

CHAPTER 32

Social science

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The last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first two of the twentieth were golden for the social sciences, due in part to the restructuring of knowledge precipitated by the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. With men such as William Robertson Smith in comparative religion, James G. Frazer in anthropology, Émile Durkheim in sociology and Sigmund Freud in psychology at the height of their achievements, the first decade of the new century was a rousing time in European intellectual circles. Eliot grew up during this flowering and from 1906 to 1916 he studied the social sciences at three prestigious universities – Harvard, the Sorbonne and Oxford – which were in the vanguard of the best new work. As an undergraduate, he focused on comparative language and literature, and as a graduate student on philosophy and comparative religion. As indicated by his graduate essays and early book reviews, Eliot absorbed the philosophy which is an indispensable element of the social sciences – historicism. He explained his version of historicism in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) and explored the meaning of the past in his major poems, beginning with 'Gerontion' (1920) and culminating in *Four Quartets* (1943). He also internalised the social scientists' methodology: namely, the comparative analysis of fragments. In *The Waste Land* (1922), begun soon after completing his graduate work, he adapted the method for his poetry, and in reviewing James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1923, he outlined this adaptation and christened it the 'mythical method' (*SP*, 178). His appropriation of the philosophy and methodology of the social sciences enabled him to deal with what seemed to be an impasse for modern artists – the requirement that art should reflect both order and chaos, that it should simultaneously be true to an ideal and to contemporary history.

Historicism is the theory that history is a living whole, the two main principles being organicism and holism. Organicism means that the pieces of history – moments, epochs, persons, events – are all interconnected,

related as limbs are in a body, not as cogs in a machine, and also, that all pieces are evolving in time. As Eliot's Sweeney suggests in *Sweeney Agonistes*, life consists of recurring cycles of 'birth, and copulation, and death' (*CPP*, 122). Holism means that history is a whole and includes everything that is, or has been or will be – all people, classes, institutions, events small and large. Historicism emphasises life in time, with the old constantly being transformed into the new:

Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces (*CPP*, 177)

Although never merely a historicist (he acknowledged a vertical, spatial dimension), Eliot consistently maintained that life is conditioned by time and place and that its parts are subject to continuous and reciprocal modification. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', he insisted that the past should not be taken as a 'lump, an indiscriminate bolus' or fixed as an 'ideal order' of monuments (*SE*, 16), but as a living whole that includes the present. No artist has his 'complete meaning alone . . . what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it' (*SE*, 15). The past and present have 'a simultaneous existence' and compose 'a simultaneous order'. The mind of Europe 'changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen' (*SE*, 16). In explaining the relation between history and truth in his 1926 introduction to the dramatic poem *Savonarola* by his mother Charlotte, he remarked: 'Every period of history is seen differently by every other period; the past is in perpetual flux, although only the past can be known.'¹ After his conversion to Christianity, which one would think would have tempered his historicism, Eliot said that even the Incarnation is 'A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history: transecting, bisecting the world of time' (*CPP*, 160).

Eliot also made historicism the backdrop for his poetry. In 'Gerontion', he brilliantly explores the historicist principle that history has a history, that contexts have a context. The basic image is that of houses within houses, all interconnected. History is a house with 'many cunning passages, contrived corridors' (*CPP*, 38) and within this house are other houses, including the house of Greece during the battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC, the house of Israel during the time of Christ, the house of Europe at the end of the First World War, and many others, all contained

as tenants in the brain of a withered Socrates named Gerontion. In *Four Quartets*, the most important philosophical poem of the century, Eliot intertwines what many thinkers attempt to separate: past and present, being and becoming:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past. (*CPP*, 171)

The exploration continues, as words slip, slide and perish, as patterns in life and art coalesce and dissolve, creating patterns that are ‘new in every moment’ (*CPP*, 179):

That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations – not forgetting
Something that is probably quite ineffable:
The backward look behind the assurance
Of recorded history, the backward half-look
Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror. (*CPP*, 187)

Only a committed historicist could imagine a line of sight stretching from today to prehistory, from present assurance to primitive terror.

Eliot’s historicism is a version of the theory of history at the heart of nineteenth-century intellectual life, particularly in the social sciences. Its context includes two sequential elements: (1) the change around the turn of the nineteenth century from a mechanical to an organic view of the universe; and (2) the change around the middle of the century from the view that the earth and its inhabitants are relatively young to the view that they are immeasurably old. The first, part of Romanticism and its idealism, is primarily literary and philosophical; the second, part of Positivism and realism, is primarily scientific. Both include the quest for origins that was to culminate in the rapid maturation of anthropology, sociology and psychology in the last quarter of the century.

The background of the philosophical change lies in the Enlightenment. In the seventeenth century many accepted the biblical account of history as consisting of linear dispensations, beginning in Genesis with the Creation and ending with the Second Coming as described in Revelation. However, this view was undercut by two powerful thinkers. In a landmark essay, ‘Natural History of Religion’ (1757), the Scottish rationalist David Hume argued that the Garden of Eden should be treated as a story that existed within history. He maintained that even religion has a history and

should be studied as existing in time. In *The New Science* (1725), the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico argued that all societies pass through three cycles or ages associated with gods, heroes and men. His evolutionary theory of history, though not appreciated in his own day, influenced the Romantics, especially in Germany, and his triadic paradigm, with an emphasis on an upward evolution, became a commonplace in the social sciences. The Positivist Auguste Comte, a founding father of sociology, maintained that all societies move through three phases – theological, metaphysical and scientific. Analogously, Frazer argued that all societies pass through stages of magic, religion and science. These thinkers believed that history moved from abstract to concrete, from irrational to rational, from worse to better.

Most credit for the success of organicism, however, is due to the Romantic Movement. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, first-generation Romantics, such as William Wordsworth in England and Johann von Herder in Germany, discarded the Enlightenment model of the universe as a perfectly oiled Newtonian machine and substituted instead an organic model of the universe. Turning Enlightenment values upside down, they emphasised temporality, change, motion, interconnection and wholeness. The venerable Chain of Being, in which all of life was represented as a hierarchy of immutable categories, was taken out of space and placed in time. In this ninety-degree turn, boundaries were softened or dissolved, and man (the middle link in a spatial and finite chain arranged from lowest to highest) became a point in a temporal and infinite process arranged from primitive to modern. God was deposed from his lofty throne and resettled in some distant future kingdom towards which all creation was moving. In philosophical terms, Becoming trumped Being, a point elaborated by post-Kantian idealists such as J. G. Fichte and G. W. F. Hegel.

The temporalisation of the Chain of Being was liberating for scientists, whose breakthroughs were built on the assumption of an organic universe evolving in time. Charles Lyell, the century's most distinguished geologist, argued in *Principles of Geology* (1830–3) that the past should not be taken as a lost 'lump' of history but as forming part of the present. In his quest for the origin of the earth, he concluded that it resulted from the accumulation of minute changes occurring over enormously long periods of time, a theory that influenced Charles Darwin, who hypothesised in *On the Origin of Species* that human beings originated in a remote prehistory and evolved from lower to higher forms through a process of natural selection. The theories of Lyell and Darwin provided a scientific

foundation for the quest for origins that was already well under way, especially in Germany, where it was associated with the attempt to define national identity. Their work also led to a redefinition of the past, which in the second half of the nineteenth century came to include not only primitive history, but prehistory. This scientific work was in many ways congruent with Romantic historicism, but in one significant way it was different. The Romantics believed in a lost golden age and imagined that the change from the Classical world of Greece and Rome to medieval and modern Europe was a process of degeneration. By arguing for natural selection, dubbed the 'survival of the fittest' by the evolutionist Herbert Spencer, Darwin flipped this Romantic view of decline, substituting a Positivist view of ascent. These views of history as degeneration or as progress remained in conflict for the remainder of the century.

Eliot flashes his awareness of these ongoing debates in a 1920 vignette describing the Hellenism of Gilbert Murray. With a touch of irony, he describes the current phase of Classical study:

The Greek is no longer the awe-inspiring Belvedere of Winckelmann, Goethe, and Schopenhauer, the figure of which Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde offered us a slightly debased re-edition. And we realise better how different – not how much more Olympian – were the conditions of Greek civilization from ours. (*SW*, 76)

In the late eighteenth century, when Rome was considered the pinnacle of civilisation, the German art historian J. J. Winckelmann fathered a Greek revival with his *History of Ancient Art* (1764). Dividing art into periods, he elevated Classical Greek work above all others. He defined the essence of Greek art as noble simplicity and rapturously described the Belvedere, a Roman imitation of a Greek statue of Apollo, as the standard for absolute beauty. His work ushered in a century of scholarship on Greek philosophy and ideals. In Germany, he influenced such figures as Herder, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Gotthold Lessing and Arthur Schopenhauer, and in England Byron and Shelley, and, to stay with Eliot's shorthand, the aesthetes Pater and Wilde. In the middle of the century, as the quest for origins intensified, the Greece of Winckelmann gave way to that of Homer; the age of philosophers to that of heroes. In the anthropology of polymaths such as Frazer and in the sociology of Durkheim, the study of pre-rational Greece was extended further back into the dark recesses of prehistory. For the Romantics, the Greeks had been awe-inspiring residents of Olympus; for contemporary Hellenists, they were simply different. In mock despair Eliot laments that the modern critic is flummoxed, not knowing whether to model his prose on Romans such as Cicero or

Greeks such as Thucydides. In regard to poetry: 'If Pindar bores us, we admit it; we are not certain that Sappho was *very* much greater than Catullus; and we hold various opinions about Vergil; and we think more highly of Petronius than our grandfathers did' (SW, 76–7). The past is in motion, and Petronius, exiled by the Romantics, returns as the gatekeeper of the twentieth century's signature poem, *The Waste Land* (see [Chapter 17](#) above).

The historicism which served Eliot as a philosophical backdrop also gave him and other modernists a method they were able to adapt for their contemporary art. In working their way back to origins, historicists focused primarily on language and mythology, both of which were considered repositories for the oldest and deepest intuitions of human experience. In approaching these two areas as 'science', they developed the 'comparative method'. Stated simply, the comparative method is the comparison of fragments in order to reconstruct larger and older fragments that can then be used to hypothesise even older fragments and eventually to reach an original – an ur-language or ur-myth. It assumes a primitive unity that has shattered into pieces which have then evolved, and it attempts to reverse the process of evolution by systematically undoing modifications and reconnecting fragments. It was developed by Danish and German philologists whose search for both national and universal origins was built upon intensive language study. In *Investigation of the Origin of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language* (1818), which compared inflectional systems and word endings, Rasmus Rask had the brilliant insight that most European languages were descendants of an extinct common ancestor. The German philologist Franz Bopp added Sanskrit to the mix, discovering that Indic and European languages were part of the same family. These scholars traced modern languages back to Indo-European roots and modern European peoples back to the so-called Aryans of India.

For most modernists, however, the comparative method was not a product of comparative linguistics, but of comparative mythology. In 1856, Max Müller, a native of Germany trained in Sanskrit, connected linguistics and mythology in a watershed essay 'Comparative Mythology'. His thesis was that the method that had been so successful in philology should be applied to mythology. Instead of comparing fragments of language, scholars should compare fragments of myths, with the aim of reconstructing older and older stories until they eventually recovered a parent myth. Müller's ur-myth, known as 'solarism', associated origins with worship of the sun.

In his final year at Harvard (1913/14), Eliot took a capstone seminar for which the announced topic for the year was 'A comparative study of various types of scientific method'. His essay for that seminar, 'The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual', is a study of the comparative method in religion. When he finished his studies at Harvard, he adapted this method for literary use. In his review of *Ulysses*, he says that the 'mythical method' has been made 'possible' by the social sciences, specifically 'Psychology . . . ethnology, and *The Golden Bough*' (SP, 178). He describes it as a method that enables the artist to manipulate 'a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity', adding that it is a 'way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' (SP, 177). The artist, like the social scientist, juxtaposes cultural and literary fragments from different times and places, but unlike the scientist, he leaves the work of reconstruction largely to the reader. This is the method of *The Waste Land*, a poem that includes fragments of contemporary life, several languages (including Sanskrit) and numerous myths (including the agricultural myths contained in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* [1890]). The fragments of contemporary life (taxis, songs, pubs, war) are particularly important, for as Lyell had argued a century earlier, the present is always the key to understanding the past.

The immediate context for the emergence of the mythical method was the burgeoning of the social sciences in the wake of Müller's 1856 essay, with the added impetus of the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*. In the first half of the century the main breakthroughs had occurred in Germany, but in the second half the major achievements came from Britain, and at the end of the century from France. In Germany the foci had been on the Greeks and on language, and this scholarship had a strong nationalistic bent associated with the desire to find the origin of the German *Volk* [nation]. In Britain, the emphasis shifted to studies of primitivism, notably anthropology and mythology, and this scholarship had a religious flavour created by the desire to reconcile evolutionary science with Christianity. British scholarship was much broader in scope, in part because scholars did fieldwork throughout the British Empire, including in Australia and India. Müller was the pivotal scholar connecting the first and second halves of the century. Settling at Oxford University while he was in his twenties, he combined his German linguistic concerns with the anthropological interests of the British. He remained in Oxford for the rest of his long career, becoming one of the most eminent figures in the first generation of social scientists. The focus in France was

more theoretical than in Germany or Britain; coming later in the development of the social sciences, French scholars, including those associated with Durkheim's periodical *L'Année Sociologique*, were able to build on the accomplishments of their predecessors.

The scholarship of the second half of the century is brilliantly encapsulated in Eliot's 1920 article, quoted earlier, on a performance of Gilbert Murray's translation of *Medea*. Murray was one of the Cambridge Ritualists, a group of Classical scholars that included Jane Harrison, Francis Cornford and A. B. Cook. In a playful paragraph, Eliot provides a bird's-eye view of the late nineteenth-century landscape in the social sciences:

[This day began] with Tylor and a few German anthropologists; since then we have acquired sociology and social psychology ... we have read books from Vienna and heard a discourse of Bergson ... Few books are more fascinating than those of Miss Harrison, Mr Cornford, or Mr Cooke [*sic*], when they burrow in the origins of Greek myths and rites; M. Durkheim, with his social consciousness, and M. Lévy-Bruhl, with his Bororo Indians who convince themselves that they are parroquets, are delightful writers. A number of sciences have sprung up in an almost tropical exuberance ... and the garden, not unnaturally, has come to resemble a jungle. Such men as Tylor, and Robertson Smith, and Wilhelm Wundt, who early fertilized the soil, would hardly recognise the resulting vegetation ... it is this phase of classical study that Professor Murray – the friend and inspirer of Miss Jane Harrison – represents. (SW, 75–6)

One of the wittiest aspects of this paragraph is the use of the agricultural metaphor, for it reveals the ghost of Frazer in the branches of the oaks below. In *The Waste Land*, published soon after this article, Eliot brings Frazer out of the shadows, remarking in the 'Notes' that the poem includes reference to 'vegetation ceremonies' (CPP, 76) and is more generally indebted to *The Golden Bough*. And in a 1924 essay Eliot lists the same figures in the development of social science, with the addition of Frazer, to whom he gives pride of place, as well as Wilhelm Mannhardt, whose studies in agricultural myth influenced Frazer, and Jessie Weston, whose own work on the Grail legends drew on Frazer's work.²

This context that includes *The Golden Bough* can easily be fleshed out from Eliot's tongue-in-cheek genealogy of the Cambridge Ritualists. He begins his survey with an allusion to the fruitful but troubled mid-century marriage of German and British scholarship. Müller not only brought the comparative method to Britain, he also brought the romantic view that history is moving from unity to disunity, from better to worse, a milder version of which was also part of English Romanticism. As was the case with most linguists, his view of history as devolution was tied to

the Indo-European thesis, which postulated a parent race and language now in ruins. The first generation of British social scientists, E. B. Tylor and Andrew Lang, accepted the comparative method but rejected the focus on philology and the view of history as degeneration. In *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor argued that evolution occurred in natural stages, forward and upward, uniformly, regardless of language and culture, a position also defended by Lang. The principle of uniformity allowed Tylor and Lang to consider primitive peoples, such as the Australian Aborigines, as representatives of an earlier stage of the evolution of modern Europeans.

The Scottish biblical scholar and Semitist William Robertson Smith, included in Eliot's vignette, reorientated the social sciences and was a powerful influence on Frazer and Durkheim, both in turn direct influences on Eliot. Most British anthropologists, including Frazer, did not know ancient languages (Müller's main complaint about them) and they did not collect their own data by conducting fieldwork. They relied on missionaries, explorers and others who travelled within the Empire. Smith, on the other hand, was a brilliant scholar of Semitic languages who spent years in the Near East trying to reconstruct the social context of the biblical religion. Other anthropologists had theorised that religion and mythology originated as attempts by primitive peoples to explain natural phenomena. In Tylor's phrase used in *Primitive Culture*, the creators of myths were 'savage philosophers'. Others, the euhemerists, argued that myths could be traced to historical events or real persons. Conversely, Smith argued that myths originated as the explanation of rituals, the meanings of which had been lost. Ancient people did not make up rituals to support doctrines or to preserve accounts of heroes; rather, they invented stories to explain rituals which had arisen as coping mechanisms in social contexts. Smith's work on social structures, essentially a sociology of religion, is reflected in Durkheim's idea of group consciousness outlined in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), which was reviewed by Eliot in 1916 and again in 1918. Smith's position that sacrifice was the ur-ritual, explored at length in *Religion of the Semites* (1889), gave Frazer the myth of the dying god. In the preface to the first edition of *The Golden Bough*, he acknowledged that Smith's work provided the central idea of his book, the conception of the slain god. Smith also provided the main idea of the Cambridge Ritualists about the priority of ritual, and with Durkheim as a mediator, shaping their understanding of social structures. Smith's legacy, in addition, includes Eliot's poetry and criticism, which prioritises ritual and treats social experience as originary.

Each of the French figures mentioned in Eliot's 1920 article – Durkheim, Lévy-Brühl and Bergson – have a special place in the context treated in this chapter: Durkheim as the main figure in sociology; Lévy-Brühl, author of *Mental Functions in Primitive Societies* (1910), as an explorer of the primitive mind; and Henri Bergson as the thinker who in *Creative Evolution* (1907) integrated the historicism of the social sciences into philosophy proper. As a graduate student in Paris in 1910/11, Eliot heard Bergson lecture and, on his return to Harvard, wrote an essay about Bergson's inconsistencies.³ He also learned about Durkheim, Lévy-Brühl and the psychologist Pierre Janet in Paris and studied them in greater depth when he returned to the United States, referencing them in graduate essays and book reviews.

Eliot continued to mention the social scientists encountered in his youth, praising the 'brilliant theories of human behaviour' espoused by Durkheim and Lévy-Brühl and remarking that Freud had shed valuable light on the 'obscurities of the soul'. He reserved his most lavish praise, however, for Frazer, who had 'extended the consciousness of the human mind into as dark a backward and abysm of time as has yet been explored'.⁴ Eliot's mind, like the mind of Europe, changed over the years, but it abandoned nothing en route, neither the prehistoric Sibyl nor the pre-Socratic Heraclitus. The first presides over *The Waste Land*, a monument to the comparative method, the second over *Four Quartets*, a monument to historicism. Both the early and late masterpieces reveal the quest for origins that is the essential context not only for Eliot's work, but of his life: 'In my beginning is my end' (*CPP*, 177).

NOTES

1. 'Introduction', *Savonarola* by Charlotte Eliot (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1926), p. vii.
2. See 'A Prediction in Regard to Three English Authors', *Vanity Fair* (February 1924), 29, 98.
3. Unpublished address to the Harvard Philosophical Club (December 1913).
4. 'Prediction in Regard to Three English Authors', 29.