, the Crimean War, and the Second World War, led to a consolidation and more commonly a marked increase of its overseas empire" and thus proves that Britain was not in danger of invasion.[49] The empire itself became yet another factor reinforcing Britishness. Many of those who immigrated, lived and thrived in the imperial lands from different parts of Britain – especially Scotland and Ireland – saw their British identity as linked to a civilising mission of a superior nation directed at conquered subaltern populations.[50] Thus, Europe and, to a lesser extent, the empire became the greatest other against which British identity was forged, according to Colley.[51]

Writing in 1992 from the United States – and acknowledging, as Pocock put it, that "Britain could neither control nor avoid Europe",[52] Colley argued that Britain had become part of Europe and could no longer treat it as the other. Despite political and public resistance to deeper integration, EU membership marked an uneasy reconciliation with Britain's longstanding ambivalence towards the continent. Colley also interpreted the resurgence of the smaller patriotisms of the Scots, Welsh and English themselves in the 1990s, in place of a British identity, as a response to the absence of a clear other, a role once played by Europe. Her book has proved very influential not only for its interpretation of Britishness but also for its critique of English exceptionalism. Colley suggests that the English, at least until the Second World War, "did not need nationalism" as they were confident in their assumed superiority and thus they did not deal with the perceptions of others of them. Moreover, the fact that the history of Britain, traditionally referred to the creation of the English state, was placed in a broadened European context, where Britain was yet another national case and not a world power, deprives Britian of its assumed prestigious position in the world.[53] Yet, Colley places Britain in Europe at a moment of strength for the European Union, arguing that Britain is once more associated with strong allies.

The advance of the global

The turn of the twenty-first century and the historiographical turns that have flourished since have reshaped the landscape of British history. Some historians began to study the empire as an integral part of British history, while others engaged a vigorous debate that questioned the influence of the empire at home.[54] Meanwhile, Britain's relationship with Europe has remained a persistent concern for historians, particularly as questions about the United Kingdom's coherence intensified in an age of globalisation, which made historians reassess Britain's priorities. Jan Rüger argues that historians of Britain have rarely

integrated British history within a European perspective, as they traditionally believed that the empire and Europe constitute opposing historical dynamics.[55] Only exceptionally, Rüger claims, have historians attempted to write "European history into the imperial British past, or indeed towards writing the British empire into European history", while it remains the case that mostly "empire" and "continent" stand as two divergent historical paths between which Britain had to choose.[56] In this context, historians often support opposite standpoints, with some asserting that the history of Britain is primarily a continental story and others that it was the empire, and not Europe, that had priority for Britain.[57] Yet Rüger, echoing Hobsbawm, contends that, despite what many historians claim, the British Empire's political, economic and strategic priorities were deeply intertwined with Europe. He avoids the cliché that Britain "was vaccinated from the contagious problems of Europe", as Peter Frankopan claimed,[58] rejecting the narrative of some that it performed a Sonderweg. Given that both "Europe" and the "British Empire" are ill-defined political constructs, this exceptionalism is difficult to sustain in light of Britain's frequent entanglements in European conflicts. Thus, despite the advice of early nineteenth-century historians to British politicians to concentrate on their insular empire within Europe – in the Mediterranean and North Sea – Britain allied with continental powers during the Napoleonic Wars. As many scholars have shown, Britain's trade was rarely exclusive with Europe or with the colonies and the rest of the world. Trade involved European and overseas locations, as very often produce from distant colonies, such as India, East Asia, the Caribbean and the Americas, were sold in the so-called "European possessions", an insular empire consisting of Corsica, Malta, Sicily, Heligoland and Gibraltar, the Ionian islands and Cyprus in the early and later 1800s.[59] Rüger also notes that throughout the nineteenth century, Europe was the most important market for the sale of colonial exports and British products made from colonial raw materials. This porous relation between empire, Europe and Britain was severed in the twentieth century following the abandonment of free trade after the First World War and even more so after the Second World War, with decolonisation and EEC membership, as Britain seemed to opt for Europe. Yet, as many historians have demonstrated, there was never a clear-cut European economic sphere from which Britain was excluded.[60] And if this holds true for products, it holds true for the flow of people, too. Migration flowed both from Britain to the empire and Europe, and from Europe into the British Empire. European experts and administrators often acted as agents of British colonialism. Even Churchill, who in a famous speech in 1948 first spoke of three circles, comprising the British Empire and Commonwealth, the British dominions and the United States, and a united Europe, did not see Britain's European and imperial roles as distinct.[61] European, imperial and global dynamics have always been deeply interconnected in Britain's past.

Over the past 40 years, historians of Britain, particularly those working beyond its shores, have increasingly sought to move beyond the nation as the primary analytical framework. Instead, they have highlighted Britain's historical interconnections with the wider Anglosphere, as envisioned by Pocock, and with the rest of the world.[62] New imperial

histories from afar have presented British history itself as an imperial formation, challenging Britain's collective amnesia about the empire and confronting the continuing hold of racialised forms of politics in a multiethnic and multifaith postimperial nation.[63] According to James Vernon, these scholars of the British world broadened the focus to include migration, colonial settlement, trade patterns, politics, new political institutions and military endeavours, showing that they helped shape Britain rather than the other way around. Furthermore, biographical accounts of the everyday lives of migrants and their transcolonial careers have often substituted systemic analyses of how the British world was made.

Yet recent historiography had also sought to move beyond empire, not by returning to the nation but by embracing the "world". This world-oriented approach challenges both empire and nation. During pivotal moments such as the Second World War, it was Britian's economic relations with the extraimperial world, not its empire, including protectorates, mandated territories and territories under condominium, that proved most vital.[64] In this sense, global interconnections, rather than imperial or national ones alone, shaped Britain's trajectory. There were further reasons to escape the nation, especially considering developments in the economy from the late 1980s onwards. As Edgerton has pointed out, during the last quarter or so of the twentieth century, the British economy underwent another major transformation on a scale that made it pointless to speak about a national economy. This turn, or rather return to the "global", took place under different terms than what had happened in the beginning of the century. The influx of "foreign" capital into what was considered national, rather than the expansion of national capital into foreign markets, as had been the case, had different consequences for the economy. The United Kingdom no longer had a distinct national capitalism, but instead it has been transformed into a huge financial centre, mainly for the capital of others.[65] Thus, Britain's globalised dimension became increasingly evident, with the nation now requiring a new "periodisation" and indeed a new "historisation".

"Britain and the World" and the persistence of the nation

By the early 2010s, a new subject concerning British history, "Britain and the world", had begun to gain traction in many universities around the world. A product of university cuts in humanities and the demand for broader subjects in university history curricula, the new subject gained currency, especially after the launching of the eponymous journal *Britain and the World* in 2008.[66] Yet, as with many other "new" fields of inquiry, this subject was not all that novel, at least in the sense that comparative, transnational and global history had been in full sway for many decades in British and European historiography, before the proliferation of such programmes especially in the United States, Australia and eventually Britain. Vernon identifies three main approaches that the "and the world" framing offers, all

of which relocate Britain from the centre to the periphery and back again. The first is an "an imperial history of the British world", dealing with the British Empire and its influence on the informal empire, which seeks to maintain the distinction between imperial and national history. In it, imperial history returns to the space of the white Anglosphere, where the racialised violence towards indigenous people is omitted, in opposition to the new imperial history which "sought to keep the mutually constructive relationship between metropole and colony in view through cultural histories of difference".[67] The second approach explores the dense global networks of association and affiliation that allowed Britons to imagine and engage with the world, at times concentrating on how individuals experienced and helped shape global historical processes and, at others, focusing on structures over agency.[68] This category should include the growing number of histories which look on the British Empire as "the principal global conveyor-belt both for transnational social movements, such as missionary societies and social reform movements, and for inscribing the idea of civil society into colonial relations".[69]

The third approach, which seems to preoccupy many historians today, explores how Britain was transformed from the outside in by processes and structures that were already transnational or global in scale.[70] This approach, Vernon argues, gives equal measure to both parts of the equation, "Britain" and "the world".

Yet the nation has not been eclipsed despite all these shifts. The global consciousness of citizens – and, of course, of historians – has not erased national narratives. Public history, as it appears in the media through journalists, politicians, educators and others, especially in debates about how history should be taught at schools, reflects a persistent desire to return to the national, which is often considered as an inherent feature of the historical discipline itself. History wars worldwide, and in Britain and the English-speaking world, remain as intense as ever, revealing the insecurity of a globalised world that seeks to return to the "national" and to re-establish confidence in national boundaries and co-existence.[71] Disputes over how the national past should be taught often draw in uninvited interlocutors, who look on the limitations of the nation with suspicion and hostility. Brexit marked a climatic expression of false perceptions of the national self as being in opposition to Europe and in alliance with the white Anglosphere. In light of this, we should aim for the enrichment of national history with the different angles of inquiry offered by transnational and global historical narratives and not for its elimination.

For much of its history, Britain has been connected to Europe, its empire and the wider world, creating new markets, generating inequalities among peoples and forging new cultural pathways, as many historians have shown. The notion of globality, as it appears in world history, is linked to colonial expansion to such an extent that Europe persistently appears as the driving force of the globalised condition itself. Britain, for the greatest part of the historiography, has been no exception, as Britain and British history remain at the centre of global histories of Britain. However, transnational histories, microhistories and histories of networks are increasingly entering historical narratives, offering alternative

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perspectives on historical space. The nation, as an analytical category, has not been eliminated; rather, it has been displaced from past certainties and compelled to converse, often on an equal footing, with "peripheral" others. The uncertainties produced by the new itineraries between centre and periphery can only be rewarding.

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[1] The term "European history" has been particularly re-examined in this century. See Stuart Woolf, "Europe and Its Historians," *Contemporary European History* 12, no. 3 (2003): 323–37, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777303001243; Richard J. Evans, "What Is European History? Reflections of a Cosmopolitan Islander," *European History Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2010): 593–605, https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691410375500; Stefan Berger and Tekin Kaner, *History and Belonging: Representations of the Past in Contemporary European Politics* (New York: Berghahn, 2018); Michael Werner, "Décentrer l'histoire européenne par les marges: Visions plurielles d'une modernité fragmentée," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 76, no. 4 (2021): 669–83, https://doi.org/10.1017/ahss.2021.159.

[2] This has been the case since nineteenth-century historiography and well into the late twentieth century. Secondary school textbooks have characteristically drawn a sharp distinction between Britain – a country and cultural universe of "liberty" – and Europe, which was often portrayed as a region plagued by tyranny and revolution. See seminal textbooks used throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as G.T. Warner, C.H.K. Marten and D. Muir, *New Groundwork of British History* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1911; 1943); S.F. Strong, *The Story of the Twentieth Century* (London: University of London Press, 1966); Denis Richards, *An Illustrated History of Modern Europe, 1789–1945*, 5th ed. (London: Longmans, 1950); Anthony Wood, *Europe, 1815–1945* (London: Longmans, 1964); A.J. Grant and H.B. Timperley, *Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 7th ed., 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1984); L.E. Snellgrove, *The Modern World since 1870*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1968; 1996). For an analysis of secondary school textbooks on Europe and Britain, see Athena Syriatou, "Educational Policy and Educational Content: The Teaching of European History in Secondary Schools in England and Wales, 1945–1975" (PhD diss., University College London, 1997), https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10099744.

[3] The impressive production of imperial history since the 1990s indicates that British history should be studied along with its empire and argue that history of Britain is interwoven with the empire. See, indicatively, Antoinette Burton, "Who Needs the Nation? Interrogating 'British History,'" *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10, no. 3 (1997): 227–48, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6443.00039; Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kathleen Wilson, "Old Imperialisms and New Imperial Histories: Rethinking the History of the Present," *Radical History Review* 95 (2006): 211–34, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2006-95-211; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Catherine Hall and Keith McClellan, eds., *Race, Nation and Empire: Making Histories, 1750 to the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Durba Ghosh, "Another Set of Imperial Turns?," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 772–93, https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.117.3.772.

[4] Krishan Kumar, *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[5] Edward A. Freeman, *The Growth of the English Constitution from the Earliest Times*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1890); James Anthony Froude, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, 3 vols. (London: Longmans, 1856–1870); William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England in Its Origin and Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1875).

[6] G.M. Trevelyan, *History of England* (London: Longmans, Green, 1926), xvii.

[7] As in Lionel Curtis, Reginald Coupland and W.K. Hancock, referred to by Wm. Roger Louis, "Foreword" and "Introduction," in *Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 5, *Historiography*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ix, 7 and 21–24.

8 Most works of John and Barbara Hammond argue that the industrial revolution was devastating for the living standards of the English working class. See, among others, *The Village Labourer, 1760–1832* and *The Town Labourer, 1760–1832* (London: Longmans, Green, 1917). The debate on the improvement of living standards after the Industrial Revolution was debated in the *Economic History Review* and the *Journal of Economic History* during the 1960s and again during the 1970s by historians such as F.A. Hayek, Harold Perkin, Geoffrey Best and later (in the 1990s) by Miles Taylor and others. See also Stewart Weaver, "The Bleak Age: J.H. Clapham, the Hammonds and the Standard of Living in Victorian Britain," in *The Victorians Since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions*, ed. Miles Taylor and Michael Woolf (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 29–43.

9 A.L. Morton, *A People's History: History of England* (London: Left Book Club, 1938; Lawrence & Wishart, 1974); G.D.H. Cole and Margaret Cole, *The Condition of Britain* (London: V. Gollancz, Left Book Club Edition, 1937); G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People, 1746–1938* (London: Methuen, 1938). For influential contemporary accounts that challenged the image of a socially united Britain, see J.B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London: Heinemann, 1934); and George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Gollancz, 1937).

10 Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

11 See, for example, Rodney Hilton, ed., *The English Rising of 1381* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1950); John Saville, *Rural Depopulation in England and Wales, 1851–1951* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957); E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969); E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959); Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962); Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969); George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (New York: Wiley, 1964); Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959); Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty: A Social Study of 1763 to 1774* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

12 Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 31–34.

13 Ibid., 3–4.

14 David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), xxix.

15 Ibid., xxx.

16 A.J.P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

17 J.G.A. Pocock, "British History: A Plea for a New Subject," *Journal of Modern History* 47, no. 4 (1975): 601–21, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1877393.

18 Ibid., esp. 619–21.

19 Ibid., 616.

20 James Vernon, "'The Worlding of Britain,'" in Tehila Sasson, James Vernon, Miles Ogborn, Priya Satia, and Catherine Hall, eds., "Britain and the World: A New Field?," *Journal of British Studies* 57 (2018): 686–92, https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2018.118.

21 Ian McBride, "J.G.A. Pocock and the Politics of British History," in *Four Nations Approaches to Modern "British" History: A (Dis)United Kingdom?* ed. Naomi Lloyd-Jones and Margaret M. Scull (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 40–42, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-60142-1_2.

22 The manifestation of national consciousness in white colonies dates to the mid-nineteenth century, with the creation of self-governing national assemblies, and became more pronounced at the beginning of the twentieth century with the adoption of the term "Commonwealth" by the newly federated Australia in 1900. This term was initially intended to distance the country from the concept of colonisation and, over time,

particularly after the 1926 Balfour Report and the 1931 Statute of Westminster, came to symbolise the full independence of member states whose legislative acts could no longer be invalidated by the Westminster Parliament. See, among others, Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), 202–3.

23 David Feldman and Jon Lawrence, "Introduction: Structures and Transformations in British Historiography," in *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1. They were referring to the "Editorial," *Social History* 1 (1976): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071027608567366.

24 Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 10–11. See also Mark Mazower's remarks about the Anglo-French *Annales: Past & Present's* collaborations and its first attempts to define global patterns of change through social and economic history during the 1950s. This international collaboration at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris inaugurated the examination of the limits of Marxist analyses, on issues such as the history of labour, the middle classes, the social history of art, in a comparative interdisciplinary framework which went beyond Europe's borders to include the rest of the world. See Athena Syriatou, "Η ιστορία μετά τον Hobsbawm: Απολογισμός ενός συνεδρίου" [History after Hobsbawm: Conference report], *Synchrona Themata* 128–129 (2015): 120–30.

25 Feldman and Lawrence, "Introduction," 3–4.

26 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution* (1962), *The Age of Capital* (1976), and *The Age of Empire* (1987). All three books have been widely translated in a multitude of languages and are considered staple reading for history programmes on the nineteenth-century worldwide.

27 This book, which was first commissioned by Penguin in 1968, became a staple for university curricula and was re-edited and reprinted until 1999. It is considered as one of the most influential books on British history by many historians and is described as such in a recent publication on Hobsbawm's legacy. John H. Arnold, Matthew Hilton, and Jan Rüger, eds., *History after Hobsbawm: Writing the Past for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

28 Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (London: Pelican, 1969; 1st ed., Harmondsworth, 1968), 13.

29 Ibid., 135.

30 Ibid., 149.

31 Maxine Berg makes special reference to the works of David Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), and E.A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance, and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), charging them with the responsibility for the disappearance of Hobsbawm's endeavour to place the Industrial Revolution within a global framework. Maxine Berg, "Global History and the Transformation of Early Modern Europe," in Arnold, Hilton, and Rüger, *History after* Hobsbawm, 143–44, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198768784.003.0008.

32 Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, 20–21.

33 Berg, "Global History," 159.

34 For the various phases of real or alleged decline of Britain, see Jim Tomlinson, "Thrice Denied: 'Declinism' as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century," *Twentieth Century British History* 20, no. 2 (2009): 227–51, https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwp019.

35 Stuart Hall noticed the way in which the state used the decline debate to discipline society, implying that the answer to relative economic decline were measures towards the formation of a society of law and order. See "Stuart Hall, Interviewed by Richard English and Michael Kenny," in *Rethinking British Decline*, ed. Richard English and Michael Kenny (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991), 105.

36 Correlli Barnett, *The Audit of War: The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

37 Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (London: Penguin, 1981).

38 David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: An Essay on a Militant and Technological Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

39 Peter Mandler, "Against 'Englishness': English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia 1850–1940," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th ser., 7 (1997): 155–75, https://doi.org/10.2307/3679274.

40 William Rubinstein, *Capitalism, Culture and Decline in Britain, 1750–1990* (London: Routledge, 1991).

41 Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn characteristically interpreted the domination of the stock exchange over industry as the principal reason for Britain's decline. They argued that Britain never underwent a true bourgeois revolution following the Glorious Revolution, with the aristocracy absorbing the rising industrial class from the early nineteenth century. See Perry Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis," *New Left Review* 23 (1963): 26–53, and Tom Nairn, "The British Political Elite," *New Left Review* 23 (1963): 19–25.

42 The literature on the decline debate is immense, yet some characteristic issues which this debate involved have been discussed in seminal works of British history. See, for example, Martin Daunton, "Britain and Globalization since 1850: I. Creating a Global Order, 1850–1914," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 16 (2006): 1–38, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440106000405; "Britain and Globalization since 1850: II. The Rise of Insular Capitalism, 1914–1939," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 17 (2007): 1–33, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440107000515; Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

43 See, for example, Hugh Pemberton, "Relative Decline and British Economic Policy in the 1960s," *Historical Journal* 47, no. 4 (2004): 989–1013, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X04004078; Nicholas Crafts, "British Relative Economic Decline Revisited: The Role of Competition," *Explorations in Economic History* 49, no. 1 (2012): 17–29, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eeh.2011.06.004.

44 Martin Pugh, *State and Society: A Social and Political History of Britain, 1870–1997*, 2nd ed. (London: Arnold, 1999). First published in 1994, the book has been a highly successful university textbook, with new editions appearing up to 2022 to include issues such as Brexit and the pandemic.

45 Similar "declinist" approaches can be found in other popular university textbooks, such as Peter Clark, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900–1990* (London: Allen Lane, 1996); Keith Robbins, *The Eclipse of a Great Power, 1870–1975* (London: Longman, 1983).

46 Two important examples of the new trends have arguably been the case of Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), as it concerns linguistic analysis of the pamphlets of the Chartists, and Caroline Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), depicting the various aspects formatting personal class identities beyond those attributed to working classes as a category according to income and status.

47 Linda Colley, *Britons Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (London: Pimlico, 1992).

48 Linda Colley, "Britishness and Otherness: An Argument," *Journal of British Studies* 31 (1992): 316, https://doi.org/10.1086/386013.

49 Ibid., 323.

50 Colley, *Britons*, 128–30.

51 Colley, "Britishness and Otherness."

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[52] Pocock, "British History."

[53] This point is also argued in James Vernon, "The History of Britain Is Dead: Long Live a Global History of Britain," *History of Australia* 13, no. 1 (2016): 21, https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2016.1156115.

[54] Representative publications of the view that the empire had an important impact on British national life are Hall and Rose, *At Home with the Empire*; Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Race in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003); Antoinette Burton, "Rule of the Thumb: British History and 'Imperial Culture' in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Britain," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 4 (1994): 483–501, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029400200064. Opposing this view is Bernard Porter, *Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), while a compromising view is Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow: Longman, 2005).

[55] Jan Rüger, "Writing Europe into the History of the British Empire," in Arnold, Hilton, and Rüger, *History after Hobsbawm*, 35–37, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198768784.003.0003.

[56] Rüger, ibid., 37, refers to the works of C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[57] Rüger, ibid., 38, refers to Brendan Simms, *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), supporting that Britain had a close relationship with Europe, and to Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War, 1914–1918* (London: Penguin, 1998) and Keith M. Wilson, *Empire and Continent: Studies in British Foreign Policy from the 1880s to the First World War* (London: Mansell, 1987), supporting the view that the British Empire has been an alternative to Europe.

[58] Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 271, cited in Rüger, ibid., 38.

[59] Rüger, ibid., 40–42.

[60] Many historians have argued for the continuous economic presence of Britain in Europe. See, among others, Daunton, "Britain and Globalization since 1850: I," 1–38; Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*; Peter Marsh, *Bargaining on Europe: Britain and the First Common Market, 1860–1892* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Edgerton, *Rise and Fall of the British Nation*.

[61] Rüger, "Writing Europe," 47–49.

[62] Vernon, "The History of Britain is Dead," 20.

[63] Ibid., 21.

[64] See David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine* (London: Penguin, 2012), esp. "The World Island," 14–24.

[65] Edgerton, *Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 466–521.

[66] Tehila Sasson and James Vernon, "Introduction," in Sasson et al., "Britain and the World," 677, and Vernon, "The Worlding of Britain," 688, https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2018.118.

[67] In this category, Vernon, ibid., 689, traces, among others, the works of John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld, 1783–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[68] The examples here include works such as Miles Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elisabeth Marsh* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).

[69] Kevin Grant, Philippa Levine, and Frank Trentmann, eds., *Beyond Sovereignty: Britain, Empire, and Transnationalism, c.1880–1950* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 6, and a review of the book by Susan Pedersen in *Journal of Global History* 3, no. 2 (2008): 287–88, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022808002726. One may also include the volumes of *The Cambridge World History*, vol. 7, *Production, Destruction, and Connection, 1750 to the Present*, ed. J.R. McNeill and Kenneth Pomeranz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[70] Vernon, "The Worlding," 691.

[71] Richard Evans, "Michael Gove's History Wars," *Guardian*, 13 July 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/13/michael-gove-teaching-history-wars.