

## **Histories, Logics and Politics: An Interview with Mark Bevir**

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**Although he has written extensively on a broad array of topics, Mark Bevir is most famous for his influential and controversial book *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). In a wide-ranging interview, Bevir responds to a number of criticisms and mischaracterizations of the book, clarifies his aims in writing it, and identifies his relationship of his postfoundationalism to both analytical and continental philosophy. Additionally, Bevir articulates a hitherto unexpected ethical dimension to the work, suggesting that it seeks to provide for a philosophy of the human sciences that incorporates those capacities for agency and reasoning that make us fully human and are thus deserving of respect. As such, he connects the book to the broader web of moral and political beliefs that underpin his work as a whole.**

SS: Perhaps I could begin by asking you to give us a brief genealogy of your thought. How did you come to be interested in what you call *The Logic of the History of Ideas*?

MB: Before I answer your questions, I would like to thank you for the interest you are showing in my work. That interest is most kind and most gratifying. To answer your question, though, I began seriously thinking about questions in the philosophy of history in an attempt to sort out an approach that could inform my own historical work. At the time, I was working on British socialist thought during the late nineteenth century. That was the topic of my doctorate. Then, soon after I finished my doctorate, I began to write about the philosophical questions, and eventually—far too long afterwards, but eventually—that latter work came together in *The Logic of the History of Ideas*.

SS: What is your philosophical background? Who were the figures who led you

into this interest in philosophy?

MB: As a graduate student, I went to various philosophy courses, all of which were broadly analytic. Wittgenstein was probably the philosopher I read most at that time. In fact, apart from Wittgenstein most of my reading in what is called analytic philosophy was built around topics rather than particular authors. In addition, I was a member of the Society for the Study of German Philosophy, which—despite its name—explored continental philosophy broadly, and through it I became interested in Gadamer and Foucault.

SS: The philosopher Jonathan Glover has noted that the distinction between ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ philosophy is somewhat counter-intuitive: the distinction between a method and a geographic location. You are a self-described ‘postfoundationalist’ who uses terms such as ‘logic’, ‘intention’, ‘truth’, ‘objectivity’ and ‘reason’. What kind of postfoundationalist are you?

MB: Well, I think that postfoundationalism entails, more than anything else, a rejection of epistemic foundations. That is, it entails a rejection of the belief that there are pure experiences or a pure reason that could provide our knowledge with a guarantee of truth or certainty. I’m exactly that sort of epistemological postfoundationalist. I don’t believe that we have pure experiences of the world and I don’t believe that our reason is uncontaminated by our local assumptions. Because I don’t believe those things, I don’t believe that we have certain knowledge of the world. I don’t believe we even *could* do so. However, while I’m an epistemological postfoundationalist, I don’t see this postfoundationalism as leading to the views about human subjectivity and the nature of mind that are associated with the poststructuralists.

SS: Such as?

MB: In particular I am not at all convinced that being an epistemological postfoundationalist requires you to see the individual—the human subject—as wholly constructed by discourse. I accept that postfoundationalism implies the self is not autonomous, where the autonomous view of the self is that the self can reach beliefs or perform actions wholly uninfluenced by society or context. Epistemological postfoundationalism asserts that we cannot have pure reason or pure experiences, which surely means we cannot reach beliefs solely by ourselves, which, in turn, undercuts this concept of autonomy. However, to reject the autonomous view of the self is not necessarily to see the self simply as the construct of discourse. There is a middle position available to us. We can take the self to be an agent. Agency should be understood, in this context, in terms of the ability to modify or transform the beliefs that we inherit from society—the discourses we find in society—and to do so for reasons of our own. To ascribe to the self this ability to transform an inheritance—a social discourse, if you like—is not in any way to presuppose autonomy. After all, we

could transform an inheritance through reflecting on it from a position that is already within it, rather than from a position that alleges to be outside of it.

SS: You have suggested that, and I certainly see it this way, your work lies between ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ philosophy. It is clear what you take from ‘continental’ postfoundationalism. What do you think you take from the analytic tradition?

MB: Most obviously I think I take a style from it—a style that strives to be clear and precise in its use of terms and, therefore, in the status of the arguments that it is making. I also think I take from the analytic tradition a certain type of self-reflexivity. Analytic philosophers are often very aware of what they think constitutes a truly philosophical argument. They work hard to offer arguments that work philosophically given their various accounts of philosophy. They try to avoid muddling philosophical and other forms of argumentation in a way that might leave the former vulnerable. Of course, analytic philosophers sometimes rely on empirical assumptions, but when they do so they like to be clear that that is what they are doing; they like to be clear that the argument rests on these, and just these, empirical assumptions. So, I think there is a self-reflexivity in analytic philosophy which consists of being aware of what you think constitutes a philosophical and legitimate argument, being concerned to make just such an argument, and being concerned to highlight the moments when you bring in assumptions from outside philosophy. I inherit that sort of self-reflexivity from analytic philosophy, I think.

SS: That’s very interesting because it seems that many poststructuralists and postmodernists are *obsessed* with the idea of their own self-reflexivity. Do you think that this is something that they are not quite achieving that you can bring in from analytical philosophy?

MB: There are no doubt different types of self-reflexivity. If you are going to be self-reflexive about the arguments you are making, then you have to be self-aware of some sort of meta-theoretical stance that you hold, and you have to work hard to ensure that the sorts of arguments you offer are at least consistent with that meta-theoretical stance. However, people can give all sorts of content to such self-reflexivity, depending on the content of the particular meta-theoretical stances they hold. So, poststructuralists can be self-reflexive in one way because they hold one meta-theoretical stance, and analytic philosophers can be self-reflexive in another way because they hold a different meta-theoretical stance. On one level, then, I would say that both are self-reflexive. On another, however, I guess I would question whether the notion of self-reflexivity that dominates poststructuralism is quite that I am ascribing to analytic philosophy.

SS: How do you see the difference?

MB: Well, I think some poststructuralists—Derrida is an obvious example—possess a clear meta-theory. They have a view of legitimate argumentation that drives the form of the arguments they make. But in the work of others, almost certainly including some of the later—I am trying not to be rude here [*laughs*], not to get into the game of naming names—some of the later popularizers and practitioners of the movement, I don't think that sort of self-reflexivity is present. They tend to understand self-reflexivity in terms of stylistic devices. Self-reflexivity consists, in their work, of various avant-garde and other strategies by which an author seeks to render their own role, and that of their text, present in the text itself, or, much, much worse, it consists simply of one elliptical qualification and evasion after another. No doubt they often adopt these strategies for what we might describe as meta-theoretical reasons, notably a commitment to perspectivism. Nonetheless, they do not appear to have formed clear views on what forms of argument are legitimate given such a commitment, let alone on how these arguments operate logically. Instead they deploy all sorts of arguments—at times arguments that have contradictory forms—'to defend their position' or 'to illuminate their material', as if the position is given outside of its defense or as if the material is given prior to the arguments and theories by which they construct it.

SS: Talking of the poststructuralists: one of your complaints about their work seems to be the way that it removes agency from human action. Is this a political or a methodological objection? What is the connexion between the two?

MB: If I had to pick between the two—well, let's just say that it's a theoretical objection and that my grounds for making it are theoretical, but that I think it has some political connotations. So, it is a theoretical objection in that I believe that people are agents and that if you don't take their agency seriously you cannot write adequate history, or at least you cannot write the sort of history I think historians should write. In my view, as I said earlier, postfoundationalist epistemology requires us to give up the notion of the subject as autonomous, but it doesn't require us to give up agency. On the contrary, we need a concept of agency in order to pin down the *particular* set of beliefs and actions that an individual ends up adopting against the range of those that are available in society. And we also need a concept of agency in order to explain how individuals modify and transform the discourses they find in society.

SS: What is the connexion between theory and practice in your work? There are, for example, some writers whose historical work you respect or admire but whose theoretical underpinnings you find questionable at best. I am thinking of Skinner and some of Pocock's work. What is at stake for you in these debates over methodology?

MB: I think that, on the one hand, all historical studies presuppose some kind of logic. Any historical study whatsoever will embody some sort of view of the objects that exist in the world—do beliefs have real historical existence? Do economic structures have real historical existence? It also will embody views about what forms of explanation are appropriate to such objects—should we explain beliefs in terms of traditions, or by reference to the economic base, or as products of semiotic structures? And, finally, it will embody some implicit notion of how to justify one historical account over another—do we need to point to evidence? What sort of evidence? How critical should we be in judging the evidence? Do we need to argue that our story is better than others or can evidence alone do the trick? So, what I am trying to suggest is that any historical study will embody these three aspects of a logic. On the other hand, however, although all historical studies embody implicit logical assumptions, I don't think a logic ever determines the stories one tells. Instead the story a historian tells is a product of how he or she reads and uses historical material in the framework of a logic.

What does this mean in practical terms about how we might judge different historical stories? I think it means that whenever we read a historical work, it embodies an implicit logic. The logic might be vague around the edges, or it might be clear and precise, maybe formalized in some other work by that author, but there will always be a logic embodied within it. Insofar as we disagree with the logic embodied in some work, there probably will be aspects of the work that we feel uncomfortable with. For instance, if we read some old-fashioned Marxist work that presupposed cultural life could be explained in economic terms, and if our logical beliefs denied that this was so, then we would probably find some aspects of that history inadequate or problematic precisely because it embodied a logic with which we disagreed. However, because logics don't fix the stories people tell, we can sort of detach a story from the logic embodied within it. Once we do that, moreover, then—as if the story were a piece of putty—we can reshape it so as to press it onto a different logical framework. In this way, we can come to read a story based on a logic with which we disagree as if it were based on a logic more to our liking. We thus can fashion a different story, which nonetheless bears a strong relationship to the original one. And the new story that we thereby create can provide us with insights, even though it is one that we have created out of a work with which we disagree.

SS: Do you think that when Skinner *et al.* do produce what you consider to be valuable historical work, they are actually doing what you are suggesting but that they misunderstand their own approach, or that they misdescribe it?

MB: No. Can I leave it there? [*Laughs*]. No, I think that they are writing a history tied—often loosely—to their own logics, logics with which I disagree. And yet I am finding that they nonetheless reach insights that I reread in terms of my logic so as to find them valuable. Or to put the matter differently, I think

that they're doing history with a logic different from mine, but our logics overlap in ways that provide aspects of a shared framework within the context of which I can find their work valuable. For instance, both Foucault and I believe that you need to understand the progress of intellectual history or the history of discourses in terms of a concept like tradition, discourse, or *episteme*, rather than as a series of great thinkers having debates with past great thinkers, although that of course does happen occasionally. Consequently I can feel sympathy for the sort of discourses Foucault picks out; I can think 'oh yes those *are* things that I would recognize as traditions that have a powerful presence in our society'.

SS: Alan Megill has suggested that *The Logic of the History of Ideas* is a 'thought experiment' like Rawls's 'Original Position', or Putnam's 'brain in a vat'.<sup>1</sup> How would you respond to this suggestion?

MB: Well, I don't think it is really, although it depends, I suppose, on what is meant by 'thought experiment'. I think that the *Logic* is an attempt to unpack a set of beliefs or theories that are implicit in the way that most of us, perhaps even all of us today, already conceive of the world. So, because we conceive of the world in a way *p*, and because I think I show that *p* entails *q*, where *q* is the theories and beliefs expressed in the *Logic*, therefore our believing *p* already means that we should believe those theories *q* for which I argue. I see all of this as an attempt to use philosophical arguments to draw out some of the beliefs and theories that are implicit within the way we already see the world and thereby show us what we already should be thinking and doing, or even what we already *are* thinking and doing. So, in those very broad terms I really do not think the *Logic* is a thought experiment at all. However, there are times when I definitely do use particular thought experiments as techniques for making such philosophical arguments. At times, I set up an imaginary situation and I say 'how would we think about that situation', and then I suggest that the way in which we think about that situation shows that we believe a range of theories or beliefs which are those I'm defending in the *Logic*.

SS: You don't think there's anything *performative* about your work?

MB: I think the book as a whole is a series of philosophical arguments rather than a thought experiment, but I think that it sometimes performs its philosophical arguments by means of specific thought experiments.

SS: What is the aim of the *Logic*? What is the value of your work to historians?

MB: It aims, through philosophical argument, to draw out the beliefs and theories we hold about the nature of historical objects and the forms of

1. A. Megill, 'Imagining the History of Ideas', *Rethinking History* 4 (2000), pp. 333-40.

explanation appropriate to them as well as the ways we can legitimately justify particular stories. Most of the issues about historical objects, forms of explanation and forms of justification that I address are prominent issues in the philosophy of history and social theory. To that extent, the book also aims to speak to a series of issues in the philosophy of history and social theory. All of which leaves open the question, what payoff does the book have for historians? One of several answers to that question is that because I think the *Logic* is right—if I didn't think it was right I wouldn't have written it—I think historians would be well advised to write histories which embody the positions it defends. Mind you, part of what I argue in the *Logic* is that because we can't have certain knowledge, objectivity depends on a comparison of competing views, so although I think historians would be well advised to adopt the theories and beliefs of my logic, I certainly don't want to legislate to make it *compulsory* that they do so. Clearly, they should adopt whatever logic *they* happen to hold; I just hope my work will do something to convince them of the validity of the logical assumptions and beliefs in which I believe.

SS: Or to look for their own?

MB: Yes, absolutely. Or, at the very least, I hope it will prompt them to recognize that in so far as we don't have pure experiences, all history must embody some logical assumptions; and I hope this recognition will then prompt them to engage in their own theoretical reflections about the sorts of logical assumptions that their work embodies.

SS: Some critics of your work have bemoaned what they see as your reluctance to engage with specific historical examples. Do you think this is a fair criticism?

MB: Let me start with the question, why do I treat examples in the way I do? The long answer is in the first chapter of the *Logic* [*laughs*]. Still, as I just said, my aim is to use philosophical argument to draw out implications of the beliefs or concepts we already hold. One way of doing that is by exploring the intuitions we have about certain cases; in fact, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, that is the key method for so doing. Thus, the question is, why do I use or not use actual historical examples as the cases about which we have intuitions? Well, the intuitions I'm trying to get at are often complex ones that can be drawn out only through discussion of an artificially constructed case. When that is so, I *can't* use a historical example since no historical example hits the particular conceptual distinction that I am after. So, the usual reason why I construct artificial examples is that they alone can do the argumentative work I want the cases to do. When I want the example to hit a particular intuition and that intuition is not one that can be drawn out from an historical example, then obviously I have to eschew historical examples.

However, examples can play another role in philosophy. Instead of drawing out intuitions, they can illustrate an argument. I suspect that when my critics

refer to my lack of examples, they are confusing these two roles. So, it is true that I avoid historical examples when I try to draw out intuitions, and I do so because historical examples wouldn't help to draw out the relevant intuitions, but that doesn't mean that I am unwilling to engage in historical examples as a way of illustrating my work. At this point, I suppose, the critics of whom you talk might ask, 'why don't you use historical examples to illustrate your work?' And, if we're focusing solely on the *Logic*, I suppose my answer would have to be a mixture of my aesthetic tastes and the economics of publishing. I preferred to write a book that was a straight philosophical argument, rather than also being an application of that argument. And, the book came out at about 140,000 words which I am sure Cambridge thought was quite long enough without me also adding a series of applications. However, although the *Logic* includes few examples of its own application, I *have* attempted such applications elsewhere. In theoretical essays, such as 'Mind and Method and the History of Ideas', I illustrate my objections to other theorists specifically by reference to their historical writings.<sup>2</sup> And in other essays, particularly those on British socialism, I attempt to use the theories of the *Logic* to illuminate my own historical interests.

SS: And yet, in your work, and in certain interviews and conversations, you have criticized what you consider to be a problematic approach to political theory in the United States in particular: using certain canonical texts as a kind of ventriloquist's dummy to address the theorist's own concerns. You suggest that theorists should make philosophical arguments for their own position. Why? Is this to do with *purity of argument*? Why can't theorists simply use texts to interrogate their political concerns? Isn't this what the text means for them?

MB: I don't mean to imply that historians and theorists *cannot* use texts in that way. What I mean to imply is that if they do so, they should be clear that this is what they are doing. So, at the end of your question you said 'isn't that just what the text means for them?' And I'm quite happy with that formulation. If a theorist wants to write about what a text means for them, they should do so. What I am against is when they suggest not only that it is what the text means for them, but in some sense, that it is what the text *means*, or that it is an obvious or necessary implication of the text.

SS: Self-reflexivity?

MB: I suppose so, yes.

SS: Is this also perhaps indicative of a concern with authority in your work?

2. *History and Theory* 36 (1997), pp. 167-89.



MB: That depends on what you are trying to pack into the word ‘authority’. My hostility to ventriloquist acts clearly connects to a concern about epistemic authority. I want people to provide suitable authority—evidence or argument—for the positions they want to uphold. If they fail to do so, I don’t see that their positions can have proper epistemic purchase—their positions lack validity unless we fill in the arguments for them. I would be less comfortable, however, if the suggestion were that I want to exercise my authority over the sorts of arguments that they can try to make. Obviously there’s at least one sense in which that’s true. I have views about what arguments are appropriate, and that means I am trying myself to argue for what I think are appropriate ways of using texts. However, the mere fact that I am doing that doesn’t mean that I am trying to do so by an imposition of authority as power or force. Rather, I am trying to do so by offering what I hope are convincing arguments.

SS: I meant, I think, that you were responding to a sort of ‘name dropping’ as a foundation for justification or argument.

MB: Oh yes, that’s right. At times people seem to hang their arguments on canonical figures as if doing so lent authority to their arguments. In contrast, I would make a clear distinction between the authority an argument has because it’s a strong argument, and the authority it has because we rightly or wrongly associate it with some well-known figure. Who makes an argument does not seem to me to make any significant difference to its intellectual merit.

SS: You work on the philosophy of history, and you now hold a position as a professor of political theory. What do you see as being the connexion between the two?

MB: Gosh, how to get into that question? Well, one way is this. Earlier I said that the *Logic* seeks to identify the nature of historical objects and the forms of explanation and justification appropriate to them. It thereby deals with a range of issues in the philosophy of history and social theory. Now, these issues—issues about agency, narrative, relativism, holism, interpretation, etc.—are issues that arise across the human sciences as a whole. So, my work covers the human sciences as a whole, including political theory. However, your question might have a slightly different import. One aspect of *political* theory, which might seem more distinctive, is the prominence within it of ethical questions about how we ought to order society—questions of freedom, equality, and justice. The links between my philosophical beliefs and this sort of political theory are far less clear.

SS: What are they?

MB: At a very general level I don’t think that positions in the philosophy of language, epistemology or the philosophy of action ever lead inexorably to any

particular ethical or political position. Nonetheless, our beliefs have to fit reasonably well with one another in what I call, following Quine, a 'web of beliefs'.<sup><OK? Book is called 'the web of belief'></sup><sup>3</sup> As a result, there has to be some sort of link between the beliefs we hold about epistemology, philosophy of language or philosophy of action on the one hand, and those we hold about ethics or politics on the other. You might say that the arguments of the *Logic* exert a pressure toward certain ethical or political outcomes. Or you might just say that I at least think that the beliefs expressed in the *Logic* fit with my more political beliefs. So, for me while agency and local reasoning appear in the *Logic* as ways of framing adequate empirical studies of human life, they also exert a pressure on us to take seriously ethical claims that people are worthy of a certain consideration, notably in their everyday lives and ordinary practices. I believe all human beings at all times are encountering slightly new situations which require them to innovate or develop their inheritance in different ways through their own agency and local reasoning, and I think that lends a certain value to their everyday lives. The *Logic* seeks to provide a philosophy of the human sciences that allows for those capacities for agency and reasoning that thus make us human. Then, when we turn to ethics, I think we need to remind ourselves always to respect other people's capacity for those things.

SS: Much of your work ends with a suggestion about the writing of future stories. Whose job is it to write such stories? How will they be written? And what is the role of the theorist in this?

MB: Let's take those one at a time. What was the first one?

SS: Whose job is it to write such stories?

MB: Anyone who wants to. What's the next one?

SS: How will they be written?

MB: In a variety of ways—by typing at computers, by pen, by speaking, or by acting. They will be written by all sorts of people exercising their local reason, whether consciously or not, in order to respond to circumstances or ideas that confront them as new, no matter how trivially.

SS: And what's the role of the theorist?

MB: All the stories that people write in all these ways will embody logics, at least implicitly. The role of the theorist is to reflect on different logics and to argue for that which he or she believes to be right. Mind you, the theorist too is just telling stories. So, instead of saying what is the role of the theorist in the

3. W. Quine and J. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House, 1970).

telling of the stories, we might ask, what type of stories do theorists tell? Imagine a house full of people telling stories: in one room theorists tell their stories while other people drift in and out; in the other rooms historians and others tell their stories while theorists drift in and out; and, of course, the same person can tell stories in more than one room, or even tell the same story in different rooms. There are no clear demarcations in practice between the sorts of stories people tell at different times.

SS: But would it be wrong to suggest that, for you, the stories that theorists tell have to be more rigorously told? What's the difference between a theorist and a poet?

MB: I don't think it is necessarily the case that the stories theorists tell have to be more rigorous than those told by other people. What is the case is that all stories seek to convince, amuse, or both. Insofar as we want our stories to convince, we aim to establish their truth by various means, one of which is argumentative rigor. Theorists are thus subject to a pressure to try to make their stories rigorous. But so are other story-tellers if they want to be convincing. I think that's true of all stories. Nonetheless, we might say that the more abstract the stories we tell—the more philosophical they become—the more the criteria by which we judge whether or not they are convincing are criteria of argumentative rigor. That would seem likely if only because evidence generally plays a less direct role in philosophical arguments.

To pick up on the particular contrast with the poet, an awful lot depends on how you define the poet, whether in terms of our everyday understanding, of Hayden White's poetics, or Rorty's strong poet. Still, I think I would want to say that a poet is more likely than a theorist to be seeking to amuse as well as, if not instead of, seeking to convince. In addition, insofar as a poet is seeking to convince, it seems to me that poets typically try to convince by making us recognize something: we read a poem, we think 'ah yes, I recognize that', and it's our recognition of it that makes it valid or convincing for us. Theorists, in contrast, are more likely to try to convince by argument. Of course, arguments too ask for a type of recognition in that they convince us only if we recognize their lucidity. But the type of recognition is different. With arguments, we recognize the lucidity of the reasoning as if it imposes a new belief upon us. With poetry, we recognize the suggestion or an image or an expression as if it chimes with something we already believe. These two types of recognition are not incompatible nor are they a dichotomy. They are ideal types to which different modes of expression tend.

SS: That's how it is, or that's how you would like it to be?

MB: Oh, I think that that's how it should be, and probably how it is too. Indeed, I think it is more like that than I would like it to be. In other words, theory and poetry are more polarized than I would like them to be. I think that analytic

philosophy—despite the drift towards holism and postfoundationalism—still retains a sense that argument somehow can get going irrespective of context, whereas I think argument can get going only in some sort of narrative or poetic context complete with the associated type of recognition. And I think that literature, despite the massive impact of modernism—and I mean modernism, not postmodernism—still often clings to the romantic ideal of the poet who hits huge insights that somehow side-step or render irrelevant critical interrogation, whereas I think that insights have to confront theoretical argumentation if we are properly to accept them as valid.

SS: Your work is especially well known and widely discussed in Europe, with numerous roundtables, journal issues and so forth devoted to it. Why do you think this is? Do you think you are a particularly European thinker?

MB: I guess the obvious answer is because I have spent most of my working life in Europe. But I also do think that, yes, my concerns are perhaps particularly European. Philippe Carrard recently pointed out that the French scholars who contributed to a prestigious collection, *Le Modèle et Le Récit*, had very different shared references from their US counterparts.<sup>4</sup> And he offers what I think are interesting reflections on why this is so. He suggests that American historians and theorists, in comparative terms, are often preoccupied by issues of ethnicity and gender, whereas British scholars tend to emphasize class, and French ones are often absorbed in a search for universal human values, or, I would add, insofar as they have come to doubt the possibility of universal human values, they are absorbed in questions about what it means to doubt universal human values, and how such doubt might itself generate something akin to universal human values. At least two points arise, for me, out of Carrard's suggestions. The first is that American scholars often systematically misinterpret or misuse European thinkers precisely because they place them in a rigid box labeled 'ethnicity and gender'. For example, I would read Derrida's logical concept of the 'Other' as one that tries to provide us with a way of thinking about something like universal human values, or universal responsibility, after we renounce more logocentric notions of universality. Yet this logical concept of the 'Other' all too often becomes confused with what we might describe as concrete others tied to ethnicities and genders. The other point, which confronts your question head-on, is that while I recognize the force of questions of ethnicity and gender, perhaps my work is—at least compared to that of many Americans—more involved with issues pertaining to things like class and universal or quasi-universal human capacities and values.

SS: Against that background, why did you decide to move to the United States? In what ways, if any, has this move affected your thought?

4. P. Carrard, 'Models, Narratives, and French Ways of Doing', *History and Theory* 41 (2002), pp. 264-72.

MB: The weather [*laughs*]. Look outside. Welcome to California [*laughs*]. Perhaps also boredom: I wanted something new. Either way, I suspect it is too early to say how it has impacted on my ideas.

SS: Although you are most famous for your work on the logic of the history of ideas, you have also written on a broad range of topics—labor history, socialist thought, public administration, Thatcherism, theosophical history, Derrida, and Foucault—to name but a few. Is there a ‘web of beliefs’ or a central set of concerns that connects these issues for you, or are they just the product of an active mind?

MB: I guess they’re the product of an active mind. I have tended to pick up any old issue that interests me, rather than being driven by some self-conscious and systematic agenda. Nonetheless, because of the self-reflexivity we talked about earlier, when I pick up an issue, I normally think about how what I say about it relates to what I am saying and thinking elsewhere. So, although my work is not the product of a systematic agenda, I think there are themes that run through it.

SS: What would you say those themes are?

MB: One is a sort of humanistic socialism. The humanism here consists of a belief in the value of the individual and the capacities of the individual for freedom through agency, for holding beliefs, for having desires, for being unique, for being special, for being themselves. Each individual life with its mundane, everyday concerns and events is of immense importance. That is not to say that individuals possess some sort of intrinsic inner-being of the sort that Foucault was rightly skeptical of. It is to say only that they possess capacities such that they are capable of making—no, they necessarily do make—their own lives. We make our own lives, albeit, as Marx said, not under conditions of our choosing. This ability to make our own lives is, in some respects, surely a uniquely human capacity, which is one reason why I describe a belief in it as a type of humanism. Much of my work, I sometimes think, consists of an insistence on, and also an exploration of, what I believe to be the philosophical corollaries of this humanism. The *Logic* might be read as an exploration of how we should think about history given a commitment to such humanism. And my work on socialism might be read as an exploration of what it might mean to create a society that takes such humanism seriously. I am interested in the idea of a socialist society that would be compassionate while, at the same time, respecting our ability to make our own lives.

Another way of approaching these themes might be to see my work as an exercise in self-discovery, I guess. If you looked at it like that, the starting point would be the history, rather than the theory. The two main historical topics on which I have written are British socialism and non-conformist and new age

spirituality, as well, of course, as the interplay between them. Now, although I combine my socialism with atheism, my family background—notably on my mother’s side—fused progressivism with nonconformism. So, I guess one way to understand my historical work is as an attempt to trace those movements that informed my family—the traditions in which I was brought up.

SS: So, we return to the genealogy of your thoughts?

MB: Right, absolutely. The more philosophical arguments of the *Logic* are perhaps attempts to unpack what I think are the implications and corollaries of the beliefs I have come to hold against the background of particular historical influences.

<ends abruptly: OK?>