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PROBLEMS IN STUDYING AND TEACHING EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH HISTORY

Abstract: The eighteenth century was a time of great events, developments and achievements in Britain's history, yet it tends to be neglected by both scholars and teachers compared with the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and a number of other periods in Britain's past. The primary aim of this essay is to explain what makes the understanding and teaching of eighteenth-century British history so difficult. There will be special emphasis on the positive and negative aspects of Sir Lewis Namier's historical scholarship, which revolutionised our understanding of the period in the middle of the twentieth century but created new complications as well.

Key words: British history, eighteenth century, controversy, Lewis Namier

The eighteenth century is often considered to be less interesting and more difficult to understand than many other periods of British history while, at the same time, its scholarly study and teaching tends to be neglected in schools and many institutions of higher education. This is curious as the eighteenth century is both interesting on its own terms and important in a number of crucial ways. One might think that it is absolutely unnecessary to emphasize the significance of this period, and yet it seems that it is not.

The *long eighteenth century*, which began in 1688 with the *Glorious Revolution* and ended in 1832 with the *Great Reform Act*, was a highly successful period in Britain's history. With the Union of England and Scotland in 1707 and the Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801 the kingdoms of the British Isles were united under one rule. Britain emerged victoriously from all but one of seven major military conflicts, which was due to the growing strength of the armed forces and the improving efficiency of the financial and

administrative systems. As a result of the constant threat of wars British national identity was forged. The break-away of the American colonies could not be avoided but this loss was more than made up for elsewhere in the world, while trade with the former colonies quickly recovered. By the 1780s significant new developments in the economy had laid the foundations for industrialization, after which a major economic and social transformation took place. The 1760s saw the beginning of a radical, extra-parliamentary political movement, but Britain managed to avoid revolution and her established order was reformed without recourse to violence. The British constitution was admired both at home and abroad. Art and architecture continued to thrive in the eighteenth century. London, with almost 700,000 inhabitants in 1750, became the largest city of Europe, as well as the centre of finance, commerce, fashion and print culture.

Considering all this two questions arise: why does the eighteenth century tend to be quickly passed over in teaching or simply omitted from the curriculum, and why does it so often fail to capture the interest and enthusiasm of students and historians? The primary aim of this paper is to try to answer these questions.

As Linda Colley has rightly remarked, “the period lacks an easily perceived discrete identity” (Colley 1986: 361). The chronological demarcation of the eighteenth century is uncertain. It has no clearly accepted temporal boundaries. The dates 1700 and 1800 are, of course, unacceptable boundaries from a historical point of view. The almost century and a half long period between 1688 and 1832, which the author of this paper prefers to adopt, is a more acceptable chronological time span since the process of slow political reform which had started in 1688 culminated in the *Reform Act* of 1832, thus demarcating a clearly intelligible historical unit. This periodisation, however, is by no means the exclusively accepted one. Lawrence Stone's *long eighteenth century*, for example, runs from 1660 to 1800 (Stone 1984: 3). In contrast, some historians adopt the *Hanoverian Succession* (1714) and the closing year of the *Napoleonic Wars* (1815) as the appropriate borderlines (Owen 1976; Plumb 1968; Rule 1992). The accepted periodisation in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain* is 1688-1789 (Morgan 1991). D. B. Horn and Mary Ransome in their *Introduction* to a volume of eighteenth-century historical documents opt for what might be called the *short eighteenth century*, 1714-1783. They argue that “the years from 1714 to 1783 [...] present the quintessence of the eighteenth century” and that “when historians speak of the eighteenth century they usually mean the years covered by this volume” (Horn-Ransome 1957: 3). It is high time historians made up their minds whether the term *eighteenth century* should cover a period of 69 years or perhaps one which is more than twice as long.

Another factor which makes the interpretation of the eighteenth century difficult is that it was – and still is – inclined to be exploited by certain political lobbies for their own political purposes. What is the image, for example, an American student is likely to get about George III after reading the *Declaration*

of Independence? The American colonists had to find an ideological justification for breaking away from the Mother Country. They invented the legend that it was the tyranny of George III that led to the *American Revolution*, and it is well known that they recited the long list of his alleged sins in the *Declaration of Independence*. The legend about the king's tyranny could only be endorsed by the Whig historians according to whom history was a gradual development towards liberal ideas and liberal institutions. These historians were bound to portray George III as an autocrat trying to revive the pristine glory of divine monarchs (Thomas 1985: 16). They described the first three decades of his reign as “politically arbitrary, militarily inept, morally corrupt, and ideologically retrogressive” (Colley 1986: 362). Although the historiography of the last fifty years or so has transformed the picture of George III and his age, the works which confirm the old view, as for example George Macaulay Trevelyan's otherwise excellent *A Shortened History of England*, are still in print and widely read (Trevelyan [1942] 1987).

Another difficulty is that the eighteenth century is often overshadowed by the centuries which immediately precede and follow it. The responsibility of historians working on the neighbouring periods is not negligible in this respect. Some historians of the seventeenth century tend to overemphasize the significance of the period – especially the understandably crucial decades of the 1640s and 1650s – in the light of which the significance of the eighteenth century diminishes. The *Glorious Revolution*, for example, as a direct result of which the political system of the eighteenth century developed, had been a neglected topic for a long time because the events of 1642-1660 were thought to represent a constitutional revolution, and many scholars asserted that the real changes in English politics and society were achieved between these two significant dates (Schwoerer 1992: 7).

What makes the eighteenth century really problematic, however, is the large number of controversies it embraces. What is more, many of these controversies concern complicated constitutional issues and questions of power and authority. Such controversies and the factors mentioned above tend to deter many students and historians from the serious study of this crucial period in British history. At the same time they induce teachers to quickly pass over the eighteenth century and rather concentrate on the teaching of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

In order to highlight this problem, in what follows I would like to examine some of the controversies associated with Sir Lewis Namier,¹ and how his scholarship has contributed to the confusion in reconstructing eighteenth-century British history.

¹ Sir Lewis Namier was born Ludwik Bernsztajn vel Niemirowski in the Russian Partition in 1888, into a family of assimilated Jews. At the age of 19 he emigrated to the United Kingdom. He studied at the London School of Economics and read history at Balliol College, Oxford. It was in

It is now almost ninety years since Sir Lewis Namier transformed our notion of the eighteenth century by demolishing the Whig interpretation which had prevailed until the end of the 1920s. In fact, the criticism of the Whig version of the past had started four or five decades earlier,² so what Namier actually did was confirm already existing ideas. His approach to the period, therefore, was not completely original in this respect. The form of his history-writing and the methods he applied, however, were innovative. Namier broke with the narrative mode of the Whig historians and used what the general reader found much less enjoyable, *structural analysis* (Colley 1989: 50). His attention was confined to the elite who dominated government and parliament. He ignored the political activities of the middling and lower orders because he believed that people out-of-doors had no influence on decisions made in Westminster. He almost completely ignored the role of ideas as well, since he considered material interests and personal connections much more important.

The most novel part of Namier's method was his development of *prosopography* (group biography), especially the collective study of the lives of Members of Parliament. Namier strongly believed that the political and social life of British society could be best approached through the study of its leading personalities. He treated the membership of the House of Commons as a representative sample of the governing elite and assumed that economic and social developments would result in changes in its composition (Colley 1989: 83). Hence Namier's claim that "the social history of England could be written in terms of the membership of the House of Commons" (Namier [1930] 1961: 3). This claim, of course, is difficult to accept if one considers that women, Roman Catholics, Jews and millions of poor people were completely excluded from becoming MPs in the eighteenth century. Namier's research nevertheless provides us with invaluable information concerning the nation's governing elite.

By dissecting the diaries, the memoirs and the letters of individuals and by writing the biographies of hundreds of MPs Namier managed to establish important new facts about the eighteenth century. The problem is that Namier

1913 that he became a British citizen and changed his name to Lewis Bernstein Namier. During World War I he worked for the intelligence service of the Foreign Office. His seminal works on the eighteenth century – *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* and *England in the Age of the American Revolution* – appeared in 1929 and 1930. In the following year he became Professor of Modern History at Manchester University, a position he held until 1953. He died in 1960. It is indicative of his outstanding intellectual influence that the term *Namierism* has entered the English language. For more information on Namier's life and views see Hayton (2017).

² By historians like J. R. Seeley, F. W. Maitland, T. F. Tout, H. W. V. Temperley, W. R. Anson and C. W. Alvord. See Colley (1989: 48-49).

failed to communicate his discoveries in a way which could be enjoyed and appreciated by non-historians as well. His works, as well as the ones which were produced by his numerous disciples,³ are certainly not for general consumption.

Another difficulty is that although Namier had demolished the Whig interpretation of the eighteenth-century political system, he left many aspects of it unexplored and unexplained. As Linda Colley has noted: “Neither he nor his collaborators had examined how the Commons functioned as an instrument of government, how it made law and policy, or how it made and unmade administrations. Here was a study of a power elite which dissected the elite itself but left out the power almost entirely” (Colley 1989: 79).

Neither did Namier and his disciples devote much attention to the electoral behaviour of voters. The sources which could have revealed this – newspapers, electoral correspondence, broadsides, pamphlets – remained largely unexplored because the Namierites were convinced that there was no important connection between constituency politics and high-politics. They emphasized the importance of personal and local factors over national issues, the role of patronage and influence, and the absence of party organisations and ideological propaganda at the constituency level.

Using modern statistical methods John Phillips mounted a major attack on this interpretation in 1982. He insisted that elections – in the larger boroughs at least – became increasingly issue-oriented in the second half of the eighteenth century, and he claimed that a substantial portion of the electorate came to be influenced by the electoral propaganda of local party organisations. By the examination of printed propaganda it was possible to demonstrate that some urban radicals tried to draw parallels between local oppressions and the actions of central government. Patronage in itself could rarely be used efficiently in controlling both seats of boroughs, Phillips argued, and it was widespread only in the small boroughs of the southwest (Phillips 1982).

In the 1960s and 1970s Namier's historiographical approach became less fashionable. Historians rejected Namier's antipathy to ideology, and interest shifted from the members of Parliament to the voters themselves and the disadvantaged groups of society such as women and workers. John Brewer published his *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, the title of which deliberately emphasized what Namier had almost completely ignored (Brewer 1976).

A clear danger for the historiography of this period was overreaction against Namierism. Some historians were so intent on refuting Namier's notions that they pushed their own interpretations too far. Edward Thompson, who condemned Namier's preoccupation with the elite and focussed instead on the political activities of the lower orders, is a good example. Thompson rejected the

³ Romney Sedgwick, John Brooke, John B. Owen, Ian R. Christie and others.

idea that the food riots of the 1760s were simply instinctive responses to economic distress. He saw these riots as rational responses to real grievances and argued that the rioters enjoyed the general support of the wider community (Thompson 1971). Thompson was right, of course, in insisting that the lower orders should not be ignored in the study of British politics in the reign of George III, but he certainly went too far in emphasizing the unity and the class consciousness of the working people, and in claiming that their radicalism was a dangerous threat to the established order which could be defeated only by physical force and repression. More serious, perhaps, is the fact that in Thompson's works the governing classes are almost completely ignored. Thompson's interpretation is the antithesis of Namier's. It analyses and describes an entirely different world (Dickinson 1985: 509-512). Such excessive reactions against Namier have confused not only the general reader but historians as well.

The liveliest controversy associated with *Namierism* has developed over the question to what extent parties and party politics existed in Hanoverian Britain. In his *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* Namier demonstrated that in the middle of the eighteenth century "there were no parties in our sense of the term" (Namier 1929: 213) and no two-party system existed in Parliament. He analysed the structure of political alignments in the House of Commons in the 1760s and arrived at the conclusion that it was better to divide the members into supporters and opponents of the government than Whigs and Tories. The politicians in office could rely on a court party of placemen and some of the independents. This alignment was opposed by the politicians out of office and the remainder of the independents. Politicians acted either as individuals or, more often, as members of factions. Party names persisted but their meaning was uncertain and misleading. As a result of the Whig political propaganda during the reigns of the first two Georges, the word *Tory* became a term of abuse denoting Jacobite leanings. As a consequence, all active politicians claimed to be Whigs.

One might compare this situation to what happened in the Socialist countries of the post-1945 era. Many people in these countries became members of the Communist Party to enhance their careers. In Hungary, for example, the Communist Party had 800,000 members. The majority of these people joined *The Party* only in order to advance their careers but, of course, it is impossible to determine the exact proportion of the full-hearted supporters and those who only paid lip-service. It is even more difficult to determine in retrospect, after more than 250 years, whether somebody was a Whig or a Tory in the mid-eighteenth century.

Namier's *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* appeared in 1929, and by the 1950s his interpretation had become the new orthodoxy, so much so that although Namier never suggested that the structure he described was valid for the whole century, Robert Walcott extended it to the period from 1688 to 1714 (Walcott 1956). Walcott's thesis provoked a number of responses from well-known historians like J. H. Plumb, W. A. Speck, Geoffrey Holmes

and others who demonstrated the force of Whig and Tory rivalry in this period (Plumb 1969; Speck 1970; Holmes 1967).

The first serious blow against Namier's interpretation came in 1957 when Sir Herbert Butterfield published his work on the historiography of the reign of George III. Butterfield accused Namier and his associates of “refusing to realise the force of operative ideas.” He declared:

A purely positivist attempt to describe party in the nude – to anatomise the material thing – is bound to have its pitfalls for the historian; for a great proportion of the existence of party lies in the realm of human thought. Those who adopt the Namier procedure, may lose sight of certain ‘imponderables’, and, when this happens, it is possible to reduce politics too much to the level of mere faction-fights (Butterfield 1988: 222-223).

John B. Owen, one of those to whom Butterfield attached the label of the *Namier School*, pointed out in reply: “the counting of heads does not necessarily mean the discounting of ideas” (Owen 1985: 528-531).

In the 1970s and 1980s some revisionist historians began to reimpose the two-party interpretation on the political history of Hanoverian Britain, leaving only Namier's special decade – the 1760s – largely untouched. B. W. Hill, Linda Colley, Eveline Cruickshanks and J. C. D. Clark have demonstrated that a distinct Tory Party long survived the Hanoverian Succession of 1714 after which the Whigs monopolized power (Hill 1976; Colley 1982; Cruickshanks 1979; Clark 1978). Since these revisionists not only challenge the traditionalists but dispute with each other as well, the controversy is especially intricate. According to Hill and Colley, the Tories after 1714 were loyal to the Hanoverian monarchs and still hoped to obtain political office. Cruickshanks and Clark, on the other hand, maintain that the Tories were primarily motivated by Jacobitism. It was not very difficult for P. D. G. Thomas, a traditionalist historian, to realize that both arguments cannot be right. Both can be wrong, however, and this is exactly what Thomas tried to prove (Thomas 1987).

There is no need to go into further details of this controversy to be able to see how complicated it is, and to realize that such controversies can easily deter the interest and enthusiasm of students and historians rather than capture it. In conclusion let us refer back to the opening remarks of this essay. The eighteenth century is interesting and important. True, its apprehension and teaching is difficult, but historians cannot afford to neglect it. The teacher of eighteenth-century British history should make up his or her mind what interpretations he or she can accept, and teach the period accordingly. There is nothing wrong with this for there is no history without an element of subjectivity, just as every good historical writing reveals the historian's personal point of view. To teach the eighteenth century in this manner is still much better than to neglect it or to quickly pass over it.

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