

The following series of reflections on History as a discipline appeared in the American Historical Association's monthly magazine, Perspectives, in 2005. They can serve as a point of departure for our discussion on November 14.

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1. How Do We Learn from History?

The readers of Perspectives do not need to be persuaded that studying history is worthwhile. All of us, I assume, love history for its own sake; we want to know about the past because we find it challenging, frustrating, exciting, exhilarating, and depressing. And all of us believe that, by expanding our experience to the lives of men and women in different times and places, history teaches us valuable things about both others and ourselves. R.G.Collingwood expressed this with admirable economy when he said that we learn three things from studying the past: "what it is to be a man, what it is to be the kind of man you are, and what it is to be the kind of man you are and nobody else." (The Idea of History, New York, 1956, p. 10)

But what about the uses of history in a narrower, more pragmatic sense? Does the past provide lessons for the present, guidance for the future? In addition to telling us who we are, does history help us know what to do? I suspect that not many of us still share the confidence expressed by Lord Acton in his inaugural lecture of 1895 that "the science of politics is the one science that is deposited by the streams of history, like the grains of gold in the sand of a river; and the knowledge of the past, the record of truths revealed by experience, is eminently practical, as an instrument of action and a power that

goes to making the future." (Essays on Freedom and Power, New York, 1957, pp. 25-26) Many of us doubt that the facts of the past are as discrete and quickly recognizable as grains of gold glittering in the sand; nor are we sure that the truth of past experience can so easily be deployed as an instrument for action.

However professionally skeptical we may be about learning from the past, there is no doubt that we try to do it all the time. We constantly tell stories about the past to our students, friends, children—and to ourselves—stories that are supposed to convey moral and practical lessons about how to behave. Physicians compile histories of their patients' diseases in order to make diagnoses and determine therapies. Military units write after action reports that provide the basis for assessing the reasons for success or failure. And, of course, historical lessons are part of every political discussion and debate. Again and again, our political leaders use the past to warn, admonish, and inspire the public, to criticize their opponents, and to justify their own policies. Historical analogies, comparisons, and metaphors are all around us; they are a source of collective wisdom on which we must rely. It is unlikely that we could live without them even if we wanted to.

It seems to me that one of our primary responsibilities as professionals is to subject the alleged lessons of the past to persistent critical scrutiny. Let me illustrate what I have in mind with two contemporary examples.

First, a relatively easy and straightforward one: the lessons drawn from a comparison between the American occupation of Germany in 1945 and the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Resistance to American forces in Iraq, it was suggested, should neither surprise nor discourage us since similar resistance could be found at the beginning of the United States's

extraordinarily successful project of nation building in postwar Germany. With the proper patience and resolve, this resistance would be overcome and a stable democratic state could emerge in Iraq, just as it did in Western Germany in 1949. This is an easy case because it rests on a single, empirically verifiable piece of misinformation: there was not, in fact, any violent opposition to American forces in Germany after May 8, 1945; indeed the postwar German situation, as desperate as it was in many ways, was notable for the population's passivity and its lack of resistance to occupation authority. Not surprisingly, we have not heard much about postwar Germany in recent months.

While this particular lesson drawn from the two occupations was clearly wrong, to compare them might well have been illuminating. But such a comparison would have had to be intellectually rigorous and critically analytical, one that took into account the complexities of each case and carefully weighed their similarities and differences. It would have required comparing the two wars that led to the occupations, the character of the occupied societies, and size and structure of the occupying forces and the particular policies they implemented. Such a comparison would not have yielded any easy answers about what to do in Iraq (although it might have suggested some things not to do), but it would have helped us to grasp the difficulties American forces faced in 2003 and perhaps to uncover aspects of the German situation that we had not noticed before. In learning lessons from the past, differences are often as valuable as similarities.

My second example, also from the debate on the Iraq war, is rather more complicated: it is the use of the "Munich analogy" to explain why preemptive military action against Iraq was both necessary and justifiable. To continue to appease Saddam Hussein in 2003, this argument runs, would have had the same unfortunate

consequences as appeasing Hitler in 1938; both were signs of weakness and miscalculation, in which an unavoidable conflict was imprudently postponed. The lesson of the Munich analogy rests on at least two claims. The first is that Saddam and Hitler were alike, not simply because both were vicious tyrants (a proposition that is undoubtedly true), but also because they both could only be defeated by military force—that it would, in other words, have been necessary to fight them sooner or later. The second claim is counterfactual: if the democracies had fought Hitler in 1938, the Munich analogy assumes, they could have defeated him with less effort than was required a year later. A good (if, to my mind, not totally convincing) argument can be made for both these claims, but the value of comparing the two situations requires that the argument be made and tested, that is, that we carefully weigh the policies and performance of the two dictators and examine the balance of military forces in Europe in 1938 and the Middle East in 2003.

To public debates on the lessons of history, historians should bring our discipline's traditional virtues: a strict adherence to research methods that are public, transparent, and open to critical scrutiny; a commitment to examining as much of the relevant evidence as possible, even if it threatens our own interpretation; a critical approach to all sources, and especially those that seem to confirm conventional wisdom; the struggle to overcome personal bias, a struggle that should be no less persistent because it is unavoidably imperfect; and, last but not least, the resolute refusal to believe something merely because we wish it to be true. I can think of nothing more politically useful and practically important than these habits of mind. Without them what we extract from history will not be grains of wisdom but the fool's gold all too often offered as

precious lessons from the past. What we learn from history depends entirely on how we do it.*

*I am grateful to Jeffrey Herf for sharing with me his article, "Historical Fiction," which appeared in the New Republic Online (29 November 2004)

2. Contested Histories

One of the days in Mike Leigh's film, Four Days in July, is July 12, when Protestants in Northern Ireland march to celebrate King William's victory over the Catholics in the late seventeenth century. Set in the mid-1980s, the film follows two families, one Catholic, one Protestant, as they make their way through a landscape blighted by the troubled relations between their two communities. Although nothing dramatic happens to any of the characters, the atmosphere is heavy with anxiety, aggression, and the potential for violence. The final scene takes place in the ward of a maternity hospital where two women, one from each family, rest side by side after having given birth. One asks the other what she is going to call her son. "William" is the answer, and as soon as the name is spoken we know that the sympathetic connection that had been building between the two new mothers has been severed. Packed into the name "William" are three centuries of Irish history, with its competing visions of victory and defeat, liberation and oppression, domination and resistance. Against the corrosive power of this divided memory, the common bond of motherhood doesn't have a chance.

Irish history (the "nightmare" from which Joyce's Stephen Dedalus was trying to awake) is a classic example of a contested past. Similar contests can be found between Serbs and Croatians,

Palestinians and Israelis, Hindus and Muslims. Many of these contests have to do with the founding of a nation; all of them set individual events into a national narrative with which each side sustains its historic identity and defines its political program. Contested pasts sometimes repeat themselves, more often they are reenacted, as happens every July in the streets of Derry and the Bogside.

The fate of the Ottoman Empire's Armenian minority is one of the most active contemporary examples of a politically charged contest over the past. Everyone agrees that in 1915, when the empire was engaged in a desperate struggle for its survival during the First World War, a large number of Armenians perished and many others were removed from the towns and villages in which they lived for centuries. At issue is why and how the Armenian population of eastern Anatolia disappeared. One side claims that the Armenians died or were displaced in what amounted to a civil war, in which they were active participants rather than passive victims. Allied with the Russian invaders, they betrayed their country and its army, and killed tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of their Turkish neighbors. The other side regards what happened in 1915 as the result of orders given by the government in Constantinople to cleanse Anatolia of its Christian population—Nestorians, Assyrians, and Greeks, as well as Armenians--by killing the men and driving the women and children into the desert. This was not civil war but genocide, the intentional destruction of a particular culture and community, a foreshadowing of what would happen to Europe's Jews a quarter of a century later.

For the Turks, the events of 1915 are part of a heroic story of nation building carried out against deadly enemies at

home and abroad. For Armenians, they are the culmination of years of persecution, the destruction of ancient communities, which live on in the memory of the survivors and their descendants.

Although there are scholars on both sides, I think it is fair to say that the overwhelming majority of researchers outside of Turkey support some version of the Armenian narrative—even if some are uncertain about the term genocide. The scholarly discourse, however, is deeply affected by the involvement of the Turkish government, which has vigorously and consistently denied that a genocide—or indeed any government directed massacres—took place. (The official position can be found on the website of the Turkish Embassy:

<http://www.turkishembassy.org/governmentpolitics/issuesarmenian.htm>)

As a result of government pressures, discussion of the issue within Turkey is difficult and perhaps dangerous; access to relevant archival sources has been limited to those with “reliable” views. In response, Armenians and their supporters have lobbied parliamentary bodies throughout the world to pass resolutions affirming or commemorating the genocide. Up until now, seventeen assemblies have voted to recognize the genocide, and in three countries (Uruguay, Argentina, and France) recognition has the force of law. Obviously, Turkey’s application to join the European Union has increased the political salience of these issues, including the demand that an official acknowledgment of the genocide be a condition for Turkish membership in the Union.

Those who hoped that in Turkey the Armenian question would become the subject of scholarly discourse rather than of political proclamations were encouraged by the announcement that

a conference on "Ottoman Armenians in the Period of the Empire's Collapse," sponsored by three Turkish universities, was to be held in Istanbul on May 25-27, 2005. An interdisciplinary meeting of Turkish scholars, this was to be the first open and critical discussion of the Armenian question to be held in Turkey. The proposed conference was vigorously attacked by a number of Turkish politicians, including the Minister of Justice, who labeled it "treason" and a "dagger in the back of the Turkish nation." The rector of Bosphorous University, which was to have been the site of the conference, fearing for the security of the participants, decided to postpone the conference indefinitely. A number of distinguished Turkish scholars as well as several important public figures have come to the conference organizers' defense.

In the light of these events, the AHA Council instructed me to write a letter to Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, expressing the Association's regret that political interference had prevented the conference from taking place and our hope that he would support free and open discussion of the Armenian question. (A copy of the letter is reprinted in this month's Perspectives.) As an organization, the AHA does not take a position on particular historical issues, but it does have a clear and unambiguous commitment to unrestricted access to historical sources and to providing uninhibited opportunity for scholarly debate. Nowhere are these principles more important than in the study of contested pasts.

"The future," Milan Kundera once wrote, "is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it." Our task as historians is to understand the past's

provocative power and to resist the efforts of those who would destroy or repaint it.

3. How is History a Moral Science?

My title pays homage to my teacher, colleague, and friend, the late Gordon Wright, who called his 1975 AHA Presidential Address, "History as a Moral Science." (AHR, vol. 81 and also available on the AHA Website) After making a few self-deprecating comments on the genre of presidential addresses (salutary reading for anyone in the process of writing one), Wright turned to the question of whether historians should make moral judgments. He had no difficulty finding comments from distinguished historians on both sides of the issue. Lord Acton, for instance, was convinced that a historian must "suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong." All too often, Acton added, historians conceal or justify past evils: "The strong man with the dagger is followed by the weak man with the sponge." In his presidential address of 1903, somewhat misleadingly entitled "Ethical Values in History," Henry Charles Lea argued that historians should seek to repress whatever "righteous indignation" might be aroused by their studies. The past should not be used as "a Sunday-school tale for children of larger growth." Ethical values should not be allowed to undermine the scientific search for truth.

Gordon Wright himself took a characteristically moderate, nuanced position:

...for some of us at least, our search for truth ought to be quite consciously suffused by a commitment to some deeply held humane values. The effort to keep these two goals in

balance may be precarious; but if we can manage it, perhaps we will be on the way to re-establishing the role of history as one, and not the least, of what we might fairly call the moral arts.

My purpose in this essay is not to reopen the question of whether history is a moral science—I am quite content to find myself in Gordon Wright's company on this issue, as on so many others. Rather I want to reflect on how history can best perform its moral function.

I begin with a remark by Judith Shklar, from her wonderful book, Ordinary Vices [(Cambridge, MA, 1984), 229-30]. In discussing the philosophical value of stories, Shklar writes, "They do not, in fact, tell us how to think, but what to think about, and make us 'see things as they are.'" Shklar is talking about fictional stories, but I think what she says also applies to the true stories that historians try to tell. Our histories do not teach us what moral judgments to make, but they do pose, illustrate, and illuminate moral questions by making us see things as they are. By telling stories about the moral choices men and women must confront and by showing the implications of these choices, history gives us problems to think about.

I suspect that the most morally instructive stories are not about the great catastrophes that are usually mentioned in discussions of history's ethical purposes. After all, one does not need a great deal of historical knowledge in order to recognize that slavery and the Holocaust were moral abominations. Perhaps the most valuable moral lessons can be found in situations where the moral calculus is harder to apply, the difference between right and wrong less obvious, the final balance more elusive. As a moral science, history works best when it stays closest to the contours of ordinary life, where people must face the painful choice between compliance or

resistance, greater or lesser evils, inflicting or suffering harm. Among history's moral lessons should be a certain modesty born from the knowledge of how complex "things as they are" often turn out to be.

History takes us to the intersection of principles and practice, the place where ethical ideals uneasily coexist with the necessity of choice. Like historical explanations in general, history's moral lessons are deeply embedded in life's messy specificity. Adding or subtracting a significant detail or shifting the narrative's emphasis can often change the moral analysis in powerful and sometimes unpredictable ways. Only by attempting to get the story as straight as we can, bringing to bear everything we believe to be significant, trying to weigh as many factors as possible, and acknowledging various points of view, can we grapple with what the people we study did and what they might or should have done.

Most moral judgments about the past contain an implicit counterfactual claim: if x had done y, the situation would have been better or worse. And as is always the case in using counterfactuals, the power of counterfactual moral judgments depends on their plausibility, that is, on how close they are to the actual facts of the case. If it is implausible that x might have done y—or even thought of doing so—then the moral charge of the counterfactual is substantially weakened. Moral principles may be unchanging, but their application varies enormously from one situation to another.

I don't agree with Lord Acton that history's most important moral purpose is to hand out sentences so that evil doers don't escape "the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong." In most historical accounts, the prisoner's dock stands empty, the accused no longer available for earthly penalties or exoneration. As a moral science, history may be

about someone else's past but its purpose is rooted in our present. That is why Carl Becker's comment, first written in The Dial in 1915 and frequently quoted thereafter, seems like an appropriate way to conclude:

Knowledge of history cannot be...practically applied, and is therefore worthless except to those who have made it, in greater or less degree, a personal possession. The value of history is, indeed, not scientific but moral: by liberalizing the mind, by deepening the sympathies, by fortifying the will, it enables us to control not society, but ourselves—a much more important thing.

4. The Varieties of Historyⁱ

We sometimes think about disciplines as if they were columns of explorers, pushing deeper and deeper into uncharted territory, cutting trails through the tough underbrush of error, excavating new and exciting truths. This is a comforting image for those who imagine that they are in the vanguard of the disciplinary column, just as it is disquieting for those who fear they may be too old and infirm to keep up the pace. It seems to me, however, that this is not a very good way to think about the discipline of history, in part because we are concerned at least as much with conservation and recovery as with innovation and discovery, but more importantly because historians do not form a single column that moves in one direction. I much prefer another metaphor: the discipline of history, I think, is like a city; it changes as a city does, not by marching in a single direction, but rather by incorporating new territory around its periphery and by removing or restoring old neighborhoods within its core. Like a city, historiography

changes as it responds to the pressures of growth but also retains its essential identity.

The most striking fact about the development of history as a discipline in the past fifty years has been its remarkable expansion in size. Although in relative terms, the number of new degrees has recently declined, absolutely the numbers are impressive: in 2002, for instance, 1000 PhD's in history were awarded, the highest number in twenty years and, if compared to the figures from the 1950s, quite extraordinary.

We have not thought enough about what this pattern of demographic expansion means for the inner life of the discipline. It would be useful, for example, to have a study of historiography comparable to Diana Crane's and Vera Zolberg's analyses of modern art, both of which show how changes in scale affect the character and distribution of artistic innovation.ⁱⁱ It would be particularly interesting to see how the founding of new universities in the 1960s encouraged disciplinary innovation and how changes in population density influenced the rise and fall of certain fields of study. I would not, of course, want to reduce changes in historiography to demographic pressures, but it seems clear that in disciplines, as in cities, demography means a lot.

As the discipline grew larger, it naturally became more diverse. We can see clear evidence of this diversity in the character of the annual meeting, which has more sessions on a wider range of topics than ever before. Or, to take another example, compare an issue of the American Historical Review published forty years ago with one from 2005: in 1965, the AHR appeared four rather than five times a year, had fewer articles and reviews, was largely (although by no means exclusively) about Europe and the United States. The subjects we now see as

centrally important—gender, ethnicity, popular culture—were only beginning to make an appearance.

An important source of history's growing diversity came from outside the discipline, from political, social, and cultural movements within American society that naturally evoked interest in aspects of the past that historians had overlooked or undervalued. The same thing may be happening today when diplomatic and military history, which had languished during the final stages of the Cold War, has been revitalized by a new sense of crisis and opportunity in international affairs.

History's diversity also comes from its sensitivity to developments in other disciplines. History, Fernand Braudel once remarked, is "perhaps the least structured of all the human sciences [and] is open to all the lessons learned by its many neighbors, and is then at pains to reflect them back again."ⁱⁱⁱ Over the past half century, historians have drawn inspiration from—and sometimes have inspired—sociologists and political scientists, economists and anthropologists, literary theorists and cultural critics. Although there always have been those who worried that the porosity of history's boundaries was a threat to the discipline's integrity, openness has usually produced a healthy kind of hybrid vigor. Despite the hopes of some and the fears of others, the discipline has flourished. History may be—in Braudel's terms—the "least structured" of the human sciences, it is also among the toughest and most resilient. What historians share is far more important than what divides them.

History will survive but it will certainly continue to change. The winds of fashion will keep on blowing through our disciplinary streets; undoubtedly we will find new subjects and rediscover old ones; some kinds of history will, temporarily at least, fade from view; the boundaries between history and other disciplines will be opened or redrawn. And yet it seems to me

unlikely that any one way of writing history will prevail. Like the residents of a living city, historians will be both divided and united by the space they share. We should, I think, celebrate this variety. The disagreements that sometimes result are signs of life rather than symptoms of decline or harbingers of revolution. We should also do our best to facilitate the flow of traffic within our city, taking full of advantages of the variety it offers us. We may well find some of our neighbors a bit annoying, but we must avoid the temptation to construct grated communities. "An orthodox history," as the great English medievalist F.W.Maitland wrote, "seems to me a contradiction in terms."^{iv}

Let me conclude with a quotation from Lawrence Stone's essay of 1979, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History":

History has always had many mansions, and must continue to do so if it is to flourish in the future. The triumph of one genre or school eventually always leads to narrow sectarianism, narcissism and self adulation, contempt or tyranny towards outsiders, and other disagreeable and self-defeating characteristics.^v

Stone was a formidable innovator, but he recognized that new histories sometimes grow stale, just as old histories can be made new again. In the end, what really matters is not whether history is old or new, but whether it is sensitive to the rich variety of the human experience.

ⁱMy title is borrowed from Fritz Stern's classic collection of historical writing, The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present, first published in 1956 and still in print. I offer

these remarks as a modest contribution to the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the book's publication and the eightieth anniversary of its editor's birth.

ⁱⁱ Crane, The Transformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World, 1940-1985 (Chicago, 1987) and Zolberg, Constructing a Sociology of the Arts (Cambridge, 1990).

ⁱⁱⁱ On History (Chicago, 1980), p. 26.

^{iv} This is the epigraph for Stern's Varieties of History.

^v Reprinted in The Past and the Present (Boston, 1981), p. 75.