# 1    A history of modern pluralism

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Pluralism may appear to be on the rise. Many societies are being transformed by a plurality of cultural groups, each with different and perhaps legitimate norms. Many states are being transformed by the new governance with its plurality of organizations working in all kinds of overlapping legal and regulatory frameworks. These social and political trends mean that pluralist issues are prominent in many contemporary debates about public policy. For a start, the increasingly diverse nature of many societies has inspired various discussions about multiculturalism.[1] What are the social and political implications of cultural diversity? Do we need to rethink our morality and even our laws to respond to cultural pluralism? In addition, the changing nature of the state has inspired various debates about governance.[2] Has the state been hollowed-out, supplemented or supplanted by a patchwork of public, private, and voluntary organizations formulating policy and delivering services through markets and networks? What are the implications of this new governance for accountability and other democratic values?

Given the prominence of pluralist issues in contemporary public debates, it is not surprising that recent years have seen an upsurge of scholarly interest in the history and prospects of political pluralism. Recent works on the history of modern pluralism have concentrated on its rise in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[3] Recent

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[1] D. Goldberg, ed., *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
[2] M. Bevir, ed., *The SAGE Handbook of Governance* (London: SAGE, 2011).
[3] J. Bartelson, *The Critique of the State* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); A. Eisenberg, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995); J. Gunnell, *Imagining the American Polity: Political Science and the Discourse of Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); C. Laborde, *Pluralist Thought and the State in Britain and France, 1900–25* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); C. Nicholls, *Pluralist State: The Political Ideas of J. N. Figgis and His Contemporaries* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994); D. Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); and M. Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State: Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909–1926* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

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works on the prospects of pluralism have concentrated mainly on con-
temporary debates about multiculturalism and governance. There is,
therefore, a gap in the literature. What happened to pluralism between
the late nineteenth century and today? *Modern Pluralism* fills this gap,
tracing the history of pluralism through the twentieth century and
thereby enriching our understanding of the nature of pluralism and
its contribution to current policies. *Modern Pluralism* brings together
intellectual historians and political scientists to recover the history of
various traditions of pluralism. In doing so, it further illuminates con-
temporary debates on multiculturalism and governance.

### Pluralism and the state

Multiculturalism and governance are examples of pluralism. Pluralism
in general refers to a belief in, or sensitivity to, the diverse kinds of
objects and properties that exist.[4] In politics, pluralism refers more par-
ticularly to a belief in or sensitivity to diversity in society and govern-
ment. Yet, pluralism is itself, perhaps unsurprisingly, a diverse entity.
Different pluralists have focused on varied, although not necessarily
incompatible, types of diversity. They have highlighted the diversity of
cultures and governing organizations, and of occupations, civil asso-
ciations, interest groups, religious faiths, and moral values. Moreover,
different pluralists have placed different emphases on either the more
empirical claim that diversity exists or the more normative claim that
political arrangements should foster or at least recognize diversity.

Pluralism generally contrasts with a monistic focus on one substance
or attribute. In politics, pluralism usually contrasts, more particularly,
with an empirical belief in or normative commitment to a homogenous
nation and a unified sovereign state. Observers have long characterized
states as relatively centralized, uniform, and hierarchical, even as pos-
sessing something like a monopoly of force or authority over their ter-
ritory. The very word "state" evokes a public institution separate from
any society of private individuals. It suggests an entity that can have a
separate existence, at least in law, apart from its citizenry.

The state, so conceived, is a contingent historical phenomenon. The
theory of the state arose haphazardly and with considerable contro-
versy during the Renaissance and Reformation, culminating in the
great texts of Bodin and Hobbes.[5] The concept of the state presupposed

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[4] See recently J. Turner, "Ontological Pluralism," *Journal of Philosophy* 107 (2010),
5–34.
[5] Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge University
Press, 1978).

medieval ideas, notably that of a *persona ficta* – a group having the status
of a person quite apart from the people who form the group. Arguably,
it fused various sources, including French discussions of sovereignty
and Italian works of advice to princes. By the seventeenth century, the
word "state" was being used to refer to civil associations of persons who
were subject to a particular sovereign. Even then, however, the theory
and practice of the state appeared only fitfully. Throughout the seven-
teenth century, people were just as likely to use concepts such as "body
politic." Besides, the consolidation of a single territory under a single
authority was by no means assured.[6] On the contrary, the claims of the
emerging state were challenged and resisted by social groups who were
often jealous of their historic rights, liberties, and powers. Republicans
juxtaposed absolutist concepts of power with more democratic and plu-
ral ones. Some of them advocated a separation of powers in order to
prevent the dominance of any one faction or institution.[7]

Still, even if democrats challenged absolutism, they often accepted
something like a sovereign state. Typically, they too believed in the state
as an association of persons who were subject to a sovereign. They just
argued that the relevant sovereign was not some absolute monarch, but
rather the people themselves. In this respect, republicans and abso-
lutists were often arguing about different forms of legitimate power
within the state, not about the existence or desirability of the state itself.
Republicans argued that citizens, as the body politic itself, were the
original source of sovereignty. Absolutists argued that sovereignty was
located in the person of the monarch, who alone could give direction
to the state. On the one hand, these and other theories could lead to
very different concepts of the state; but, on the other, these different
concepts of the state can generally be seen as sharing some common
features, perhaps most obviously the idea of a unified people and an
indivisible sovereignty. By the mid-eighteenth century, the concept of
the sovereign state thus dominated the theory and practice of public
and international law in Europe. Sometimes the sovereign was literally
a person, as proposed by absolutist theories. At other times, the whole
body of the people formed a sovereign that was then treated as a single
fictive person for legal purposes. Either way, the state appeared to be at

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[6] For intellectual history see A. Black, *Guild and State: European Political Thought from
the Twelfth Century to the Present* (New Bruswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003). For
political practice see L. Coley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1937* (New Haven:
Yale University Press, 1992); and S. Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New
Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[7] J. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic
Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975).

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least somewhat distinct from the society it governed and almost entirely
independent of any external authority.

Modern pluralism seems to have arisen less as a challenge to the
state than as a reaction to an individualist challenge to the state. As
the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, liberal radicals and
utilitarians challenged the legal and political standing of the state. The
most famous example is perhaps Jeremy Bentham's critique of all legal
fictions, and his insistence that law and government be based on actual
individuals and their pleasure and pain.[8] Many radicals began to argue
that the state was just those individuals who happened to make up the
government at some particular point in time. They toyed with the idea
that the state had no standing, as reality or as legal fiction, apart from
the temporally specific set of individuals who formed a government.

One important strand of modern pluralism arose in reaction to the
individualism of the radicals. Lawyers and theologians argued that
groups are at least in some senses persons. They sought to defend the
standing of groups, corporations, and churches. F. W. Maitland and
Neville Figgis, following Otto von Gierke, looked back to the middle
ages and early modern Europe to explore the independent legal and
metaphysical status of various associations.[9] Generally, they empha-
sized the role of contractual relations and relations of trust in the forma-
tion of associations. These relationships provided the legal basis for the
existence of groups as persons. Contracts and trust could thereby free
associations from certain types of control and regulation by the state.
In addition, these pluralists sometimes suggested that the personality of
associations was something more than a legal fiction. Maitland in par-
ticular argued for the real personality of associations. He suggested that
an association could act; it did not have to rely on individual members
acting on its behalf. These pluralists often owed a direct or indirect debt
to Rousseau and Hegel. They were holists who believed that a group is
in a metaphysical as well as legal sense more than the beliefs and actions
of its members. Sometimes they even implied that the principle good
for individuals is the integrity of the groups to which they belong. In
this view, individuals are free when the groups to which they belong can
maintain their own ways of life without external interference. Equally,
however, these pluralists typically applied their view of groups to the
state itself, arguing that the state too is an association with a legal and
arguably real personality. In doing so, they raised the question of the

[8] D. Lieberman, *The Province of Legislation Determined: Legal Theory in Eighteenth-
Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[9] Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*, chapters 3, 5, and 6.

relationship of the state to the associations under it.[10] Figgis in particular argued that all associations, including churches, should have principles that are consistent with those of the state. Maitland and Figgis thereby forged a distinctive liberal tradition of pluralism.

Liberal pluralists were not the only nineteenth-century thinkers to react against the individualism of liberal radicals and utilitarians. Many others, including some radicals, suggested that individuals were part of unified nations and civilizations that developed through history in ways that typically led to statehood. The most obvious examples are the idealists, who, once again following Rousseau and Hegel, evoked the state as the final expression of the common life of a people and even as an object with a will of its own.[11] Yet, appeals to unified nations as the basis of sovereign states were far more widespread than idealism. The nineteenth century saw the nationalization of histories and literatures throughout Europe and beyond.[12] The classic national history narrated the formation and progress of a unified nation-state based on some kind of shared character, language, and ethnicity. Statehood was thereby presented as an integral moment in the progress of nations.

A second strand of pluralism arose in reaction to these nineteenth-century concepts of the nation and especially the state. Philosophers and political scientists argued in a way that sometimes echoed the radicals and utilitarians that the state was just the legal and political processes of government. Some added that the processes of government depended on the activity of competing groups in society, and this activity might bear little relation to the constitution and formal laws. Graham Wallas and Arthur Bentley rejected an overly legalistic approach to the study of politics.[13] They argued, first, that political scientists should study actual processes and behavior rather than formal arrangements, and second, that political power was dispersed across

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[10] Pluralists such as Figgis and Charles Gore were, for example, actively engaged in debates about the disestablishment of the Church of England.

[11] S. Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge University Press, 1972); and P. Nicholson, *The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[12] S. Berger, M. Donovan, and K. Passmore, eds., *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800* (London: Routledge, 1999); and P. Hohendahl, *Building a National Literature: The Case of Germany, 1830–70*, trans. R. Fransiscono (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). The sovereign state also served as a key principle in political science as it arose out of history: see R. Adcock, M. Bevir, and S. Stimson, eds., *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges since 1880* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

[13] A. Bentley, *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures* (University of Chicago Press, 1908); and G. Wallas, *Human Nature in Politics* (London: Archibald Constable, 1908).

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various social groups rather than concentrated in legislatures and exec-
utives. As World War I ended, Harold Laski argued forcefully that the
legal theory of the sovereign state was not only unconvincing but, as
we will see later, also undesirable.[14] These pluralists did not necessar-
ily ascribe any metaphysical or even legal standing to groups. On the
contrary, most of them were overtly critical of organic concepts of the
nation, community, and state. Their pluralism consisted in a growing
recognition that organized interests often played an important role in
modern democratic politics. Constitutional nostrums did not accur-
ately reflect the complexities of modern government. Wallas, Bentley,
and Laski thereby began to introduce a distinctive empirical tradition
of pluralism.

Empirical pluralism was not the only grounds that turn-of-the-
century thinkers had for attacking the state. The most vocal challenges
to the state came instead from the communist and anarchist move-
ments rising in parts of Europe. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and
Engels famously argued that "the power of the modern state is merely
a device for administering the common affairs of the whole bourgeois
class."[15] Less famously, they also wrote that, following the communist
revolution, "the proletariat will use its political power … to centralize
all instruments of production in the hands of the state, ie. the proletar-
iat organised as ruling class."[16] Marx clearly rejected Hegel's organic
harmonious concept of society and the state as remotely adequate
descriptions of contemporary capitalism. However, he also seemed
to leave open the possibility that communism might bring into being
something like a harmonious society and perhaps even an administra-
tive state.

A third strand of pluralism arose when Marxists tried to develop
forms of social action and organization largely independent of bour-
geois politics and the state. By the end of the nineteenth century, the
Fabian socialists were promoting parliamentary and state action as
ways to solve socio-economic injustices.[17] Yet, Marxist ideas continued
to inspire other socialists who opposed Fabian politics. These latter

[14] H. Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917).
[15] K. Marx and F. Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in K. Marx, *Later Political Writings*, ed. T. Carver (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 3.
[16] Marx and Engels, "Manifesto," p. 19.
[17] The clearest example is S. Webb, "The Historic Basis of Socialism," in G. Shaw, ed., *Fabian Essays*, intro. A. Briggs (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962). For discussions see M. Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton University Press, 2011); C. Hill, *Understanding the Fabian Essays in Socialism* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1996); and W. Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

socialists often argued that the solutions to socio-economic injustices had to come from the workers and their industrial organizations. G. D. H. Cole and at times Laski looked to groups of workers organizing and controlling their own activity.[18] They argued that in a socialist society industries should be controlled and run by associations of the relevant workers. The workers in any given industry might form self-governing co-operatives, guilds, and other producer-based associations. Insofar as the state remained necessary, it would play a purely regulatory role, overseeing these other associations. Yet, Cole in particular some-times implied that society, as opposed to the state, should somehow co-ordinate and oversee the associations within it. He seemed to reject the possibility of any organized political unit acting as the legitimate expression of a common good. Cole and Laski thereby forged a dis-tinctive socialist tradition of pluralism.

Modern pluralism may seem to involve a balancing act. On the one hand, some pluralists want to ascribe to groups a particular legal, and at times even metaphysical, standing in order to forestall the onward rush of a modern, atomized, and individualized society devoid of historic ties, bonds, and associations. Equally, on the other hand, some pluralists want to demystify and disaggregate the state so as to fore-stall the similarly rapid advance of the modern state as it intervenes and even controls more and more aspects of individual and social life. Nonetheless, even if pluralism is a balancing act, it is not necessarily incoherent or confused – just complex. There are all kinds of ways in which pluralists might reconcile support for groups with demystifying the state. Most obviously, some pluralists might choose to ascribe a standing to all groups including the state, while others might choose to demystify not only the state but also all groups within civil society. However, there are other, arguably more interesting, ways in which pluralists might seek to demystify and restrict the state and yet to pro-mote and protect civil associations. They might reject the metaphys-ical ascription of identity to groups while arguing that various groups should be given legal standing. They might then argue that all kinds of civil associations – not just the state – should have the legal right to conduct their own affairs. For now, however, the important point is that

[18] M. Newman, *Harold Laski: A Political Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993); and A. Wright, *G. D. H. Cole and Socialist Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). Also see R. Eisfield, "The Emergence and Meaning of Socialist Pluralism," *International Political Science Review* 17 (1996), 267–79; P. Hirst, ed., "Introduction," in *The Pluralist Theory of the State: Selected Writings of G. D. H. Cole, J. N. Figgis, and H. J. Laski* (New York: Routledge, 1989); and Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*, chapters 8 and 9.

modern pluralism is not monolithic. It includes diverse liberal, social-ist, and empirical strands, each containing varying perspectives on the nature of associations and how they might break up the metaphysical, political, and legal standing of unified sovereign states.

The diversity of modern pluralism raises the question of whether the different strands have anything in common other than the use of the word "pluralism." Not only do the main pluralist traditions differ from one another, each has always accommodated a range of views that have changed over time. It is a mistake, therefore, to postulate a core set of beliefs that always appear within pluralism. Aggregate concepts in the history of political thought do not possess that kind of stability; they are not natural kinds. Yet, the lack of an essential core to pluralism does not preclude it being a topic of historical study. Pluralism is best character-ized, like so many concepts, in terms of family resemblances. As I have suggested, pluralists typically share an awareness and preference for diversity and a political suspicion of allegedly homogenous nations and sovereign states. Many have paid attention to the role of sub-national groups and their potential as sites of forms of self-government. More generally, however, the extent to which different strands of pluralism do or do not share anything in common will depend on the level of abstrac-tion at which we treat them. The beliefs of any two pluralists will differ in their details and yet share more abstract themes.

### Historicizing pluralism

The twentieth century opened with modern pluralists challenging the theory and practice of the state. The pluralist challenge to the state then inspired new policies and new worlds, including some features of con-temporary multiculturalism and governance. *Modern Pluralism* traces the history of pluralist ideas and the worlds they helped create.

Pluralists themselves might be especially wary of the danger that the history of pluralism gets told in homogenizing or even statist terms. *Modern Pluralism* draws here on a radical historicism that allows for the diversity and contingency of social and political theories and practices. Radical historicists are wary of describing particular historical develop-ments in relation to a single overarching category, let alone in terms of an apparently natural social entity or teleological process.

*Modern Pluralism* thus employs concepts such as "tradition" and "dilemma" to demarcate its aggregate units.[19] Radical historicists

[19] For a fuller analysis of these concepts and their roles see M. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

conceive of beliefs as contingent in that people reach them against the background of a particular intellectual inheritance, rather than by means of pure reason or pure experience. We thus need a concept akin to tradition in order to demarcate the background that helps to explain how people reach the beliefs they do. Of course, all kinds of words might evoke such a concept, including, for example, "language" and "discourse" as well as "tradition." While the particular word we use is of little importance, there is at times a substantive issue at stake. "Language" and "discourse" sometimes carry lingering echoes of the structuralist hostility to agency and the structuralist preference for syn-chronic explanations. In contrast, "tradition" captures the historical flow of people inheriting webs of belief that influence what they think and do without fixing it. People inherit traditions that they then develop or transform before passing them on to others.

When we use abstract concepts such as tradition, discourse, or lan-guage, we raise the question of how we should analyze and explain change in them. Concepts such as "dilemma" and "problem" suggest that change occurs because agents seek to respond to novel circum-stances and ideas by drawing on the resources of the traditions they have inherited. Here, a dilemma arises whenever a new idea stands in opposition to people's existing beliefs, and so forces a reconsider-ation that results in somewhat new beliefs and typically inspires at least slightly different actions and practices. While dilemmas can derive from theoretical and moral reflection, it is useful to recall that they often arise from experiences of the world. Thus, although we cannot straightforwardly associate dilemmas with social, economic, or political pressures in the "real" world, we can link intellectual history to social, economic, and political history. Beliefs, traditions, and dilemmas are profoundly impacted upon by people's competing experiences of the world about them.

The chapters in *Modern Pluralism* discuss traditions and dilem-mas across a range of levels of aggregation and with varying mix-tures of descriptive and explanatory goals.[20] These traditions and dilemmas differ in scope from broad characterizations of widespread patterns of thought – such as liberalism, socialism, and empirical pol-itical science – to narrower depictions of networks of scholars or even

[20] Other works have described modern pluralism in terms of three traditions that bear at least a family resemblance to those that dominate the following essays. See, in par-ticular, Eisenberg, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism*, chapter 4; and D. Nicolls, *Three Varieties of Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1974). For a notably different – and argu-ably less historicist – typology, see Laborde, *Pluralist Thought*.

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policy-makers – such as guild socialists, Cold War liberals, and difference
theorists. Whatever the scope of the traditions and dilemmas invoked,
radical historicists should be wary of attempts to equate them with a
fixed core and a penumbra that varies over time. Particular traditions
and dilemmas are pragmatic concepts, the content of which depends
on what one wants to explain. They are not natural kinds with essential
properties or necessary trajectories. It is best to think in terms of an
undifferentiated social context of criss-crossing interactions, not a ser-
ies of discrete and identifiable traditions and dilemmas. Historians and
social scientists then choose to slice a particular tradition or dilemma
out of this undifferentiated background in order to explain whatever set
of beliefs, actions, or practices interests them. In this view, particular
traditions and dilemmas are aggregate concepts that we ourselves craft
to suit our particular purposes; they refer to things in the world, but
their borders are defined by us and our purposes. Particular traditions
and dilemmas should not be mistaken for given chunks of the past as
if they and they alone were part of an adequate account of history. Nor
should they be mistaken for structures of thought that fix the diversity
and capacities for change of the individuals located under them. The
criteria for evoking traditions and dilemmas thus vary with the pur-
poses of the narrative being told. From this perspective, the chapters
that follow do not prescribe a new master narrative so much as tell a
series of interlinked stories.

Once we shift attention from homogenizing and statist concepts to tra-
ditions and dilemmas that we craft for our own purposes, we then might
proceed to reconsider the place of national and transnational themes in
the history of pluralism. At times, earlier historiographies have charac-
terized political thought as cosmopolitan and universal in character, as
if it comprised a set of political ideas addressed to perennial philosoph-
ical problems or to scientific truths possessed of a universal validity.
Radical historicism queries any such characterization by emphasizing
that particular beliefs are necessarily embedded in wider webs of belief
and traditions, which are themselves contingent and historical. Political
thought thus appears as an activity by which people make their future
out of their past. Political actors inherit a tradition that they then can
modify and use for their own purposes, perhaps through abstract and
conscious reflection or perhaps through unreflective action. When they
modify their inheritance so as to act in new ways, they thereby remake
the world. The history of political ideas is at least in part the study of the
activity by which people collectively make and remake their commu-
nities. Moreover, because the nation-state is an important expression
of community in the modern world, it is sometimes helpful to situate