

Dec. 10 **Where are Historians Going? The Future of the History Profession**

The Future of Historians

1. Why Study History? Several Quotations

[in the spirit of *zhi bu ke er wei*: "Do it knowing it to be impossible" -- Confucius]

“For history is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction”

-- Eric Hobsbawm address to the Central European University, Budapest, *New York Review of Books*, December 16, 1993

“Historians ... are the professional remembrancers of what their fellow-citizens wish to forget”

-- Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, p.103

"My young son asks me: Should I study mathematics?

What for? I want to tell him.

You can see for yourself

That two pieces of bread

Are more than one.

My young son asks me: Should I study French?

What for? I want to tell him.

Civilization is collapsing.

Just rub your stomach with your hands and groan

People will understand you.

My young son asks me: Should I study history?

What for? I want to tell him.

Just learn how to stick your head in the sand

Then you might possibly survive.

Yes, I tell him:

Study mathematics, study French, study history!

-- Berthold Brecht, *Gedichte*, vol.2, p.818 [1938]

A [probably apocryphal] anecdote:

A young man asked his father: Should I study history? The father replied, "Well, my son, history requires many skills. First, you must have great patience, because you must sit for long periods of time in dusty, drafty archives, reading very uninteresting documents, searching for the few items that contain valuable information. Then, you must have great worldly experience, because you must reconstruct the lives of long-dead people from these scraps of paper, using all the personal insights into human nature that you have gained throughout your life. And you must have tremendous capabilities for empathy in order to feel yourself into the lives of dead people very different from yourself. But you must also have great analytical skills, in order to discern clearly what interpretations are logically justifiable and which are implausible, which sources are reliable and which are lies. Finally, you must learn to suffer hardship, because most of your writing will be ignored by the public, and you will gain neither fame nor fortune from your research. You are better advised to become a lawyer or a businessman, who requires none of these talents."

The son disregarded his father's advice, and went on to become a well-known historian. His name was Marc Bloch.

..."or so yclept from Clío's clippings, which the chroncher of chivalries is sulphurous save he scan, for ancients link with presents as the human chain extends..." Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 254

First, the good news. Historical studies are blossoming in greater profusion than ever before. There are more professional historians alive today than there have been in all recorded history. Ever-growing varieties of perspectives generate new journals, electronic and printed. There are even a few new graduate programs based on interdisciplinary approaches [like ours], and their graduates are employed. Historians draw upon, and engage in dialogue, with the entire range of social and even natural sciences, and humanities: from literary criticism, anthropology, sociology, and economics to demography, ecology, and technology. And, if a recent book is to be believed [McDonald], the other social sciences are seeing the light: they are turning toward history and its special tools for the solution of their long-standing theoretical issues. The ethnic and gender diversity of the profession has advanced greatly [women repeatedly become Presidents of the AHA]; and the public has taken notice: Commemorations and the development of new history standards in public high schools demonstrate that the social history movement begun in the 1960s has become the mainstream. Onward, social historian soldiers!

Now, the bad news. The profession is in crisis: the proliferation of sub-specialties has led only to fragmentation, rancor, and a lack of consensus on what historical standards are. Each special interest group promotes its view of the past as the only legitimate one and accuses the others of racism, sexism, species chauvinism, etc. Historians are not rigorous at all by the standards of the "hard" natural and social sciences: "They almost never test their claims; they rely on anecdote and hope that no one asks too many hard questions".

But they believe in their fetishized primary documents too naively to satisfy literary critics: they see texts as sources of “facts”, not as rhetorical exercises embedded in a discourse determined by the social and cultural environment. The public at large couldn’t care less about either of these arcane debates, but they do react strongly when historians tamper with their personal memories: just try telling the whole story of Hiroshima to a veteran who was waiting on the Pacific coast to invade Japan in 1945. And in the high schools, political battles rage, often led by the conservatives [John Silber and Gertrude Himmelfarb] who argue that the social history move has abandoned any coherent story and demeans the national history of the U.S., practically ignoring the words of Abraham Lincoln in favor of Sojourner Truth. Finally, the new electronic media make all these debates over the written word irrelevant anyway: in the digital age, visual media predominate, people rely on fragmentary impressions, they exhibit “incredulity at master narratives” [Lyotard], and they forget even the basics of the important events of the past. [Lewis Lapham: “the Spanish armadillo”]. “All we, like sheep, have gone astray. We have turned, every one to his own way” [Handel, Messiah; cf. Yale, Wffnpoof Song].

Oh, and by the way, the number of jobs in history is at best level or declining, while the number of new Ph.D.s increases; Michigan State University listed the average salaries of its undergraduates by major in a recent publication, and History B.A.s were nearly at the bottom [lower than English, but higher than “Humanities”]. Most of the new students entering college in the future will not be interested in careers in specialized academic disciplines anyway [Menand], which may mean that the traditional Ph.D. and the education designed around it will become irrelevant [Ziolkowski].

Are you depressed enough yet? Cheer up. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob revive the idea of history as a collective enterprise, based on a pragmatic consensus about what we count as reliable, and what orientations toward the past we see as valuable. [Compare the title of this book by three women with the vatic voice of the earlier work of Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History*] They try to ward off the extreme skeptics of deconstruction on one side, and the hard-liners of objective science on the other, at the risk of creating strawmen out of both. Truth is created by communities, not by solitary geniuses. The question is what kind of intellectual community you prefer. Some people like the barracks, where there is a single, hierarchical chain of command. One leader gives a consistent set of orders [if he is competent]; Others like the free-for-all of the three ring circus, where everyone does his own thing [or Bakhtin’s carnival and Turner’s “counter structure”]. Some of us would like to find a position between dictatorship and anarchy, a bit more like a civil conversation, where you listen to a lot of different voices, use some and reject others, and come to some agreement on what works best for your own approach. But if the old gods of objectivism and elite-centered political history are dead, we are a lot better at killing off the new ones of social structure and Marxist class-consciousness than we are at creating new ones to worship.

Geoff Eley: “The earlier ambition of a ‘total history’, of writing the history of society in some integrated and holistic way, has come radically into question...As the hold of the economy has been progressively loosened, and with it the determinative power of the social structure and its causal priorities... the classical materialist connection has been

broken once and for all. 'Society' as a unitary object can no longer be maintained... the major casualty of this intellectual flux has been the confidence in a notion of social totality .. History , in this sense, has lost its way. [McDonald, 211, 213]"

Fragments of Marx and the other integrative nineteenth-century theorists survive: in the politics of collective action as influenced by structures of work and community [Tilly]; in the integrative 'mode of production' of environmental historians, but without the class conflict [Cronon, Worster], in the Durkheimian collective consciousness and its influence via Geertzian anthropology on new cultural history, but lacking Durkheim's general theory of modernity. From these ruins come no new cathedrals, but possibly a series of dispersed, linked communities of discourse. History is the oldest of the academic disciplines, founded in the first millenium B.C. by Herodotus and Thucydides in the West and Sima Qian in the East. Historians are no longer dinosaurs; can we evolve into birds?

References [In Reading Room]

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"AHR Forum: The Old History and the New", articles by Theodore Hamerow, Gertrude Himmelfarb,

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Lawrence Levine, Joan Scott, John Toews; in *American Historical Review*, June 1989

McDonald, Terrence J., ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* [see esp. chapter by Geoff Eley]

Menand, Louis [NYT Magazine]

Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream* (last chapter);

Symposium on Peter Novick's book in *American Historical Review*: articles by Hexter, Megill, Hollinger, et.al.

T. Ziolkowski, "The Ph.D. Squid"

Articles from *Perspectives*