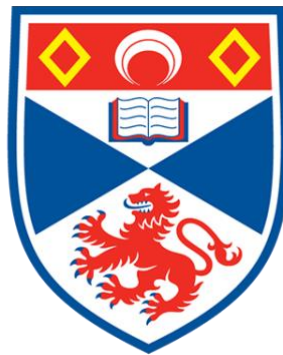


Looking For ‘Dynasty’: The Case For and Against Using ‘Dynasty’ in Euro-American Historical Scholarship.

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This essay is part of an ongoing project based around a series of interviews on the topic of 'dynasty'. I was able to conduct this work thanks to the generous assistance of Lord Laidlaw and his charitable foundation and I am incredibly grateful for this support. This essay was inspired by Craig Clunas, who questioned "whether studying dynasties is useful to the historian." (Spangler, 2016, p.64) I have altered this question slightly to ask whether, as a historian, using the term dynasty and researching dynasties is productive, both in academia, but also in wider (particularly Euro-American) society.

I argue that historians should continue to use the term dynasty and well research dynasties, however, they must also be aware of the limitations of such study. First, I highlight the limitations of dynasty by exploring how the term is etymologically unstable, how its portrayal in academia is misaligned with its current meaning and that the sources we use to study it are particularly vulnerable to falsification. I then explore how research into dynasties can be misused and how Euro-American norms load the term with connotations which can elicit negative responses, undermining research findings, or lead to honest research being seen as partisan. I then argue for the merits of using dynasty by exploring how dynasty's etymological flexibility and 'pop culture' status can be used by historians to better educate the public, how research into dynasty is essential for understanding the generational transmission of power and promoting egalitarian societies and how the 'idea' of dynasty resonates in the self-identities of groups globally today, which merits study.

Dynasty is a term which changes over time, creating issues for historians. Natalia Nowakowska (2020) highlights how Dynasty's meaning shifted from the Aristotelian "power, lordship or dominion," to Edme-François Mallet's 1775 definition: "a line of princes from the same lineage who reigned over one country." (p.2-3) Nowakowska (2020) explains that academics have further confused the term, as historians of early modern Europe have created a diverse range of definitions for dynasty, with most falling into one of three categories. These are, "monarchical government per se, the mechanics of royal succession, or the internal socio-cultural history of the [ruling] family itself." (p.7) Contrastingly, critical and post-colonial theorists have posited that the term 'dynasty' is a manufactured tool which unites many practically disparate forms of political authority under an umbrella term to justify the perpetuation of colonialism and capitalism. (Banerjee, 2020) Confusion and debate over the academic definition of dynasty and the fact that the dictionary definition of the term changes over time, lead Nowakowska (2020) to fear that academics may be "misreading their pre-modern sources" (p.1) and that the usage of dynasty in academia is becoming "inconsistent, imprecise and unsteady." (p.1) Considering this, it is arguable that for the benefit and clarity of research, it would be more productive to replace the 'umbrella term' of dynasty with other more specific and less contested terms, such as kingship', 'succession', or even 'memoria', a term introduced to me by Alison Beach (2021), used to denote the historical and material culture used by a dynastic family to create and preserve its identity. (Personal communication, 22nd June)

Unfortunately, the issues plaguing dynasty do not end with definition. The term itself occupies a very specific niche within historiography (the study of the study of history), that being its association with "premodern and non-western societies." (Banerjee, 2020, p.1) An examination

of conference reports including the term dynasty, as well as the academic definitions highlighted by Nowakowska (2020), show that scholars of dynasty focus almost entirely on 'ruling/royal' dynasties in the pre-modern period. (Nowakowska, p.7)(Spangler, 2016)(Sorg, 2020)(Spangler, 2017)(Geevers, 2017) This becomes problematic when we consider that the dynasties that researchers are focussing on do not fully reflect what the public understands a dynasty to be today. Since the Washington Post's 1905 reference to a "baseball dynasty" (Merriam-Webster online, Dynasty, n.d.) and the explosion of the term into popular culture through mass media such as the hit TV show 'Dynasty', (which depicted the fictional Carrington business family) dynasty's meaning has expanded to include powerful families in politics, business and sport. Successful sports teams have also been incorporated into the dynastic rubric, weakening the centrality of family connection to definitions of dynasty. This disconnect between academic history and the public's understanding of dynasty has caused historians largely to abandon the analysis of these 'modern' dynasties to economists and political scientist, resulting in what Frank Lorenz Müller (2021) called an 'underdeveloped area of historical research', particularly in relation to family firms. (Personal communication, 17th June) Academics, however, are not unaware of the persistence of dynasties in the present. Jeroen Duindam, author of the lauded work on pre-modern dynasties: 'Dynasties, A Global History of Power 1300-1800', also spent a chapter of his 'Dynasty: A Short Introduction' examining comparisons between the behaviour of premodern dynasties and modern dictators, US political families and family businesses. (Duindam, 2019, 144 mins 10 secs-175 mins 53 secs) However, such work, though beneficial to academia and public policy, remains rare. This is not because academics lack awareness, but because the premodern connotations of 'dynasty' in historiography mean that only premodern specialists ever hazard to use the term. In light of this, it seems historical research would be better served by refining and subdividing the loaded term of dynasty and instead expanding the use of terms such as 'hierarchy' which would be more accessible to a broader group of scholars, encouraging modern scholars to fill the void of research into 'modern' dynasties and facilitating communication and collaboration between premodern and modern historians.

Focussing on dynasty can also be problematic where it leads to issues with the veracity of sources as well as moral dilemmas. During my interview with Alison Beach (2021), she highlighted how it was normal for the Swabian nobility to fabricate their genealogies (ancestral relations) to claim a dynastic relationship to great figures such as Charlemagne, with the aim of increasing their social capital. (Personal communication, 22nd June) However, the fabrication of dynastic connections is not isolated to Swabia. Edward Moon-Little (2021) explained that it is a global phenomenon during our discussion on 'Stranger Kingship'. (Personal communication, 4th August) The conscious fabrication of genealogies to increase social capital is significantly complicated by the prevalence of 'pretenders' (individuals impersonating a member of a dynasty) which was also a global phenomenon, especially in pre-modern society and has been examined in detail by Robert Bartlett. (2020, p.360-378) This combination of conscious fabrication and impersonation means that the study of hereditary dynasties is built on large amounts of material which is unstable and unpredictable. This limits the usefulness of studying dynasties, as it makes it challenging to establish historical certainties with which to produce useful research. Beyond the problems inherent to dynastic source material, Beach also explored the moral dilemmas that can

result from studying dynasty. She explained how upon careful examination of her source material, she discovered that one of her key references, a German historian named Karl Bosel, was an enthusiastic Nazi, who had at times misappropriated Medieval texts in order to subtly promote German cultural superiority. (Beach, Personal communication, 22nd June 2021) Whilst Beach was able to discover Bosel's biases and account for them in her work, her insight displays how national studies of dynasty can be misused by a range of actors. Many authoritarian and repressive regimes have drawn upon historical dynasties to promote problematic, violent and exclusionary ideologies. Beach's story shows that it can be difficult to identify where repressive ideologies have influenced a work of history, meaning that researchers of dynasty must seriously consider that some of the information they produce can provide a platform to deeply problematic perspectives. This adds a level of risk and challenge to research on dynasties, making different types of research a more appealing use of time and energy. More directly, Milinda Banerjee suggests that we have a moral imperative to deconstruct and undermine the usage of dynasty within history. His critical argument, that dynasty is a Eurocentric concept created to reinforce traditional hierarchies, holds that continuing to use the term 'dynasty' uncritically within history promotes "hereditary power, inequality, and exploitation." (Banerjee, 2020, 25)

The final challenge that (particularly Euro-American) historians face when employing the term 'dynasty' is that it has connotations that influence the way dynastic research is read. Duindamn (2019) has suggested that "In the realm of public government family dominance is seen as nepotistic and corrupt and hereditary power is frowned upon," (173 mins 24 secs) this is particularly true within Euro-American democracies. The reason for this is, as Anastasia Piliavsky (2018) posits, equality has been naturalised as "the democratic value in Euro-American political thought" (10 mins 50 secs) and the political dominance of certain families seems to challenge the perception that all individuals in a certain polity are equal, which has become a cornerstone of western political philosophy. Because of this contradiction between dynasty and the ideals of Euro-American democracy, the terms dynasty/dynast are frequently used as insults and slurs towards rival political leaders and there exists a slew of journalistic writing attacking the concept, with one writer calling dynasties "an affront to American tradition." (Wead, 2015) Historians who wish to use the term 'dynasty', particularly if attempting to fill the academic research gap around 'modern' dynasties, should be aware that dynasty, despite the real-world success of political dynasties, is a term that will elicit almost universally negative connotations in democratic societies, particularly in the west. Such connotations could potentially lead to unbiased work being called partisan, or result in what was intended to be a value neutral description colouring a dynastic actor in a journal article, or even policy paper. Consequently, using less value loaded terms, such as 'family', could be academically productive.

The prevalence of dynasty in popular culture and the instability of its definition constitute major limitations for the term. However, paradoxically, they also provide academics with a significant advantage over other terms when attempting to produce public history. Carl Becker (1932) famously argued that for academic work must be read widely and spark the imagination of the public, 'dynasty' helps historians fulfil this brief. (p.234) Duindamn (2021) explained that he chose to use the term 'dynasty' in the title of his book after it was pointed out that academic titles such

as “An anthropology/ Global History of rulership...would not help sales”. (p.3) This illustrates how, as the term dynasty has become more publicly recognisable and been associated with drama and duplicity by Euro-American media, academics can utilise this popularity to inform a wider number of people and increase their own returns on their research by employing the term as a ‘hook’ to grab public interest. Supplementing the increased exposure that using dynasty can provide, the etymological flexibility and confusion of the term allows historians to impart their own meaning to it. Instead of having a set definition and meaning, dynasty can instead be used as a tool that allows academics to analyse and explain how many hierarchies work and the commonalities between them in a way that is more accessible to a non-specialist audience. Viewing dynasty in this way also opens up space for a far more diverse range of actors to be viewed through a dynastic ‘frame’ (theoretical way of looking at the world). Works like Banerjee’s (2018) ‘The Mortal God’ can be actively subversive and political by situating the claims to a dynastic inheritance of Kshatriya identity and collective rulership by labouring peasants and Dalit caste members alongside the parallel dynastic claims of more powerful elements of Indian society. Even research that doesn’t explicitly use the frame of ‘dynasty’, like, Nicholas Barnes’s (2021) work in the *Complexo de Mare*, can be read through a dynastic lens to show the importance of family ‘dynasties’, in an area typically (and unfairly) stereotyped as being characterised by breakdown of family structures. (Barnes, Personal communication, 30th June) These cases demonstrate how employing a focus on dynasties in all their forms can create politically relevant research.

Beyond issues of publicity, the continued study of dynasties provides significant insights into contemporary cultures. Ali Ansari’s (2021) observations on the significance of Cyrus the Great as well as other rulers and the wider idea of dynastic/hereditary rulership to the identity of Iranians, provides an example of how historical rulers and their dynasties can inform national cultures and behaviours. (Personal communication, 22nd July 2021)(Ansari, 2021) Similarly, Jonathan Spangler (2016) has pointed out that in Chinese history “dynasty defines almost everything about a period, rightly or wrongly.” (p.64) The ‘idea of dynasty’ is central to a range of individual, ideological and national identities. Whether the usage of dynasty to refer to the historical families that inspire today’s culture is anachronistic (belonging to a period other than the one portrayed) is irrelevant, as, in the present, many people from Iran, China and a panoply of other states understand themselves as inheriting the social and cultural legacy of historical dynasties, (such as the Sassanians) or see world history through the lens of a dynastic cycle. Consequently, the idea of dynasty and how it reflects on today’s culture is an important topic to research.

The most compelling argument, however, for the study of dynasty, is that it provides a unique insight into the transmission of power by individuals. Systems of power in sports teams, businesses, political and educational institutions are all “wealth power nexus[es]” (Afanasyev, Banerjee, 2020, p.8) that have been built and perpetuated by the hereditary processes that research into dynasty (by any definition) studies. The unique insight that the study of dynasty provides is the ability to explore how these hereditary processes function and develop over time on an individual level, which is something that concepts like ‘hierarchy’ and ‘memoria’ lack. Understanding the study of dynasty as the study of the hereditary transmission of power allows us to extend the knowledge that pre-modern, non-western experts have gained to

increase our knowledge and insight into (distinct) contemporary structures, identifying continuities and fluctuations in power and debating their benefits and costs to modern society. Researchers like Duindamn have used these methods to formulate theoretical laws, for instance, that legitimacy is a uniquely central concern shared by dynastic family systems. (Duindamn, quoted in Spangler, 2016, p.64) However, there is far greater potential inherent in such study. Demystifying the advantages, strategies and circumstances around individuals that allow them to form and perpetuate dynasties also provides academics with the opportunity to formulate and suggest policies targeted at 'levelling the playing field' between individuals who have the capability to form dynasties and individuals that do not, with the aim of living up to the idea of a more egalitarian world. An example of this can be seen in the study of US political dynasties. Having identified name recognition, family connections and inherited wealth as three distinct advantages that dynastic politicians hold, academics could use this insight into how dynasties concentrate their power to counteract it by recommending novel policies around education, financing and campaigning. (Feinstein, 2010, p.590) Such policies could allow more individuals a fair shot at competing for political office, whilst continuing to provide equal opportunities to the children of political figures. As academics further unpack the way global dynasties function and persist, the study of dynasty will be essential to debates over whether the transfer of hereditary power is acceptable or even beneficial in certain scenarios and polities. In these debates, it is the role of historians to identify how individual power manifests, transferred over time and the results of its transmission. The study of dynasty is an essential component in allowing us to do this.

In conclusion, whilst I have made the case that the study of dynasty should continue and is an essential component of historical scholarship, there is no escaping the fact that the term is deeply flawed. Its current location in historiography is problematic. However, my conversations with a range of academics have made me more hopeful that a reconsideration of dynasty's place within historiography is possible, which will hopefully lead to more research into 'modern' dynasties, particularly those in business. Confusion over dynasty's definition and the moral and source issues inherent to its study are and unfortunately seem likely to remain core aspects of the study of dynasties. It is on current scholars to better highlight these pitfalls, otherwise historians wishing to enter the field risk misunderstanding their source material, reproducing violent discourses and getting bogged down in academic definitional debates which impair collaboration between scholars and detract from potential insights into the operations of hereditary power. Finally, whilst academics such as Anastasia Piliavsky (2018) have made fascinating observations about how hierarchy acts as a central value in Indian democracy, it seems unlikely that the antagonism between the idea of dynasty and that of western 'egalitarian' democracy will change, making it hard to use the term apolitically at present. This myriad of issues makes research into dynasty difficult to do and makes producing work that has the productive impact on society that Carl Becker (1932) envisioned difficult. (234)

However, such issues do not compel historians abandon dynasty, or even isolate it to a particular historical period or geographical area. Dynasty is understood today in a wide variety of ways. It captures public imagination and this makes it a useful vehicle to sell not just books, but to package nuanced historical ideas for widespread education and consumption. More importantly,

studying the dynastic elements of a wide range of historical and contemporary power structures gives historians a new perspective and set of tools to understand how such structures form and develop. Today access and equality are highly valued in a range of societies globally and understanding forms of repressive and benign hereditary rule is equally essential to carry out tasks as diverse as foreign policy, humanitarian work and organised protest. A dynastic perspective, in laying bare the mechanics of hereditary power within businesses, academia, and government, plays a vital role in explaining the individual impulses and drivers which create systems of power as well as the behaviours, techniques and advantages that these structures employ to ensure succession, consistency and the retention of their dynastic character.

Armed with this information, we would be better able to understand what parts of power structures can be democratised, pulled down or opened to new influences productively, as well as which aspects of dynastic control (if any) may be essential to the continued productivity and viability of such structures.

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A note on personal communication- I have cited several interviews that I have held with people in text as they are currently unavailable and typically an APA reference list does not include material that cannot be found by the reader. However, there is a possibility that some of the material that I have referenced in the text will become available in the near future. If this were to be the case, it would be located on the website: <https://globaldynasties.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/>