

## Historicism and the Human Sciences in Victorian Britain

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**Editor:** Mark Bevir

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The disciplinary development of the ‘human sciences’ has attracted extensive scholarly discussion in the last three or four decades. Much of this has been primarily methodological or philosophical, but intellectual historians have also become increasingly interested in exploring the boundaries of the category, and explaining its evolution.<sup>(1)</sup> 19th-century Britain has not been prominent in this work, with the most sophisticated and influential recent studies focusing on the 20th century, and especially on the United States.<sup>(2)</sup> But other strands of Victorian ‘science’ have long preoccupied historians. Existing studies have dealt exhaustively with the 19th-century invention and reinvention of scientific terminology, categories, and institutions; charted in detail arguments within inchoate scientific disciplines; and discussed the ways in which the notion of ‘science’ itself, and more specific scientific ideas, were deployed in wider public debates as sources of political and intellectual authority.<sup>(3)</sup> Nearly all of this work, however, has focused on (what we habitually call) the social and natural sciences. So there is room to make the case that approaching the intellectual history of Victorian Britain through the lens of the ‘human sciences’ might generate fresh insights, as well as clarify the tangled prehistories of its constituent disciplines.

These considerations presumably played some role in the conception of *Historicism and the Human Sciences in Victorian Britain*, edited by Mark Bevir, which emerges from a conference of the same name held at the University of California, Berkeley in 2013. But it is hard to be sure, because the book is curiously indistinct about what its historiographical purposes are. In the introductory chapter Bevir has plenty to say about the intellectual currents which helped to shape Victorian historicist thinking, and about the reasons for its rise and decline, all of it sophisticated and insightful. But he does not explain which debates the book aspires to intervene in, or which received wisdoms it means to explode; and this lack of specified targets makes the collection feel a little familiar, as well as a little shapeless.

In so far as the book does have a programme, it lies in its attempt to vindicate Bevir’s claim that ‘the Victorian era was the heyday of what might be called “developmental historicism”’ (p. 2). That is to say, the volume sets out to demonstrate that the Victorians made sense of human life, as understood through the various proto-disciplinary lenses available in the 19th century, by setting events and institutions in their historical contexts; and that they saw history as progressively unfolding certain key principles. It is not

altogether easy to see how this represents an advance on what we know already. It has been dinned into us for decades that evolutionary and developmental theories and metaphors, as devised or channelled by (among others) Whig historians, Tractarian theologians, German romantics, philologists, Scottish Enlightenment writers, and not least Victorian naturalists, came to sit at the core of nearly every branch of 19th-century British thought, not excepting political thought.<sup>(4)</sup> The book takes these well-established narratives in some slightly unfamiliar directions, but it does not seek in any specific way to challenge, develop, or synthesise them.

The book also seems a little uncertain about what it wants to do with the notion of the ‘human sciences’. Few Victorians, of course, would have recognised either of the conceptual categories in the volume’s title, at least in their modern senses. The term ‘historicism’ was not current until nearly the end of the 19th century, while the phrase ‘human sciences’ was used mainly to emphasise the contrast between human and Divine capacities. At least all the authors employ a similar, uncomplicated working definition of ‘historicism’, as ‘a philosophy that emphasizes the importance of history in understanding, explaining, or evaluating phenomena’ (p. 1). By contrast, we are never told what the parameters of the ‘human sciences’ are meant to be, the category being treated as self-evident and descriptive; it does not do any analytic work, and there is no discussion of its contemporary senses or its shifting meanings. All we are told by Bevir – who says more on the subject than any of the other contributors – is that the book ‘appeals to “the human sciences” rather than “the social sciences” in order to denaturalize contemporary categories, the assumptions informing them, and the institutions to which they have given rise’ (pp. 16–17). So the conscious anachronism is to herald a deliberately iconoclastic take on established disciplinary and conceptual distinctions in Victorian thought and scholarship. But this never quite emerges.

It may be that we are meant to work out for ourselves what counts as a ‘human science’ by looking at the list of chapters. But the principles of selection are not easy to make out. The chapters all bear grand-sounding one- or two-word titles, dealing with gigantic areas of scholarship and intellectual debate. Some deal with apparently familiar disciplinary divisions like ‘History’, ‘Literature’, and ‘Political economy’. Some are explicitly designed to undercut them, by dealing with ‘topics’ rather than ‘disciplines’ (p. 2), the aim being to clear the way for the identification of unexpected connections and analogies. It is disappointing, then, to discover that these titles often mask equally familiar themes: ‘Life’ is about evolutionary biology (not a ‘human science’, of course, but a scene-setting chapter), ‘Race’ about anthropology. The individual chapters project rather different conceptions of their brief: some authors attempt overviews (of sorts) of their given topics, while others deal with much more specific problems. There is a sort of accidental unity of approach in the focus of many chapters on the most celebrated names in the Victorian firmament, but this is hardly unusual in 19th-century intellectual history. Bevir suggests that the sequencing of the chapters holds interpretative significance, stating that their order ‘reflects the claim that Victorian historicism can be understood as arising out of a broad intellectual shift from a Newtonian view rooted in physics to a romantic organicism rooted in the life sciences’ (p. 9): this is suggestive and plausible, but it is not really picked up on by any of the other authors, so the notion more or less dies on the vine. As all this suggests, whether the book is deemed worth consulting must depend on whether prospective readers are interested in specific chapters. Some of these, happily, are excellent – though it should be noted that many of them see authors return to issues and material with which they have dealt in earlier publications.

Bernard Lightman begins his chapter on ‘Life’ from the starting point that evolutionary naturalists contributed seminally to the general historicising of 19th-century thought, and to the growing dominance of a dynamic rather than a static model of nature. The aim of his contribution is to show that the leading ‘Darwinians’ did not all accept the random implications of the theory of natural selection, but that some of them instead held to teleological, developmental, progressive narratives of evolution – and that an important reason for their reluctance fully to admit Darwin’s conclusions can be found in their attraction to German romanticism. Neatly turned discussions of the intellectual formations and evolutionary arguments of Herbert Spencer, John Tyndall, and Thomas Huxley are presented to make this case. Lightman’s conclusion is that the ‘Darwinians’ were thus more in line with other groups who accepted evolutionary theory than we might have thought, and that romanticism continued to exert significant intellectual influence deeper into the 19th

century than we suppose. It is a nicely constructed and clearly written piece, but does not push back any frontiers. Ephram Sera-Shriar's complementary chapter on 'Race', which repeats some points about Huxley, sets out to show that developmental theories played a larger role than previously imagined in the early history of British anthropology – that is, between the beginning of the 19th century and the foundation of the Anthropological Institute in 1871. Through dissections of arguments about developmental processes and research methodologies made by James Prichard, Robert Knox, and Francis Galton, among others, Sera-Shriar makes the point that there was more continuity in the intellectual history of Victorian anthropology than historians have claimed, and that there was no sudden rush towards evolutionary thinking in the closing decades of the century. Anyone interested in these issues will want to consult his 2013 monograph, which deals with the same topic.[\(5\)](#)

Marcus Tomalin's chapter on 'Language' makes fascinating arguments about the scope, complexity, and possibilities of a less familiar field of Victorian intellectual endeavour, which he (with careful justification) calls 'linguistics'. He argues, with some force, that research into the subject has tended to congeal around a small, unrepresentative sample of language science projects, and that we are a considerable way from being able to make general claims about the career of 19th-century linguistics – or about the status of particular developmental historicist arguments within it. The meat of the chapter, however, is very much more specific, comprising an overview of Victorian interest in Icelandic. This was initially supposed to be an unusually 'pure' language, but over the course of the 19th century scholars gradually came to appreciate the differences between Old Norse and modern Icelandic. Tomalin connects these shifts with changing arguments about the character of linguistic progress, corruption, and decay, and demonstrates how different linguists employed different kinds of historicism. It is an excellent case study, but the main point of the chapter is to demonstrate the general shortcomings of the state of the literature on Victorian linguistics.

The chapter on 'Literature' by Ian Duncan feels like looking through the keyhole at a project of exceptional vastness and intricacy. It advertises itself as being about how the project of the history of man in 19th-century novels absorbed scientific, especially organic, developmental models; and it is as much about those models as about literature, spending as much time on Herder (with additional musings about Kant, Lamarck, Goethe, Schlegel, Lyell, and Cuvier) as on Scott. In other words, Duncan aims to show that Victorian novelists did complex things with Enlightenment theories and new departures in the natural sciences. The heart of the chapter lies in an analysis of George Eliot's novels and her writings on Germany: Eliot, we are told, came to understand the novelist's task as shoring up human nature against the flux of cosmic time. It is an exuberant piece, but becomes at points difficult to follow, probably because so much material is being compacted into such a small space. Lauren Goodlad's entry on the Victorian analysis of 'Moral Character' ranges almost equally widely across time and between authors, and draws partly on material from her 2003 monograph.[\(6\)](#) Most of the authors discussed are familiar – Dickens, J. S. Mill, Carlyle, Samuel Smiles, Galton, etc. – though there are some interesting asides on less well-known figures. Illuminating distinctions between different uses of the term 'character' are drawn out, and interesting suggestions about when and why they changed are made. The basic argument is that the 19th century saw a shift from a prescriptive to a descriptive notion of 'character', the latter of which held much more limited transformative possibilities. The chapter can be read as a useful counterpoint to, but certainly not a replacement for, Stefan Collini's much-cited 30-year-old article on the same topic.[\(7\)](#) The problem with the chapter, read in this particular setting, is that it has virtually nothing to say about historicism.

The best chapter in the book – or at least, in the context of the book – is Brian Young's on 'History'. This is not just because of its elegance and erudition, but also because it is the only one to have a really pointed case to make about the nature of historicism and the human sciences in Victorian Britain. Young sets out to show that the employment of historicism as a philosophy of history was inseparable from religious belief for most of the 19th century. Its triumph was not inevitable, and historicism became the preferred style of university history only gradually, because amateurs remained influential within the professionalising discipline for much longer in Britain than they did in America or Germany. These points are brought out in discussions of Comtist historical thought in the writings of Frederic Harrison, of 'theoretical' and anticlerical history though the case of Thomas Buckle, and of religiously-inflected historicism through explorations of the work

of William Stubbs, Mandell Creighton, and Lord Acton. Lesser figures like Walter Bagehot and Henry Hart Milman contribute to the argument along the way, and polite disagreements are registered with Michel Foucault and (implicitly) Richard Evans. Young rounds off his chapter with a glance at late-19th-century conflicts over the very idea of history as a ‘human science’, and succeeds in demonstrating just how important and illuminating this book’s theme can be.

Frederic Albritton Jonsson’s chapter on ‘Political Economy’ focuses on changing conceptions of the ‘stationary state’ over the course of the 19th century. It is presented as a case study in the relations between nature and history in Victorian political economy; it takes the form of a slightly oblique whistle-stop tour through a healthy swathe of the main preoccupations and protagonists (Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, Mill, Jevons, Ruskin) of 19th-century British political economy, with an unusual amount of attention devoted to debates about coal supply. It is very nicely done, but much of the material is familiar. The passages on how political economists looked towards the past for ways of imagining the stationary state are very much to the point, but the only focused discussion of historicism the chapter offers is in its conclusion. Again, some of the material is available in a monograph.[\(8\)](#)

The final two chapters deal in different ways with British attitudes towards the wider world, and make some complementary points. Duncan Bell’s chapter on ‘Empire’ looks at how imperial debates were informed by different narratives of historical time, specifically the ‘cyclical’ and the ‘progressive’. It deals especially with public arguments about the British Empire, taking place in the closing decades of the 19th century, and especially with the ideas of imperial enthusiasts. It examines British thinking about the ancient Roman and Greek empires and the lessons taught by their inevitable decline, before dealing with rhetorical attempts to establish that the British had in fact escaped the grip of these lessons by creating a fundamentally new form of progressive empire. It is an extremely well-executed, full, and interesting piece – though it is already available in a volume of Bell’s collected essays published last year, and many of its central points are also made in his 2007 monograph.[\(9\)](#) Jennifer Pitts’ closing piece on ‘International law’ is another strong contribution. It aims to show that the thought of Victorian international lawyers was deeply historicist, and conditioned by a particular set of historicist presuppositions: primarily the notion that international law could hold sway across the globe because only Europe had managed to generate the progressive civilization that was humanity’s destiny (cf. Bell above). The chapter feels fresher than many others in the book, taking us through a range of ways in which historical thinking was deployed within, and helped to frame, the emerging discipline of international law. The substantive discussion deals principally with the work of three men, the now-ubiquitous legal scholar Henry Maine, the ever-ubiquitous J. S. Mill, and the so far rather less well-studied ‘dean of late Victorian international law’ John Westlake (p. 240).

*Historicism and the Human Sciences in Victorian Britain* will more than repay selective consultation. As it is to be hoped this summary has indicated, many of the chapters are based on excellent scholarship, cover fascinating topics, and hold important insights. But as a collection, it is not indispensable reading. It does not really claim to set any sort of new agenda in the study of 19th-century ‘science’, or in the analysis of historicist thought, and so it is no surprise that none emerges along the way – but it does feel like a missed opportunity when so many distinguished historians have been assembled under this banner.

## Notes

1. *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Public Affairs*, ed. John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey (Madison, 1987); Roger Smith, *The Fontana History of the Human Sciences* (London, 1997).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Joel Isaac, *Working Knowledge: Making the Human Sciences from Parsons to Kuhn* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2012); Joel Isaac, ‘The human sciences in Cold War America’, *Historical Journal*, 50, 3 (2007), 725–46; ‘The human sciences and Cold War America’, ed. Joel Isaac, special issue of the *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences*, 47,3 (2011), 225–333. See also *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-Century Domains*, ed. Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1995).[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. The literature on the first two themes is endless; for an introduction to the third see e.g. Frank M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays on Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge, 1993), part II.[Back to \(3\)](#)
  4. For some waypoints within this endless literature see J. W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: a Study in Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1966); Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: a Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge, 1983); James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago, IL and London, 2000); H. S. Jones, *Victorian Political Thought* (London, 2000).[Back to \(4\)](#)
  5. Efram Sera-Shriar, *The Making of British Anthropology, 1813–1871* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2013).[Back to \(5\)](#)
  6. L. Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore, 2003).[Back to \(6\)](#)
  7. Stefan Collini, ‘The idea of “character” in Victorian political thought’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 35 (1985), 29–50.[Back to \(7\)](#)
  8. Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment’s Frontier: the Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (New Haven, CT, 2013).[Back to \(8\)](#)
  9. Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 2016), ch. 5; Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), chs 8–9.[Back to \(9\)](#)
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