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BEIJING — History is often interpreted to meet the political objectives of whichever government is doing the interpreting. The historical relationship between Tibet and China is replete with claims, disputes and caveats. But the ruling Communist Party does not hesitate to eliminate any uncertainty and use history as a political tool to validate its hold on Tibet ... Across China, schoolchildren are taught that Tibet is an inalienable part of the country. Tour guides in Lhasa must follow approved versions of history. Dissenting scholars have been marginalized, censored and, in a handful of cases, imprisoned. Questioning official history can expose scholars to accusations of separatism. A Tibetan scholar, Dolma Kyab, has been jailed since 2005 after writing an unapproved history of Tibet. 'History is linked to legitimacy,' said Tashi Rabgye, director of the Contemporary Tibetan Studies Initiative at the University of Virginia. 'The problem for Beijing is that their presence on the Tibetan Plateau has never been
legitimized. And their attempt to control history is an effort to do that.

New York Times, 17 April 2008

Much of the contention over the current political status of Tibet rests on, and has used, interpretations of history to validate rights and territorial claims to this high-plateau region. As Powers has shown, both the Tibetan government-in-exile and the Chinese government have played the history card in their respective attempts either to reclaim or to maintain rule in Tibet. The claim of the Tibetan government-in-exile rests on primordial reasons: the people of Tibet have the right to its land and rule over it. China’s presence in Tibet is, therefore, illegitimate and should be corrected by the rightful return of the Dalai Lama and his government. China, on the other hand, maintains that—in history—the right to rule Tibet was given over to previous Chinese dynasties. As such, the present Chinese government continues to have absolute and ‘irrefutable’ right to govern this region. Yet, whatever legitimacy either side claims to have, the stalemate between the Tibetan government-in-exile and China ironically rests on a shared belief in a true, and singular, historical narrative.

That history is subjected to politics, used both to enforce nationalism and to maintain national identity, has been the subject of writings ranging from the role of history in the ongoing nation-making process in Georgia to the use of history to create a primordial identity in the otherwise cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the Solomon Islands. These examples show the inter-relationship between history, as the narrative of shared memory, and nation-building, as an endeavor that, far from being ‘natural’, is constructed and invented in various ways, including communion in a shared narrative. The relationship between history and nation-building extends beyond the realm of rhetoric; the recently established Tibet museum in Beijing is testament not only to how China has co-opted certain objects to maintain the unity of its narrative but also to the fact that certain elements, such as the 14th Dalai Lama, are consciously removed from this narrative. As a scholar related to the museum noted: ‘This is a Tibet museum, and we don’t recognize him as part of Tibet any more.’ This kind of effort reinforces what Kohl has carefully reviewed in the general literature: that objects, and the

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associated events, of the remote past are systematically reconstructed in order to construct a nation.\textsuperscript{6}

Furthermore, the debates over national construction are not only contained within the political sphere. The ‘history wars’ in Australia are an example both of how interpretations of history have been used to support political agendas\textsuperscript{7} and of how academics themselves become involved in the issue.\textsuperscript{8} To some extent, the spill-over of such ‘history wars’ into academia, and the use of academic writings to legitimate national agendas, is mirrored in the case of the history of Tibet, where academics may be seen as implicitly promoting, or used to promote, a narrative that supports either the perspective of the Tibetan government-in-exile or that of the Chinese government.\textsuperscript{9} In this sense, politics regains its original meaning as the participation in public or civil affairs, even as science encourages its exponents to be distanced from its object of study. Admittedly, this instrumental perspective of history for political ends in no way represents the full scope and application of the concept of history.\textsuperscript{10} Yet, within the aspect that considers the relationship between history and nation-making, what is interesting is that different interpretations of historical events are used to disprove each other, but in their efforts to be hegemonic, the various interpreters and institutionalisers\textsuperscript{11} of history endorse the existence of a true and singular narrative of history, or what I call history’s motion.

This chapter does not intend to assert what is true or untrue of Tibetan history. Instead, it will attempt a different task all together. In order to more fully understand the complexities surrounding the current tensions over the history of Tibet, I suggest that the search for the true narrative of Tibet’s history is fundamentally governed by the concept of history’s motion, and that this motion is inspired by Newton’s natural philosophy on absolutes. Briefly, Newtonian absolutes are concepts that have been articulated without reference to real physical observances; but they are the concepts that inspire the calculation of real physical forces and motions. Thus, absolute time, space and motion are the concepts on which relative time, space and motion are based and, in turn, calculated in the real world of physical motion and forces.

History’s motion, then, is not the actual narrative but the concept that there is a true narrative of history. Rooted in Newton’s
concept of absolute, linear time, history's motion relies on the truth of an imagined single trajectory of events in human civilisation. In this way, it builds on what Chakrabarty has written that history, as the narrative of human action through time, becomes as natural as nature: 'history is supposed to exist in the same way as the earth', and people view its narrative as a primordial truth. What Chakrabarty was referring to is the appeal to history as a primordial truth, as something given in nature and therefore indisputable, which is precisely what is then used by nation-states to establish their legitimacy exactly on those terms: of primordial right, even though scholars, such as Gellner and Hobsbawm, have shown that nations are constructed, invented and have to be maintained.

Precisely because one narrative is not yet hegemonic and the trajectory to naturalisation is still in process, the example of Tibet and China offers interesting insights into the attempt at claiming hegemony by appealing to truth. Moreover, history's motion in Tibet is integrally related to the contest over space and over interpretations of geographic borders between inner and outer Tibet, viewed as a main point of disagreement between the Tibetan government-in-exile, which claims a larger area of autonomy, and the Chinese government, which maintains that these outer areas were always outside the rule of Lhasa. The inevitable linking of historical time and geographic space in the respective projects of both sides further underscores the links between Newton's natural philosophy and the situation presented here.

In what follows, I explore what constitutes Newtonian absolute motion and apply it to the concept of history's motion, namely that the motion of bodies we are able to perceive, or relative motion, ultimately relies on the underlying concept of absolute motion. Because Newtonian motion is clearly built from his articulation of time and space, the concept also extends the typically temporal dimension of history into the spatial realm, fruitfully highlighting how, in the case of Tibet and China, the struggle for historical hegemony is inextricably linked with the dispute over geographic borders. Yet the chapter will also direct attention to where the analogy breaks down: whereas in Newton's physical world, relative motion, from which calculations on forces and velocity are made, accurately reflects the concept of absolute motion, such an easy elision does not exist where disputes continue over the historical narrative. In the social
and historical world, the dis-analogy between what is real and conceptual calls for a reassessment of such concepts as history and time. But let us first proceed to Newton.

**Newton's absolutes and establishing parallelism**

To briefly review Newton's concept of absolutes, let us start with the terms that he uses. In his 'Scholium to Definitions' in the first volume of *Principia Mathematica*, Newton writes that absolute time and absolute space must be distinguished from their physical observable states, namely relative time and relative space, so that mathematical principles will not be subject to the errors of sense perception. Absolute time flows equably and changelessly; qualities of time that we observe, such as duration and acceleration, he calls relative time. Similarly, absolute space is homogeneous and immovable; what we observe as changes in space such as when a body moves are, in fact, what Newton calls relative space. The space that a body occupies is called place, and may be absolute or relative depending on its subsuming space. Having identified these fundamental concepts, Newton is then able to construct the concept of absolute motion, which is different from its observable counterpart, namely relative motion. Absolute motion is 'the change of a position of a body from one absolute place to another'. It differs importantly from relative motion because it is the pre-condition on which actual bodies in relative motion are then calculated. The classic example is that of a ship sailing on the earth, with a body moving on the ship in relation both to the ship and to the earth. How does one calculate motion when all movable parts are in motion? By designating a conceptual point of reference (absolute motion) on which all other motion is then calculated. It is also vital that this applies to the parts as to the whole, so that the kernel of a moving apricot moves also with the motion of the exterior flesh. From these core principles, Newton proceeds to elaborate his natural philosophy, accounting for such factors as acceleration, deceleration, external forces, inertia, action and reaction within the system. It was a system that revolutionised our understanding of the physical world.

Rynasiewicz has commented that even though Newton's mathematical principles effected a revolution in the observable world of physics, it was nonetheless crucial for Newton that his argument was tautological, namely that relative motion could not be
calculated without the concept of absolute motion, and that this was essentially predicated on absolute space and time, none of which was discernible by sense perception. Nonetheless, Newton's influence was so great that his system subsequently inspired many others in other disciplines to search for a parallel revolution in their own work. While these efforts never produced a similar model in economics or demography, for example, Newton's natural philosophy did influence these disciplines in one crucial way. As Cohen writes: 'Newton's physics did not ever produce any useful analogies or homologies for the social sciences. Yet as is shown by the example of Malthus and others, Newtonian natural philosophy did have its effects on the social sciences, but on the level of style and metaphor.' As Wiesenfeldt and Camilleri (in this volume) have demonstrated, analogy and metaphor are powerful methodological interlocutors in the transfers between concepts and across disciplines. The metaphor of history's motion illustrates how Newton's concepts of absolute time and place guide the belief in a single, undisputed narrative of historical events and the eventual linking of historical time to national territories.

Let us now examine how this unfolds in the example of Tibetan history.

**History's motion in Tibet**
The narrative of Tibet's contemporary history that is familiar to a certain Western audience runs thus: in 1950, the army of the People's Republic of China entered the lands of the Tibetan Plateau and arrived in Lhasa, seat of the Dalai Lama's Tibetan government. Their presence was claimed to 'liberate Tibetans from servitude', yet along the 2000km journey from eastern Tibet to Lhasa, the army met with fierce local resistance at the town of Chamdo. In 1959, on threat of his life, the Dalai Lama was forced to flee Lhasa to India, where he lives, to this day, in exile in the northern hill town of Dharamsala. There, he established his Tibetan government-in-exile, which continues to seek support for his return to Lhasa and to negotiate autonomous rule for Tibet. Ever since 1950, Tibet has been irrevocably tied up with the history and politics of China. For example, the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) led to grave suffering for Tibetan people and innumerable atrocities committed to its material culture. According to this narrative, the present situation is interpreted as the
ongoing illegitimate rule of China over Tibet, exacerbated by infringements on the human rights of self-determination and freedom of religion, the unequal development of Tibetan communities compared to majority parts of China, and excessive exploitation of natural resources in Tibetan areas.

A narrative that is not so familiar to this same audience runs thus: in 1950, the army of the People's Republic of China entered the lands of the Tibetan Plateau and arrived in Lhasa, seat of the Dalai Lama's proxy government in order to 'liberate Tibetans from serfdom'. Tibet had been governed by a ruling aristocracy that perpetuated slavery. Following the takeover of the Communist Party in 1949, it was their duty to liberate their Tibetan brothers as they had done in the rest of China. Furthermore, ever since the thirteenth century, Tibet had been an inalienable part of China, and the rule of the Dalai Lama was only ever given by decree from Chinese emperors. In 1959, sensing his imminent defeat at the hands of communist China, the Dalai Lama fled Lhasa. It has since been the responsibility of the Chinese government to modernise its Tibetan population by purging it of false religious beliefs and developing it to be a fully participating member of the Chinese polity. Moreover, the Chinese government views the claims of the Tibetan government-in-exile as 'a conspiracy hatched by imperialists in an attempt to carve up China'. The true narrative of Tibetan history, for the Chinese, is integrally linked to its nation-building process.

Key dates and opposing interpretations of events raised by both sides further fuel the incommensurability between different narratives of history's motion. A key point in the Chinese government's narrative to prove China's 'indisputable' right over Tibet goes back to the beginning of the thirteenth century when the Yuan dynasty was in power. This point is particularly relevant for the Chinese because the date precedes the official institution of the Dalai Lama by around a hundred years, further 'delegitimating' the current Dalai Lama's authority. According to Chinese sources, Tibet became part of the Mongol empire when the Mongolian Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) assumed rule. In 1368 the ethnic Han dynasty named Ming conquered the Mongols. Through the logic of transferability, the Ming dynasty therefore became the rightful rulers of Tibet. The Tibetan government-in-exile, on the other hand, maintains that Tibet was never under Mongolian rule but in a priest-patron relationship that
was complementary but autonomous. In its response to the Chinese government, it has stated that:

It is not disputed that at different times in its long history Tibet came under various degrees of foreign influence: that of Mongols, the Gorkhas of Nepal, the Manchu emperors of China, the British rulers of India. At other times in its history, it was Tibet, which exercised power and influence on its neighbors, including China. Moreover, the relationship with Mongol, Chinese and Manchu rulers, to the extent they had political influence, was personal in nature and did not at any time imply a union or integration of the Tibetan state, with or into, a Chinese state. It is important to note that both the Mongols and Manchus were foreign powers who exercised their control over China for a very long period. By this very logic of China's claim over Tibet, it would be justifiable for Mongolia to lay claims over China.²⁰

Map 1: People's Republic of China, with the current Tibetan Autonomous Region shaded and overlayed with claimed Tibetan regions at 1949

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The conflict between different narratives of history’s motion extends beyond the quest for absolute time to include the quest for absolute space (and, as we have seen, absolute time and space are the concepts underlying the observable phenomena of relative time and space). For the two sides, more is at stake than the area of Lhasa and what is currently demarcated as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The Tibetan government-in-exile claims the space of ‘a greater Tibet’, inhabited predominantly by Tibetan people as part of the nation they aspire to reclaim (see map 1). The Chinese government regards this claim as one more attempt to carve up China because the space outside the TAR inhabited predominantly by Tibetans forms the spatial majority of Sichuan and Qinghai provinces and parts of Gansu and Yunnan provinces. Geography is occasionally used to reinforce history’s motion, as Kolas and Thowsen have observed: ‘The areas west of the watershed were administered from Lhasa, while the territories to the east were administered by native chiefs under the supervision of the governor of Sichuan. At the present time, the border between the TAR and Sichuan follows the Drichu [River].’ However, as the counter-narrative reveals, topographic borders are movable to the extent that they are able to support history’s motion. The Tibetan government-in-exile claims the topography of the Tibetan plateau, ringed by mountain ranges to the east, north and south as ‘one contiguous region’ of Tibet, and presents this as cause for one autonomous administration.

These brief examples in the debate highlight the incommensurability of the different narratives, both seeking not only to legitimise their respective historical claims but also to consolidate a corresponding geographical area. As part of the state-making process, an impasse results because there can be only one true narrative and one exposition of time and space. Even perspectives that attempt to go beyond the polarised versions are caught in the concept of one true narrative. A case in point is the admirable collection of essays, *Khams Pa Histories*, which seek to collapse the distinction between Tibet and China. The essays instead point to how the traditional Tibetan region of Kham, part of an area outside Lhasa’s direct control, negotiated its own political and social processes, thus giving us a varied historical account both of Lhasa’s relationship with the supposed ‘peripheral’ areas and of these areas’ relationship with China. The essays rightly point to historical complexities in these relationships,
yet they inevitably create new temporal and spatial borders in the process: the region of Kham then becomes the new basis from which to re-enact efforts to trace history's motion in search of absolute time and space.

In extending an analysis of Newton's influence to the case of history in Tibet, I suggest that Newton's concepts of absolute time, space and motion find particular resonance in how these concepts are imagined and used. History's motion is the absolute and true trajectory of past events, existing conceptually as Newton's absolute motion. And where the world of Newtonian physics could be accurately calculated according to relative motion, time and space, there are examples of such parallels in real history, in which a historical narrative has become hegemonic and there is no dispute over its truth. However, when there are disputes over history, as the case of Tibet and China demonstrates, then a dis-analogy arises and we find different narratives attempting to be the true historical narrative. Yet the influence of Newtonian thought holds strong because the various parties continue to hold on to the truth of absolutes and the applicability of this truth to the physical, observable world of key events and crucial dates.

In this way, history's motion has locked us in to substantiate its conceptual and physical.

Towards a multiplicity of narratives
I have attempted not to question the concept and discipline of history but to highlight the attenuating circumstances in which 'history' often exists. A historical narrative is generally considered hegemonic and, as such, relies on just one conception of time and space, namely a Newtonian absolute time and space that is linear and homogeneous.

But what if we were to try to imagine a different kind of history? Such an attempt would exclude the simplification and use of history for political ends to emphasise different historicities; that is, the numerous narratives that combine, either harmoniously or discordantly, to create a complex narrative of the past into the present and future. In this way, then, the narrative of history is not to describe the truth of what 'was' in a single trajectory that represents universal truth. Neither would it abandon the former project all together. The serious inclusion of different historicities, in the form of lived
historical narratives for example, into the larger concept of history does not mean that we have doomed ourselves to considering only ever-smaller and more indigenous/local areas and times of knowledge. A re-emphasis on lived historical narratives does not completely banish the effort to draw out structural or universal comparisons. Instead it would include the present social and relational aspects of different historical narratives. These narratives, as Chakrabarty and Spivak have suggested, might comprise supernatural elements or emphasise the voices of the subaltern or of women. Freed from a single motion, history becomes enriched by the multiplicity of narratives and transforms from a frozen past absolute to an evolving present interaction.

This also frees the writing of history from being a political instrument in the construction and ongoing maintenance of nations. In fact, history of this kind would be freed from any kind of ultimate and over-arching aim apart from the purpose of understanding how past events could be understood in different narrative forms and arcs to produce the multiple positions that possibly continue to exist in the present. The writer of history, then, would be less privileged than he or she already is—as the literate individual authorised to make their narrative the true and singular version of history—and would become the chronicler of sequenced events in light of different life-stories and interpretations of these events.

These multiplicities of the historical narrative would have equally far-reaching bearing on how we might conceive of time because it would require a rearticulation of the concept of time from a single and linear progression to something else. In this way, Hodges' interpretation of Bergson's and Deleuze's articulation of time is particularly helpful. In his article, 'Rethinking time's arrow: Bergson, Deleuze and the anthropology of time', he suggests that rather than limiting our understanding of time to the purely objective or the purely subjective, we should consider the term that Bergson creates and Deleuze develops, namely la durée. Central to this concept is a clarification of how anything multiple (namely, multiplicities) can be of quantitative or qualitative kind. The former, or quantitative, implies that differences take a homogenous form, even though they may be homogeneous by degree. Seconds and minutes ticking along the second and minute hands of a clock are quantitative multiplicities. They are homogeneous both as seconds to
seconds (type) and as seconds to minutes (degree). In this way, time is chronological, following a multiplicity of ordered differences. The latter, or qualitative, implies that differences are themselves heterogeneous among themselves, and that none of these can be isolated without affecting all others. *La durée* refers to the qualitative, kind of multiplicity and, therefore, when this definition is applied to time, time itself becomes non-chronological; multiplicities of time may be always experienced and lived at the moment. This qualitative kind of multiplicity is in a state of unpredictable, incessant flux. But, importantly, it is not chaos defined as a situation in which different types and degrees of multiplicity unfold without the knowledge of what they are different from. Instead, *la durée* is a model of an eternal return of difference, taking into account both the structured and lived multiplicities that tell us time is.

A history based on this articulation of time would inevitably depend on the sequencing of events to form an understanding of the past, but more importantly it would constantly re-evaluate these seemingly past events, from a variety of sources, in light of how it affects the lived present. Thus, to take a possible example of this kind of historicity in Tibet, the figure of the warrior-king, Gesar, who ruled the kingdom of Ling eight hundred years ago, might be considered by some as merely the subject of an epic poem. Yet the way his stories have been told and retold by local Tibetans, and the way he has been taken up as a symbol of how present challenges can be inspired by past adventures, is in fact a prime example of this kind of living history, which is all the more powerful because there is no quest to find the true narrative of Gesar. History, as it being disputed on the Tibetan Plateau, would benefit from a similar revolution in how it is articulated and conceived, if not at the level of state-making then certainly at the level of academic discourse. To simply perpetuate national agendas silences the narrative contributions of those who are caught between these agendas, and are part of neither.

**Notes**

1 Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*.
2 LiPuma, 'History, identity, encompassment'.
4 See Yardley, 'New museum offers the official line on Tibet'.
5 Kohl, *Nationalism and Archaeology*.
Although the review surveys mainly European cases, the application of the practice to the example of nation-making China is still apt and relevant, particularly in light of works by Gladney, Harrell and Rossabi. The detail of nation-making in China undoubtedly carries its own arguments about consensus among different ethnic groups (ethnos), and it is evident that a main reason for the conflict between Tibet and China is a fundamental disagreement over the conflation between ethnos and nation.

MacIntyre & Clark, *The History Wars*.
Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History; Manne, Whitewash; Dawson, ‘Washout’*.
For an example of these, refer to Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows; Powers, History as Propaganda; Smith, Tibetan Nation; Grunfeld, The Making of Modern Tibet; Goldstein, A History of Modern Tibet*.
Of particular relevance to this essay are writings on the relationship between history and anthropology (Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology; Sahlin, Goodbye to Tristes Tropes; Comaroff & Comaroff, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination; Ortner, Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal*), on the post-colonial critique of history (Chakrabarty, * Provincializing Europe*, and Spivak, *Deconstructing Historiography*) as well as specific narratives on the histories of Tibet (Epstein, *Khams Pa Histories*).

Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*.
On this point, I acknowledge that the brief summary presented here is not encompassing of Newton’s work or philosophy and, given the brevity of this chapter, I am unable to fully consider Newton’s work in alchemy, which Dobbs (‘The unity of truth’) has written about.

Or, more precisely, the effects of relative time and space, since neither are themselves physically observable.

Rynasiewicz, ‘Newton’s views on space, time, and motion’.
Cohen, ‘Newton and the social sciences’, p. 79.
Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*.
Kolas & Thowsen, *On the Margins of Tibet*, p. 32.
Epstein (ed.), *Khams Pa Histories*.
Spivak, *Deconstructing Historiography*.

With respect to Tibetan history, an important move in this direction is Carole McGranahan’s most recent work with life-stories of Tibetan women, ‘Narrative dispossession’.