FINANCIAL TIMES

March 8, 2013 5:01 pm

'The Undivided Past', by David Cannadine

By Mark Mazower

For David Cannadine, historians should look beyond the clash of religions, classes and civilisations to what unites us – but there are problems with an appeal to common humanity. Mark Mazower reviews 'The Undivided Past'

The Undivided Past: History Beyond Our Differences, by David Cannadine, *Allen Lane RRP£20/Knopf RRP$26.95 (April), 352 pages*

"Whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat." This was the view of the early French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon but we may safely assume it is not David Cannadine's. His new book, *The Undivided Past*, is on one level an investigation into the many ways in which historians have sought to make sense of the disordered material before them, superimposing categories from the present to give it shape and form. But his main purpose is to exhort us to overcome our differences. Do the fissures of nation and faith even really exist? Or are they nothing more than figments of the imagination of previous generations? Perhaps those who struggled and fought in the name of country and cross were following chimeras? Whether or not they were,

Cannadine urges us to see through them and look past them, to get away from the old chestnuts of class, race, gender and the rest, and to concentrate on exploring what brings us together.

Cannadine, a professor of history at Princeton, is particularly concerned that fellow-members of his guild have contributed more than their fair share to the disharmony of mankind and he is anxious to see them use their talents more positively. The book thus rests upon a detailed account of what historians have been up to and, in particular, what they have said about the big six collective solidarities – religion, nation, class, gender, race and civilisation – that Cannadine argues have divided people and made them fight one another. I cannot think of another scholar who has so sweepingly dismissed the whole idea of history as identity politics. Readers who want to know the twists and turns of scholarly debates on the Christianisation of the Roman empire, or the causes of nationalism's emergence, or the declining relevance of class as a social category of analysis, will find plenty to ponder: Cannadine is widely read across an impressive array of periods and he gives nicely potted summaries of many of the important debates of the past half century.

Yet, only a short way into the book, one begins to notice something a little odd: historians in this telling seem to be behaving rather well. For the overwhelming thrust of contemporary research in more or less whichever field you turn to appears to be along the lines of Cannadine's debunking thesis. Historians are now telling us that religions turn out to be porous, not impermeably sealed, as often tolerant as fanatical; also, that class and race are both pretty limited in describing anything in the real world. More of them today spend their time demystifying the nation-state than lauding it. If Cannadine's account of the state of the field is right, then isn't the profession already doing what he wants?

Let us give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, there is no use denying that however much on the side of the angels historians may be now, in the past they have done their fair share of rabble-rousing. The real issues raised by this book lie at a rather deeper level. Appalled by the Manichean rhetoric that emanated from the Bush administration after 9/11, Cannadine wants us to abandon Us and Them, and to eschew such polarised modes of thought, what he calls "the impulse ... to sunder all the peoples of the world into belligerent collectivities" that has been around as long as mankind itself.

Yet this Age of Terror emphasis on binaries, on polarisation – between faiths, civilisations or nations – is more than a little misleading. For theorists of nation or class, for instance, those categories were often neither exclusive nor, indeed, terminal. Marxists believed that class struggle was necessary only so long as humanity's basic goals remained unrealised. Heck, even Proudhon felt that way. The greatest 19th-century theorist of nationalism, the Italian Giuseppe Mazzini, told his many followers that to be a nationalist was to be an internationalist. This was

precisely the reasoning that inspired the creators of great global institutions such as the League of Nations to give them the form of clubs of member nation-states and that allowed President Woodrow Wilson, one of Mazzini's most ardent admirers, to be both a proud American patriot and a confirmed internationalist.

Overcoming our differences sounds great. It is about as hard to denounce as Christmas. But might there not be losers as well as winners in this game? Try telling the unemployed they should focus on what they have in common with billionaires and reflect on who has gained or lost out from the collapse of the language of class. Categories that Cannadine finds wanting have underpinned many of the decisive struggles in our time. In one case, he accepts this – noting that in the second wave of feminism, women's groups achieved lasting civil rights gains. Nothing so positive emerges from his chapters on race, nation or class. Yet it is often the relatively powerless who have chosen to name things the powerful would have rather ignored, and who in naming them have helped improve their lot.

Class may have turned out to be a fairly useless category for some generations of historians. But it was a pretty indispensable part of the toolkit of organised labour and not irrelevant to the struggle to raise workers' living standards. Race may have been invoked to justify slavery; but it was later asserted to win rights for slaves' descendants as well. Nationalism was emancipatory before it turned into its own form of tyranny. And, for many centuries, solidarity itself was regarded as a virtue; in 1981, when martial law was declared in Poland, every good western liberal was in support of it.

Now, *The Undivided Past* suggests, the only solidarity that is acceptable is solidarity with humankind: nothing less will do because anything more partial risks dividing us, and division means fisticuffs or worse. Yet is there not something ultimately quietist about writing off many of the conceptual vehicles that have previously allowed people to mobilise? Not all conflict, after all, is bad and justice sometimes may even require it.

Behind Cannadine's story of identities that need to be shrugged off is the interesting intellectual question of when we all got so hung up on this business of identity and started seeing it as something limiting rather than liberating. Nazism and fascism took the shine off nationalism for many European liberals. "Identity" began to be used in the contemporary sense sometime in the 1950s but it acquired a harder and more negative edge during the culture wars on British and American campuses. In an earlier book, *Ornamentalism* (2001), Cannadine criticised Edward Saïd's influential account of Orientalism by claiming that in the British empire divisions of class trumped race. In *The Undivided Past* he seeks to do away with such categories completely, trumping them by an appeal to our common humanity.

Yet terms such as "the human condition" are no less problematic than the six he highlights and simply shift the identity problem to a new level. The cause of humanity has often lent itself to ideological misuse but these days, in particular, we face a bewildering proliferation of "the human" in global affairs – from human rights and humanitarianism to human security and human development. One therefore looks for Cannadine to provide more information than he does on the new kind of history that he has in mind to improve our lot.

Might it focus on connections and communications – in the vein, perhaps, of Fernand Braudel's epic history of the Mediterranean? Or on capitalism and commerce – the market as the salvation of mankind? One imagines a kind of history as dreamt up by The Economist. And then one thinks of Paul Gootenberg's *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (2009), a superb recent history that showed the connections between South American peasants and well-heeled partygoers in New York, and wonders if that was exactly what Cannadine had in mind. Or might it be history with the nasty bits left out – a story of people being nice to one another, or brilliantly creative, or generous, the kind of history today's oligarchs or yesterday's robber barons would perhaps like us to write, skating quickly over the shadier side of how their billions piled up and dwelling on their munificence?

It is true that many historians will find themselves occasionally pondering why they spend so much time describing human nastiness and so little on virtue or beauty. Yet the best example we have of a genuinely cosmopolitan history with an ameliorist agenda – Unesco's *History of Humanity* – hardly constitutes strong evidence of its intellectual viability. On the contrary, it was way back in 1965 that historian Jack Plumb described one of the volumes in that series as having the effect of "an encyclopaedia gone berserk, or re-sorted by a deficient computer". As for the European Union's own efforts to fund cheerleading histories in the spirit of *e pluribus unum*, they have been a complete waste of money and certainly don't seem to have furthered the cause of integration.

The truth of the matter is that historians are members of their society – or societies – and their writings form part of the larger conversations that take place around them. They may talk primarily to one another but even then they are also responding to issues of common concern. One form human society has so far not generally taken is global. There is still virtually no shared consciousness globally of common struggles or common achievements. Enormous groups – the poor in the Global South for instance – have no sense of forming a single community; in an earlier age, the experience of being subjected to European colonial force failed to create a common anti-colonial front. Even today's most urgent global issues tend to be tackled regionally or nationally: the history of global warming or organised crime is a history of multiple actors, as often as not talking at cross-purposes. There may be many things beyond our differences. But it is not clear that there is any history – at least not yet.

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