Introduction

‘... perhaps we should think of history writing, not as something that engages in the building of national identities, but rather as something that critiques all historical identity-claims, and in doing so, as a by-product, opens a space for constitutional allegiances and behavioural norms that stand at a remove from what is simply given to us by the past.’

Allan Megill’s idea of thinking of history writing as ‘something that critiques all historical identity-claims’ is one that, by implication, highlights the strong correlation between the development of professional history writing since the late eighteenth century and the formation of modern national identities. This book will review key developments in the history of historiography over recent decades, both in traditional historical fields, such as political, social and cultural history, and in more recent sub-fields, such as gender history, memory history, visual history, the history of material culture and global history, among others, in order to investigate to what extent the new history that has been emerging is one that is indeed characterised by critiquing historical identity claims, or, at the very least, being more self-reflexive about those claims. In this chapter I will begin by providing an overview of the manifold links between the writing of history and the construction of collective identities of nations, classes, ethnicities, religions, genders and a host of spatial sub- and transnational identities. This link was built into professional historical writing from its inception in the eighteenth century. As I argue in the second part of this chapter, such links were challenged by diverse developments in the theory of history writing during the 1960s and 1970s. These developments are connected to a range of thinkers who are not easily grouped together under one label. For that reason I discuss them individually rather
than as a united body of theory, even if certain linkages between them will also be discussed. In the third and final part of this chapter, I will comment briefly on the way in which this body of theories has percolated through to the historical profession and led to the making of a new history writing since the 1980s. I introduce some of this new history writing in subsequent chapters of this volume.

The Writing of History and Its Link to Building Collective Identities

Before the eighteenth century, history had often been a sub-discipline of theology at the universities in Europe, i.e. subservient to explaining the history of the Church and of Divine providence in the world. History writing, in other words, was tied to the promotion of religious identity. During the Enlightenment, it became a more secular affair, although the ruptures with religion were usually gradual and should not be exaggerated. Many Enlightenment historians, following their universalising aspirations, sought to trace the emergence of progress through world history, often identifying particular cultures or civilisations in different parts of the world as carriers of progress through the ages. Several authors were not shy to locate the most recent champion of progress in their own nation. Voltaire, for example, in his history of Louis XIV, declared the French nation the most advanced in its customs and habits, whilst his Scottish colleagues William Robertson and Adam Ferguson thought of Scottish commerce and industry as well as Scottish legal and historical thought as marching at the forefront of contemporary progress. By linking the idea of progress to the idea of national character and national development, Enlightenment historians were already pinning history writing to the promotion of national identity. This relationship became ever stronger as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth. The modern historical profession, as we know it today, began to form institutions, networks and communities that allowed historians to set themselves up as the only ones who could speak authoritatively about the past. Their long years of training and practice in the archives and libraries and their methodological and theoretical rigour allegedly gave them a superior vantage point from which to understand the past. This claim was never entirely successful, as many academics from neighbouring disciplines as well as authors operating outside academia continued to write history that was, at
certain times and in certain places, more popular and more influential than academic history writing. I will have to come back to some of these cases in later chapters. But certainly, for about a century, between 1850 and 1950, professional historians rose to prominence, because both those in power and those seeking it sought to harness their professional standing to their own causes, which were often identitarian ones linked to nation-building. In an age of nascent nationalism, historians became prophets of the nation-state, both of existing nation-states, of nations at the core of empires and of nations seeking sovereignty from multinational states or empires. **Methodological nationalism** thus became a central hallmark of the historical profession during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

The link to nation, however, has by no means been the only collective identitarian link that historians forged. I have already referred above to the older links between religion and historical writing. These continued into the modern era, with church and ecclesiastical history remaining an important sub-genre through the long nineteenth century and churchmen playing an influential role among historians in different parts of the world. To this day, religious identity remains an important focus of historical writing wherever diverse world religions are prominent. Religion has played a key role in many of the conflicts of the twentieth century. One thinks, for example, of the civil wars in Ireland, Spain and Yugoslavia. With the rise of political Islam in the last third of the twentieth century, historical writing in many parts of the umma underpinned religious identity, whereas outside the Islamic world, it has been used to serve Islamophobic identitarian discourses. Christian fundamentalism today is strong not only in the United States, but also in parts of Latin America, Asia and Africa. Here too we see history being used in the service of religious communities. In most cases such history is not state-sponsored (with exceptions such as the Islamic Republic of Iran) and it often finds a home outside university history departments, but it still speaks to the resilience of the link between religious identity and historical writing up to the present day.

With the advent of Social Darwinism in the last third of the nineteenth century, historical writing also began to be linked to biology through the controversial concept of race. Whilst some of the most popular propagandists of the idea of the impact of race on historical developments, such as Joseph Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Steward Chamberlain, were not professional historians, racism
certainly struck a chord among many reputable university historians. The case of the Liberal historian Edward Augustus Freeman in England, whose racism was directed against black people and Irishmen alike, is as famous as that of the German liberal conservative historian Heinrich von Treitschke, whose anti-Semitism sparked the Anti-Semitism Dispute in Germany in 1878. After the First World War, a new form of racialised history, one oriented towards the people understood as a racial unit, came to the fore. This occurred especially in some of the countries that had lost the war, above all in Germany, but also in Hungary. In Germany, so-called Volksgeschichte attracted young radical right-wing historians who rose to prominence in the Third Reich and sought to justify forms of ethnic cleansing and genocide in Eastern Europe as well as the expansion of the German Reich on its western and eastern borders. The link to nation had already led a considerable number of historians to justify violence and war in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth the link between historical writing and race made an even more substantial group of historians into indirect apologists for genocide and, outside Europe, in particular in the United States and South Africa, into outright apologists for apartheid regimes. It should, however, also be noted that the link between racial identity and historical writing could serve a range of emancipatory agendas, i.e. in the historical writings on black identities in the USA or in the diverse writings on ‘first nations’ across different parts of the world. Here race was used not in a racist sense but in an attempt to liberate oppressed ethnic minorities from discrimination and social injustice.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries history writing forged another strong identitarian link to class. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ historical materialism amounted to a philosophy of history linking, as it did, class formation to specific historical periods. According to them, history started with an ‘original communist society’ and moved on to a slave-holding society and then to feudalism before arriving at capitalism. It would come to an end with the overthrow of capitalism and the advent of communism. Humankind would at last be liberated from all forms of exploitation. Marxism’s critique of the inequalities produced by capitalism rang a bell with many labour movements across Europe, but it was never the only show in town: religious socialism, ethical socialism, anarchism and liberal socialism were all based on different sets of ideas. Yet at least a large part of the
labour movement everywhere adopted the language of class in an attempt to improve the situation of the workers in the industrialised areas of Europe. Whilst the nineteenth-century labour movement had few supporters among professional historians, who tended to be liberals or conservatives of various shades when it came to politics, labour movement intellectuals, who were at the same time political activists, wrote histories of class and of the labour movement across Europe. Their writing was explicitly meant to strengthen the class identity of class-conscious workers. In its turn this would bolster the organisations of the labour movement, i.e. political parties, trade unions and cooperatives. Only in a few countries, e.g. Britain, did historians sympathetic to class discourse, such as R. H. Tawney and G. D. H. Cole, occupy university positions in the interwar period. They were often at the forefront of developing forms of labour and social history which contested the dominance of political history writing. In most countries, however, the rise of social and labour history only occurred after the Second World War. (See Chapter 3.)

Whilst identitarian links to the histories of nation, religion, race and class have been prominent, historians also forged strong links to sub-national and transnational spatial entities. Thus, much historical writing underpinned local and regional identities, as well as so-called pan-histories, like pan-Germanism, pan-Slavism, pan-Iberianism and pan-Scandinavianism. In addition, European histories and histories of empire have all sought to forge strong identities around those transnational concepts of belonging. Histories of particular cities or regions often preceded the flowering of national histories in the nineteenth century and they have remained strong throughout the modern period. Studies devoted to pan-movements sought to establish commonalities in macro-regions spanning more than one nation. European histories were already conceptualised in the nineteenth century in order to build a European identity vis-à-vis diverse non-European ‘others’. In all nineteenth-century empires history was firmly institutionalised at the universities, and many of the histories produced there were meant to forge strong identitarian ties with and across the empires. There is also a distinguished tradition of global history writing that sometimes rivalled and sometimes strengthened national historical accounts.

The most successful identitarian link ever forged by historical writing was, however, that with the nation. Although the age of the nation was shorter than the age of empire or the age of cities, historical master
narratives were far more important in underpinning nations than either empires or cities. Conceptualisations of the nation were uniquely able to subsume all other identitarian discourses under the language of the nation. Regions became the building blocks of nations in many national histories. Pan-histories served to justify nations’ imperial ambitions, whilst European histories became spatial fields in which particular European missions of specific nations could be exemplified. Imperial histories glorified imperial nations, as can be seen, for example, in J. R. Seeley’s conceptualisation of a ‘Greater Britain’. Global histories could also be related to national missions in the world. Class histories, for their part, were comprehensively nationalised, the nation-state widely being seen as the framework in which the liberation of the working classes would have to take place. Racial histories claimed that particular races formed the core of nations, e.g. the ‘Aryan race’ in National Socialist Germany. Religious history identified nations strongly with particular religions or religious denominations. In Europe one thinks of Catholicism and Poland as well as Spain, Orthodoxy and Romania as well as Russia, Protestantism and Germany as well as England and Scandinavia.

This strong historiographical nationalism turned into hypernationalism in the first half of the twentieth century, dominated, as that was, by the two world wars, a series of genocides, in particular the Holocaust, and unprecedented forms of ethnic cleansing as well as diverse fascist regimes of terror. Historical writing, tied to identitarian concerns, played an important role in justifying all of them. At the end of the Second World War hypernationalism and hypernationalist historiographies had left Europe devastated and exhausted – with tens of millions of dead soldiers and civilians and cities reduced to heaps of rubble. In the immediate post-war period historians struggled to re-establish traditional national historical narratives in the light of the upheaval which had occurred between 1914 and 1945. The search for good national traditions on which to build post-war national identities was only partially successful and met with increasing criticism. The long 1960s amounted to a ‘delayed break’ with traditional historiographical nationalism. Historians began to take a more critical look at national histories.

This more critical perspective was closely related to institutional changes in the historical profession. Across the Western world the massive extension of higher education resulted in thousands of new
jobs in history departments.\textsuperscript{28} It became increasingly impossible for the gatekeepers of the profession to ensure that the discipline retained its political-ideological homogeneity. An increased plurality of forms of history writing associated with different identitarian concerns came to the fore. Political history’s long dominance ended. In many places social history, especially labour history, now became powerful. It was linked to left-wing political identities. The promotion of class discourses was one way of situating history in the political conflicts of the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s. Class was inscribed into nation. Class discourses underpinned hopes for the eventual demise of capitalism by providing a historical tradition of past challenges to the capitalist system. In that political context E. P. Thompson’s \textit{The Making of the English Working Class}, first published in 1963, became an international bestseller.\textsuperscript{29}

The fact that a distinctly left-wing political project became linked to historical writing in the 1960s was a sign that the traditional link between identitarian politics and historical writing had not been weakened by the change from political to social history. The same is true of the rise of women’s history that accompanied the forward march of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Much of it dealt with the discovery of women’s agency and women’s identity in the past. Women had been systematically written out of history by a male profession.\textsuperscript{30} At worst, they had been depicted as being the reason for all the misfortune of nations, races and religions.\textsuperscript{31} Many histories had been thoroughly gendered, all the positive virtues being normally associated with allegedly male values and actions and all the negative ones reserved for their female equivalents. At best historians had recognised that both women and men had to fulfil their roles according to middle-class gender norms established as general norms in the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Feminist, women’s and gender historians thus had an incredibly rich historical field to investigate, and over the decades the canvas has become much more colourful than it was in the 1960s. Having said that, much of this work (see Chapter 5) was strongly linked to identitarian concerns. The same is true of sexual identities: here the rise of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersexual)\textsuperscript{32} histories was massively in line with strengthening LGBTI identities. Once again many of the histories emphasised long periods of discrimination and persecution, whilst at the same time highlighting the agency of people
with LGBTI identities. As Leila Rupp wrote in a book which she hoped would help put LGBTI history into the history curricula in higher education: ‘For contemporary students who identify as transgender or genderqueer, knowing this history can go a long way toward fostering self-acceptance and, we hope, creating a more acceptable environment.’

In the left-wing political atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s, attempts to highlight minority and oppressed identities coincided with a far more critical attitude towards apologetic national history writing and a more trenchant critique of colonialism and imperialism. The latter built on the reception of anti-colonial and postcolonial historical writing that, since the late nineteenth century, had emanated from both the colonial peripheries and its centres. Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, first published in 1961 (in French), became a classic of socialist revolutionary anti-colonial literature and set the tone for a strong link between anti-colonial as well as postcolonial identities and historical writing. It would eventually lead to a questioning of Western understandings of history. Fanon had already written: ‘So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions, and societies that draw their inspiration from it.’ However, history writing, as it was practised in the West, had been a very successful colonial export in the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth. Colonial powers set up academies and universities in their colonies and imported Western sciences, including the ‘science’ of history. Japan, which became a colonial power in the first half of the twentieth century and is often referred to as ‘West in the East’, adapted from the West what it regarded as the core of modernity. In terms of history writing, it learnt from the West, in particular from the German schools of historical writing considered to be the most advanced in the world before 1914. Learning from the West, however, did not mean copying it. Rather, it took the form of adapting in a multitude of different ways Western practices and ideas. Here we should think not so much of countries that export vs. those that import, but rather of circulations and mutual influences. We can observe the strong link between identitarian politics and historical writing in many of these forms of colonial and postcolonial history writing. Japanese imperialism and hypernationalism in the first half of the twentieth century did, after all, underpin much historical writing. The anti-colonial
struggle was likewise strengthened by a good deal of historical writing that took up and adapted the language of historiographical nationalism from the West. Anti-colonial historians tied historical writing to national independence struggles and decolonisation. In Africa, for example, history was explicitly written to give newly decolonised states self-confidence and pride. As Martin S. Shanguhija and Toyin Falola have written: ‘There was a need to furnish Africa and Africans with a historiography that gave purpose and meaning to former colonial subjects and their newfound sense of belonging.’

Where anti-colonial struggles were infused by left-wing ideologies, class narratives united with national(ist) narratives, just as they had done in left-wing class historiographies in the West. In the course of the twentieth century a globalised historical profession came into being imbued with the core principles of a Western understanding of history.

The rise of postcolonialism from the 1980s onwards, which figures in many subsequent chapters, has problematised these forms of Westernised universalisation without finding a solution to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s famous statement that Western thought, whilst remaining ‘indispensable’, was at the same time ‘inadequate’. In its move from the margins of India and the postcolonial world to the metropolitan centres of academic knowledge production in the USA and Europe, postcolonialism has contributed much to the problematisation of Eurocentrism. But it has also moved towards establishing a project primarily concerned with establishing cultural difference between the West and ‘the rest’. In so doing it has at times lost sight of the other important project with which postcolonialism started, namely giving a voice to the subaltern classes in the postcolonial world. In the contemporary globalised world, their disadvantaged position continues. Moving them back to the centre of the postcolonial project requires renewed attention to developing the political economy without losing sight of the importance of establishing cultural differences.

In subsequent chapters I will attempt, where possible, to look beyond the borders of the West and incorporate non-Western historiographies. But, of course, many of the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of histories I discuss still have Western origins. They were, after all, formulated in the centres of knowledge production in the West. A certain Western-centrism perhaps is unavoidable in our discussion.
Questioning Historiography’s Link to the Building of Collective Identities: Developments in the Theory of History during the 1960s and 1970s

By the 1970s, historical writing was underpinning intersecting and intermingling collective identities. Since all collective identities are always situational, depending on context, sometimes one seemed more prominent than the other and was emphasised more in historical writing. The critical national tradition that emerged in the West from the 1960s onwards questioned the link between nationalism and historical writing but was much more willing to accept a link between it and class consciousness. It tended to be strongly tied to an understanding of history as a form of Enlightenment drawing on Enlightenment traditions from the eighteenth century onwards. It is no coincidence that one of Germany’s foremost ‘critical’ historians, Jürgen Kocka, published one of his essay collections under the title ‘History and Enlightenment’. As I have argued above, Enlightenment history was itself infused with identitarian concerns, and most historians in the 1960s and 1970s retained this link. The only change was that their concern moved from nationalist concerns to a series of progressive political ones that had to do with the emancipation of hitherto oppressed identities, such as workers, women, the colonised and a whole range of minority ethnic and sexual identities.

Theorists of history who championed the link between enlightened progressive concerns and historical writing also tended to uphold the link between historical writing and the formation of collective identities. One of the most internationally prominent was the German philosopher of history, Jörn Rüsen. For him it was unthinkable to engage in historical writing without thinking about identity: ‘The question of identity is a fundamental fact of human culture. It demands a response. Historical thinking is an essential medium for that response.’ Rüsen was very much aware of the strong link between identity, historical consciousness and ethnocentrism. Historical writing has constructed exclusionary mechanisms that created both an individual and a collective ‘self’ allegedly more valuable and worth more than the ‘other’. In this fashion, historical consciousness served a range of inhumane ends. Yet there was, according to Rüsen, no way of escaping the question of identity. Hence he has spent decades developing a universal theory of humanism which would reconcile the values of