

CHARLES HOMER HASKINS
PRIZE LECTURE FOR 2012

A Life of Learning
Joyce Appleby

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ON CHARLES HOMER HASKINS

Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, was the first chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies, from 1920 to 1926. He began his teaching career at the Johns Hopkins University, where he received the B.A. degree in 1887 and the Ph.D. in 1890. He later taught at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard, where he was Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History at the time of his retirement in 1931, and dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. He served as president of the American Historical Association in 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America (1926).

A great American teacher, Charles Homer Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized in honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of 13.

HASKINS PRIZE LECTURERS

2012	Joyce Appleby
2011	Henry Glassie
2010	Nancy Siraisi
2009	William Labov
2008	Theodor Meron
2007	Linda Nochlin
2006	Martin E. Marty
2005	Gerda Lerner
2004	Peter Gay
2003	Peter Brown
2002	Henry A. Millon
2001	Helen Vendler
2000	Geoffrey Hartman
1999	Clifford Geertz
1998	Yi-Fu Tuan
1997	Natalie Zemon Davis
1996	Robert William Fogel
1995	Phyllis Pray Bober
1994	Robert K. Merton
1993	Annemarie Schimmel
1992	Donald W. Meinig
1991	Milton Babbitt
1990	Paul Oskar Kristeller
1989	Judith N. Shklar
1988	John Hope Franklin
1987	Carl E. Schorske
1986	Milton V. Anastos
1985	Lawrence Stone
1984	Mary Rosamond Haas
1983	Maynard Mack

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOYCE APPLEBY

Joyce Appleby has long studied how economic developments have changed perceptions about human capacities and convictions about political order. Her research on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England, France, and America has focused on the impact of an expanding world market on people's understanding of their society and their place in it. A revolution in social theory accompanied a revolution in economic activity, according to Appleby.

Appleby, who earned a B.A. at Stanford University, an M.A. at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a Ph.D. at Claremont Graduate University, began teaching at San Diego State University in 1967. In 1981, she was appointed professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she taught until retirement in 2001. In 1990-91, she served as the Harmsworth Professor of American History at Oxford University, where she was a fellow of Queen's College.

The complex relationship between the American public and the country's professional historians has fascinated Appleby. She has presided over the Organization of American Historians, the American Historical Association, and the Society for the History of the Early Republic. As cofounder of the History News Service, she initiated a program to facilitate historians writing op-ed essays for newspapers. In her career as an historian of the founding era in the United States, she has worked to promote an understanding of the past that can help Americans deal more sanely with the present.

In her dissertation, "An American Pamphlet in Paris," Appleby studied the career of an American publication in the opening debates of the French Revolution, a project that encom-

passed the foreign service of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Her first book, *Ideology and Economic Thought in Seventeenth-Century England*, won the 1978 Berkshire Prize. In 1982, New York University invited her to give the Phelps Lectures, which were published as *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Jeffersonian Vision of the 1790s*. She gave the Becker Lectures at Cornell University in 1984.

Her abiding interest in the interacting economic and intellectual history of the American revolutionary era led to the publication of *Liberalism and Republicanism in Historical Perspective*, a collection of essays that appeared in 1992. Moving beyond the revolutionary era was her study of the lives and careers of those Americans born after 1776. *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* came out in 2000. She has also written a presidential biography of Jefferson.

The challenge that postmodernism poses to historians became the central theme of *Telling the Truth about History*, which Appleby wrote with Margaret Jacob and Lynn Hunt in 1994. Her *A Restless Past*, published in 2004, contains a collection of presidential addresses and essays. After retirement, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* appeared in 2010.

In 1980 Appleby was named to the Council of the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg; she acted as chair from 1983 to 1986. She served on the Smithsonian Institution Council from 1993 to 2001. She is a member of the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the British Academy.

INTRODUCTION

Joyce Appleby's 2012 Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture is the thirtieth in this annual series, which is named for the first chairman of ACLS. The Executive Committee of the Delegates of ACLS selects the prizewinner and lecturer from the many worthy nominations put forward by our community.

The lecturer's charge is "to reflect on a lifetime of work as a scholar; on the motives, the chance determinations, the satisfactions (and the dissatisfactions) of the life of learning; and to explore through one's own life the larger, institutional life of scholarship. We do not wish the speaker to present the products of one's own scholarly research but rather to share with other scholars the personal process of a particular lifetime of learning."

Professor Appleby's life of learning has helped us understand better the history of our nation as well as the lives and thoughts of the leaders of the Revolution and the new governments formed with its success. Her analyses and descriptions of the revolution in social theory that accompanied the economic revolution produced by the new global market of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries both illuminate the past and speak to our current critical dilemmas as well. Consider this: in *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans*, Joyce writes that the political generation of 1800 "would not leave the public conscience at peace" and "turned perfectly normal patterns of domination into vexed issues."¹

Joyce Appleby's many honors include election to the presidencies of three learned societies, as well as to membership in the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and—I think this would please those she has studied and written about—to the British Academy. Reviewers of her work bestow other laurels, describing her as one of "the most in-

fluent scholars of the past three decades”² and as “a penetrating critic, a gifted controversialist and stylist [who] is one of the most impressive masters of the graceful, influential essay.”³

Professor Appleby was a journalist before becoming a professional historian. It therefore should not surprise that she has been a consistent and forceful advocate for bringing scholars into conversation with the widest public. We find her writing a compelling statement of what historians, and indeed all scholars of the humanities, have to offer. I quote:

In fighting for an inclusive memory, historians have acted on their deepest convictions that history arouses curiosity about humanity, teaches the lessons of unexpected consequences, and fortifies the will to study life in all its complexity while helping those who study it to reject consoling simplifications. The study of history nurtures curiosity, hope, and a taste for comprehensive understandings.⁴

In her 2012 Haskins Prize Lecture, Professor Appleby limns the dynamic relationship of the historian to history itself, stating that “history orders the chaos of the past through stories that then create meaning.” The achievements of her life of learning have yielded rich meaning for her students and readers, and we welcome those who hold this volume to that number.

—Pauline Yu, President
American Council of Learned Societies

ENDNOTES

¹Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000), 55.

²Michael Kammen, "Review of a Relentless Past: History and the American Public," *The Public Historian* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 67.

³Lance Banning, "Review of Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination," *The Journal of Modern History* 67, no. 1 (March, 1995): 104.

⁴Joyce Appleby, *A Relentless Past: History and the American Public* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 9–10.

JOYCE APPLEBY

A Life of Learning

I'm very pleased to be giving the Haskins Prize Lecture, so to begin I'd like to thank all those responsible for my selection. When I received Pauline Yu's invitation, I was in the midst of teaching a course for UCLA's Economics Department. You may well ask, why would an econ department ever allow a statistics-challenged historian into one of its classrooms? It was an emergency. They unexpectedly needed an instructor for a history of economic theory course scheduled to begin in a month. Their chair remembered that I had recently written a history of capitalism. I hadn't taught in a decade, but the prospect of doing so with a hundred econ students was too intriguing to turn down.

Composing a Haskins lecture promotes reflection. But reflection is rarely random. Mine focused on just why I would have written a history of capitalism. I am not an economic historian. Niall Ferguson, in a review that would be a stretch to call favorable, noted archly that my pages were "unsullied by a single table or graph."¹ If I had to choose a rubric for myself, I would pick intellectual historian, one for whom the impact of economic developments upon the way people interpret their world has exercised an enduring fascination.

This abiding interest in how people responded to changes in their everyday experience has something to do with growing up during the Depression. When my family drove into downtown

Omaha, where I lived as a child, my father would always point out the long lines of people standing outside soup kitchens. In the darkest years, men came to our back door to ask for food. My mother would fry a couple of eggs and toast some bread for them. This scene catapults us back to an America that is hardly imaginable today.

One of my earliest memories was hearing Franklin Roosevelt speak in 1932 at the Omaha Cow Palace, the Aksarben. (The name *Aksarben*, I hasten to tell you, is *Nebraska* spelled backward.) At age three the most thrilling thing about that event was the revolver on the hip of a policeman at my eye level. But I also recall the raw excitement of the crowd.

I came from a divided family—Democrats on my father's side and Republicans on my mother's. My father's father had been a friend and partisan of William Jennings Bryan. He was one of Bryan's nominators at the 1900 Democratic convention. My mother's father was a land speculator, buying property from Kearney, Nebraska, to Cripple Creek, Colorado, and on to San Francisco, then a part of what was called "the Far West."

Summers we visited my father's sisters, both fanatic FDR supporters. One kept a great scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings about Roosevelt's campaigns. By this time my father, a businessman, was putting some space between himself and his Populist roots. He and his sisters would argue politics well into the night on these visits. Listening, I realized that my aunts were speaking from deeply felt convictions while my father was likely baiting them rather than sharing his beliefs.

About that same time, I worked for the paper at Haven Junior High School in Evanston, Illinois. I learned then that writing was something I wanted to do. I also had a strong sense that people took you more seriously if you got paid for what you did. And as the baby of my family, I very much wanted to be taken seriously.

When I graduated from college in 1950, society spoke very clearly that I should want to become a wife and mother as

soon as possible. In fact, I'd spent the last few months as a bridesmaid in my friends' weddings.

Mademoiselle magazine saved me from this fate. I was one of 20 College Board contest winners brought to New York City to help put out their big back-to-school issue. I then stayed on in *Mademoiselle's* advertising department. Since its office was on Madison Avenue, I suppose that made me a "Mad Woman." The job put me on the periphery of a glamorous world—riding up in the elevator with notables like Truman Capote—but fashion and advertising were much too frivolous for me.

Publishing, I thought, would be better: at least I would be close to serious writers. So I fired off letters to every publisher listed in the New York City telephone directory. A young Harold McGraw Jr. offered me a job, but before I could get started at McGraw-Hill, convention called me back to Los Angeles to be married.

My telephone directory approach to job hunting had worked so well in New York that I tried it again in Los Angeles—where there were far fewer publishers. But I did get one call from the *Western Hotel and Restaurant Reporter*, a trade magazine run out of a real estate office in Beverly Hills.

A few minutes into my interview there, the cigar-smoking realtor said, "You can have it."

"What is it?" I asked, somewhat abashed.

"The editor's job," he replied.

I was ecstatic, even after I discovered that I also did layouts, delivered copy to the printers, and sent out subscription notices.

After the birth of my first child and a move to Pasadena, I got a job with the *Star-News* as its South Pasadena stringer. This was part-time and could be done from home by calling each morning for a review of charges from the police blotter. I also attended board of education and city council meetings. (I'm telling

you all this because the story of how I became a historian is tied up with why I didn't become a journalist.)

One day something exciting actually took place in South Pasadena. A real story came my way. A 14-year-old boy had shot and injured a friend while the two of them were playing with guns. The city editor ordered me to hightail it over to the wounded teenager's home and get a picture of him for the next day's paper. The house was less than a mile away.

When I rang the doorbell, an elderly woman answered. I explained my mission. She identified herself as the victim's grandmother and invited me in. I could see the boy's framed photograph on the mantel the minute I stepped inside. She seemed about to comply with my request, but then had second thoughts. The boy's parents were at the hospital. What if something happened to her grandson and they returned and learned that she had given the beloved picture away?

I knew what I should do. I had seen Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's play *Front Page*, in which the reporters stole corpses and sequestered criminals. If I wanted to join their tribe, I needed to push past grandma, grab the photo, and make a quick exit. Instead, I commiserated with her. I agreed that the parents might feel awful if it were missing. I retreated slowly from the living room and went back home without the photo but with a critical insight about myself: I didn't have the brassy spirit to be a reporter. It was at that point that I remembered my love of history and the fact that historians also wrote.

Three children, another move, and I enrolled in a Ph.D. program at Claremont Graduate School. I was on a very short tether. Had there not been a Ph.D.-granting institution nearby, I would not have become an academic. Fortunately, there was, and I got to work with three superb scholars: the Colonial historian Douglass Adair; Sidney Mead, the doyen of American religious history; and the political scientist Martin Diamond.

In guiding me, Adair stressed that anyone who knew only American history didn't know it very well. By that he meant that

you needed knowledge of the countries that had shaped the European settlements in the New World, so I studied seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and France as well. This stood me in good stead, for later on it gave me the option of going where my curiosity led me.

For my dissertation, I followed the impact of American nation-building upon French and English politics in the opening months of the French Revolution. It was a topic I could handle from Escondido, California, after two weeks of document-gathering in the East. Titled "An American Pamphlet in Paris," it explored the way a party of Frenchmen who styled themselves *Américains* used the sudden prestige of the new nation to gain their own political goals.

The *Américains* turned the 56-page *Examination of Government* into a 291-page annotated translation with which to bludgeon the *Anglomanes*, who favored a bicameral legislature for the new French National Assembly. Though the pamphlet's author had said nothing in favor of unicameral legislatures, he excoriated civil privileges with a rousing endorsement of democratic self-government. That was enough for those dead set against a Gallic version of the British Parliament.

I was entering the profession at a good time when I started teaching in 1967 at San Diego State University. Male professors in the humanities were far more welcoming to female colleagues than their peers in other fields. Still, my identification was that of a wife and mother who luckily got to leave home Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays to teach four history classes.

I think a lot about curiosity. It lies behind all that we know. I used to tell my students that everything they learned in college was an answer to a question that someone had posed. We continue to write freshly about the past because each cohort of young people brings a different set of questions to the past. And we're still ignorant about a lot of things because no one has thought to ask about them.

This became apparent to me when, in 1968, I organized a book exhibit to accompany a program for high school teachers on the brand new subject of African-American history. Again I wrote every publisher—something of a recurring impulse—requesting copies of any titles they had on the subject. I got back a motley assortment, little of it scholarly. Today it would take three large rooms to hold all the publications on the African-American experience because thousands of historians have inquired about it.

My husband had watched me get a Ph.D. and decided that he wanted one, too. (We had met in our freshman Western Civilization class.) Quite unexpectedly, this gave me a second graduate education. My professors had been older than I, whereas Andy's were in their late twenties and early thirties. They were immersed in the methods and topics that were liberating history writing from the gentlemanly restraints imposed by nineteenth-century WASPs at Ivy League schools.

While I was composing my first lectures, Andy would come home talking about models, cohorts, and data. The word model brought to my mind the balsa wood airplanes little boys fabricated. These concepts, this new vocabulary, challenged me. No—it threatened me. Here I was, a newly minted Ph.D., made to feel obsolete by a graduate student, even if he was my husband. But I learned a lot from his mentors, second hand.

The introductory American history course at San Diego State proved critical to my future scholarship. We taught it in multiple small discussion sections, all using the same text. *The People Shall Judge* featured documents from the liberal canon, starting with Puritan sermons, moving on to Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Adam Smith, and Thomas Paine, and then crossing the ocean permanently with Revolutionary pamphlets and the Federalist Papers.

In teaching, I uncovered the gaps in my knowledge, but more intriguing was the lacuna in the documentary record. In the early seventeenth century, Puritans railed against men and women for being impulsive, untrustworthy, and bathed in sin. Fast forward a century and a half, and Smith treated them as

steady self-improvers rationally pursuing their interests. This striking transformation raised the questions of when and how the reevaluation had occurred.

Andy's research sent us to London for a year, where I found the texts that would reveal the metamorphosis of the fickle, wayward men and women of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into the sober truckers and barterers of *The Wealth of Nations*. I looked first at the growing commentary on the novel practices that were fashioning a market economy in England during the seventeenth century. The British Museum had an abundant collection of books, pamphlets, and broadsides that I got to peruse in the same lovely reading room, with its pale blue leather chairs and desk pads, where Karl Marx had written *Das Kapital*.

One of the clues to my puzzle was that Smith never made an argument for his depiction of how the profit-oriented butcher and baker reacted to competition. He talked assuredly about the "uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition." He declared that "the principle which prompts to save is the desire of bettering our condition . . . [that] comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us til we go into the grave."²

Edmund Burke echoed Smith's assumptions. "A theory like yours[,] founded on the nature of man which is always the same[,] will last," he confided to his friend, "when those that are founded on opinions, which are always changing, will and must be forgotten."³

I'm sure that Smith was unaware that these sentiments had not always been common, because the seismic shift from Puritan sinners to Smith's rational bargainers had taken place two generations before he was born. Then, over several decades of watching people in their market relations, writers began to describe them as dependably calculating and reasonable.

What started as an interpretation of conduct in the economic realm was universalized. "All men are merchants from the king to the peasant," one pamphleteer noted. Others claimed that

“trade is in its nature free, finds its own channel, and best directs its own course.” Slowly crept in the notion that economic relations belonged to nature, not public policy. Order came about spontaneously, often guided by the law of unintended consequences.

Few things are more exhilarating than finding voices in the past that confirm your hunches. Hobbes and Locke had laid the basis for thinking of individualism as natural. It soon became an unexamined assumption for Anglo-Americans. But contemporaries recognized the novelty in their assertions. “Methinks [that Mr. Hobbes] discourses of Men as if they were Terrigene, born out of the earth, come up like Seeds, without any relation one to the other,” wrote a skeptical reader of *The Leviathan*, “when by nature man was made a poor helpless Child who must trust and submit to his Parents.”⁴ Locke’s placement of the fundamentals of the economy in the state of nature prompted another critic to mock him for pretending that “the Government had no more power in Politicals than they have in Naturals.”⁵

I checked my footnotes for *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* at the Harvard Business School’s Baker Library. There I got a demonstration of the value of my having written it isolated from other scholars. The librarian had shown my manuscript to the distinguished European historian of banking, Fritz Redlich. One morning, Redlich, who was quite small and very old, approached me, a large volume of a German biographical dictionary weighing him down. Pointing at one of the entries—for a nineteenth-century German economist—he said to me, “He’s done it. He’s already done it.”

More supportively, Albro Martin, the editor of the *Business History Review*, told me how happy it made him to learn that Smith stood on the shoulders of so many people, because so many others were standing on his.

Smith’s view of human nature not only prevailed in economics, it shaped how people thought about human nature in general. Most English speakers shared his presumption that the innate striving for freedom and self-improvement drove events. Some attention was given to superstition, but it was always seen

as indicative of backwardness and capable of correction. Ideas were hammered out on the anvil of truth. People were in charge of the contents of their minds.

I grew up in a cultural milieu that battered off nature. Nature, not societies, discriminated among races; nature dictated the destiny of women. The economy was a natural system based on innate human traits, and it was capable naturally of regaining equilibrium after shocks to its system. My long exposure to the Depression made the latter point suspect, but the evocation of nature to define women's role incited me more. Because I knew that this depiction of woman's essence was not true, I entertained doubts about other assertions my society made about what was natural. Burke's encomium to Smith was wrong, I decided; human nature is not always the same.

Though I didn't know the term at the time, I had actually been investigating the social construction of reality, the one that had dominated Western thought since the Enlightenment. While I was completing my book on English economic thought, a new construction of reality was being put in place in the field of early America. Bernard Bailyn had banished the rather banal idea that American colonists had rebelled against taxation in his *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. In its place he elaborated a particular mindset that had compelled the Colonial gentry to construe imperial reforms as illegitimate acts imposed by a corrupt British ministry.

The classical republican convictions that Bailyn ascribed to America's founders drew on a vocabulary of political pathology to predict tyranny, chaos, usurpations, and conspiracies. Locke was turned into an eccentric figure, the center now being held by an inherited way of interpreting events harking back to Renaissance fears about power lusts.

Classical republicanism involved several propositions: that change generally brought degeneration, or worse, and that history pointed to the instability of all political orders. Civic vir-

tue, where leaders put the common good above their own interests, formed the only bulwark against decay. Gordon Wood ended *The Creation of the American Republic* saying that “American Republicanism represented a final attempt to come to terms with the emergent individualistic society that threatened to destroy once and for all the communion and benevolence that civilized men had always considered to be the ideal of human beings.”⁶

Highlighting the ideological rather than the intellectual origins of the American Revolution signaled that historians had lit on a way of ditching the rational actor while simultaneously scraping Marx off the concept of ideology. Sociologist Talcott Parsons and anthropologist Clifford Geertz helped here.

Parsons taught historians to look at society as a structure of structures—familial, political, religious—each reinforcing the other. He also gave them Max Weber, whose writings he translated. Weber attributed to human beings “an inner necessity to comprehend the world as a meaningful cosmos and to know what attitude to take before it.” Geertz built on this intuitive notion in his elegant “Ideology as a Cultural System.” Man, he announced (I always presumed he meant woman too), is “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”⁷

Culture was losing its connotation of cultivated tastes and beginning to take on the conceptual burden of explaining everything. J. G. A. Pocock gave it an epistemological twist when he wrote that “men cannot do what they have no means of saying they have done, and what they do must in part be what they can say and conceive that it is.”⁸

Geertz, whose field was Indonesia, also offered an explanation for why American leaders adhered to classical republican thought. “Ideologies,” he said, “emerge and take hold when societies free themselves from the governance of tradition.” Geertz thrilled historians with his “thick descriptions” of the connecting threads in the fabric of meaning that passed under the radar of critical inspection. His aphoristic flourishes were irresistible.

The History Department at the University of California, Irvine, used to have a spring program on social theory. Commenting one year on a paper that Lawrence Stone had delivered, I solemnly declared that I could have sharpened my critique with a quotation from Clifford Geertz but that I had given up quoting Geertz . . . for Lent.

In my dissertation, I investigated John Adams and Thomas Jefferson as conduits of American political thought in Europe, where they served as foreign ministers in the 1780s. This research left me resistant to the republican revision for two reasons: Adams and Jefferson did not inhabit the same intellectual universe, so I doubted that classical republicanism could be seen as a world view in the anthropological sense of the term. And what Jefferson did believe about human beings offered a striking alternative to Adams's gloomy strictures.

A controversy ensued. I argued that a liberal orientation existed alongside the recovered civic humanism. For me, liberalism had entered American consciousness as a potent brew blended from seventeenth-century entrepreneurial attitudes and the Enlightenment's endorsement of liberty and reason. Because nature had endowed human beings with the capacity to think for themselves and act on their own behalf, representative government seemed the perfect fit for them. Rather than classical republicanism's fixation on social traumas, liberalism was optimistic, moving forward with the rational, self-improving individual who was endowed with natural rights to be exercised in a widened ambit of freedom.

Jefferson was my witness. "The rights of one generation will scarce be considered hereafter as depending on the paper transactions of another," he asserted. Assessing Shays's rebellion, he insisted that "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." On language he was equally venturesome: "I consider purism as destroying the verve and beauty of the language while neology improves both and adds to its copiousness." As Adams wryly observed when Jefferson shared some of his beliefs, "Your

taste is judicious in liking better the dreams of the future than the history of the past.”⁹

It was a rousing academic debate that lasted about five years. I came away from it with the awareness that you get the most out of a controversy when you engage with people whom you greatly admire. The result was a richer understanding of the influences playing upon the revolutionary elite. For me it was also a personal life-line. Andy and I were teaching at San Diego State together when a heart attack felled him. After his death, I was invited to join the faculty at UCLA, where I taught for 20 years.

Reading Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* opened me to another major historiographical shift. I had been pondering the stuff of consciousness—how it gets into the stream of events we know as history—when I encountered this arresting line: “A man does not by nature wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose.”¹⁰ I read that sentence over and over in tingling excitement.

To get a feel for the cognitive dissonance Weber’s statement caused in me, we need to retrieve the historical reasoning that swung on the hinge of progress. Smith and other Scottish intellectuals had created a conjectural history for mankind, moving from societies of hunters and gatherers, then to shepherds, on to farmers, and, finally, to the commercial men and women of their era. It was a seamless scheme showing the ineluctable advance of human civilizations.

Westerners had settled into the conviction that time’s natural course was progressive. Well into the twentieth century, industrialization was treated as a destination, like a city toward which all historical roads led. Scholars largely ignored any taste or habit from the past that didn’t contribute to the march forward. Our histories were Whiggish and proleptic, depicting men and women as straining toward a better future.

But not Weber. He recognized that the culture of pre-capitalist societies had thrown up impediments to any kind of

change. What others saw as the working out of an inexorable destiny, he characterized as a highly improbable development demanding analysis.

The implicit follow-up question to Weber's claim was that if men were not, by nature, eager to earn more and more money, how had they become so? His answer was a cluster of unintended consequences. Protestants had intruded their strenuous morality into every nook and cranny of customary society, using the scalpel of reason to cut away the accretion of popish religion along with the lethargy of habit. Their rational approach to action, enhanced by a fierce anxiety about salvation, transformed work habits wherever they prevailed, leading to the novel spirit of capitalism. More provocative than Weber's thesis was his insight that men and women didn't have emotional attachments to the future, but rather to their present and near past. Change didn't beckon. It agitated.

Self-improving individuals hadn't ushered in modernity—mutually reinforcing developments had. Historians weren't particularly good at explaining processes. Very fortuitously, the social sciences came to their rescue. H. Stuart Hughes's article "The Historian and the Social Scientist," immortalized in a Bobbs-Merrill reprint, provides a good sense of the zeitgeist in 1963.

Hughes had spent a year at Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, where he learned things he thought other historians should know. With a convert's zeal, he set out to get his peers to adopt some social scientific techniques, such as model building. The gingerly way he approached the task of educating them amuses in retrospect. After a dozen pages talking about Ranke, Dilthey, Croce, and Collingwood, Hughes finally tiptoed up to the "question of how the concepts of social sciences may be applied" to history. Despite historians' attachment to the particular, Hughes adroitly pointed out that they were already using generalizations implicit in the words industrialization, revolution, and nation. Going further, he boldly recommended investigating opinion surveys, sampling devices, and content analysis.¹¹

As it turned out, Hughes was pushing on an open door; graduate students were already there. We can imagine him quickly stepping aside to avoid the crush of young quantifiers hurrying to their IBM punch cards. With computers and very good eyesight, these young people had started pouring over long-term data sets like parish records of births, marriages, and deaths; manifests of ships carrying immigrants; slave sale billings; city directories; and tax rolls.

Social scientific theorizing about social mobility, demographic regimes, and class structure supplied historians with hypotheses to test. The new social historians prepared a feast of information about the lives of immigrants, slaves, women, and laborers. Mastering techniques beyond the ken of their mentors, they gave voice to the voiceless in their histories from the bottom up. Where their elders hid behind the omniscient author, social historians carefully detailed each step in their research. I fully expected one day to read an article that began with directions on how to get to the Newberry Library. Still, their emphasis upon making explicit their procedures raised the consciousness of the entire discipline.

These ardent quantifiers coined the ultimate put-down by calling the resources of their seniors "literary evidence." The old guard complained that they had disrupted the story line of the rise of the United States "'Tis all in pieces; all coherence gone," they moaned. Later came the realization that we had attained a fuller, more inclusive narrative of the American experience.

For me, social science methods were most rewarding when applied to England's pioneering of a capitalist economy. Once the assumption of inexorable progress was no longer there to glide over the questions of how and why, modernization became a mammoth puzzle. How had communities immured in custom, ruled by hereditary hierarchies, and limited by economies of endemic scarcity managed to vault over the walls that protected against change?

Let me instance two conundrums. Industrialization could never have taken place without dramatic improvements in agricul-

ture because feeding the people in a traditional society took upward of 80 percent of the society's labor and funds. Only if farmers could increase their crop yields while using fewer workers and less capital could people and investments pass to manufacturing and marketing. Altogether a tall order, especially for country folk, who are least likely to innovate.

Finely honed inquiries about land management and rural practices specified how it happened, only to present another riddle: why didn't larger harvests lead to the additional births that would trigger the Malthusian trap? Painstaking research uncovered the answer. Family reconstitutions, parish by parish, revealed a pattern of late age at marriage, typical throughout Europe. This had put a lid on population growth. In a striking departure from mores elsewhere around the globe, European bridal couples did not move in with their parents to create an extended family. Society prescribed independent households, so young people delayed marriage until the groom could support a family.

It would be hard to exaggerate how mind-expanding it was to approach people in the past as moving unprepared into an unknown future. In my field of early America, a fresh look at the intentions of the country's charter colonists replaced the assumption that the United States had been born "free, rich, and modern." Historians attended to the extraordinary efforts made to transplant Old World traditions into New World settlements.

I had always loved reading social theory. I once joked that my 4-inch-by-6-inch note cards, if laid end to end, would extend from Los Angeles to Frankfurt and back again. When Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault burst upon the academic scene, I was intrigued. With the Enlightenment legacy in their sights, each philosopher, in his own way, sought to destabilize the foundations of thinking in the modern West.

The philosophes had sought a total break with absolutist monarchies, church-dominated education, and institutionalized cruelty—in short "the infamy" of the old regime. They convinced

contemporaries and their intellectual heirs that nature offered the best guide to the proper ordering of human affairs and that reason could discern the difference between truth and falsehood in the social realm as well as the physical universe.

Commenting on this faith a century later, Friedrich Nietzsche announced that “to look upon nature as if it were a proof of the goodness and care of God and to interpret history as a constant testimony to a moral order was now past because it had conscience against it.”¹² But his perceptions and those of a few others chafing in the Enlightenment straightjacket did not ignite a rebellion. In retrospect it appears that the two world wars, the Holocaust, and the Cold War held at bay a critique of Enlightenment verities for another century, making it all the more forceful when it finally arrived in the 1980s.

Foucault and Derrida, joined by others such as Richard Rorty and Hayden White, didn’t so much kill the Enlightenment as write its obituary. They replaced the autonomous individual with “the subject.” They raised the “problematic consistency of the self.” Men and women were probed as repositories of their society’s culture. Rejecting the idea that power was knowledge, they turned upside down that Baconian observation with insistence that social power determined a people’s knowledge.

Where historians in the Enlightenment tradition saw continuous processes of development, postmodernists discovered ruptures and discontinuities. The social glue of language became unstuck for them. Words suffered from an “indeterminacy of reference.” They no longer moored reality, because they lacked the capacity to represent the external world. Words could only point to other texts or discourses. Language certainly could not play the role of a value-free instrument for representing things outside its purlieus.

Out, too, went authorial intent, for the gaps, transgressive possibilities, and unintended indicators in a text lead to a multiplicity of readings. We do not speak language, Derrida maintained, but rather language speaks us, imposing its particular logic.

As I was taking all this in, the Mellon Foundation waved \$40,000 in front of me along with an invitation to address what it considered a problem: postmodernism was slowing history graduate students' progress toward their degrees. I proposed a seminar that put postmodernism in historical perspective. I didn't think postmodernism was affecting the time to degree, but rather that history graduate students weren't familiar with its neologies, which they would surely run into when they got jobs and mingled with colleagues in literature departments.

Teaching that seminar three times prepared me to respond affirmatively when Margaret Jacob and Lynn Hunt suggested that we write a book that would offer an antidote to the vertigo postmodernism had induced among our peers. Historians, after all, had more at stake in these issues than literary scholars, who apply themselves to texts. We reconstruct events, lives, and developments that have actually happened.

Our tack in *Telling the Truth about History* was to juxtapose postmodernism's skepticism about a correspondence notion of truth against positivism's certainty of it, and then pull out from these extremes a *via media*. We called it "practical realism." In contrast to poststructuralists, we emphasized the function of words in articulating speakers' multifarious contacts with objects.

Abandoning Bacon's notion that the eye was a mirror reflecting reality, we argued that historians' shared goal of achieving accuracy and completeness acted as a constant pressure to get things right during their rigorous interrogation of evidence. This professional ethic, bolstered by the freedom of speech in a democracy, we claimed, acted as a safeguard against history becoming a "mere discourse."

Historians have to deal with a vanished past, but they use records outside of texts, such as burial sites, city layouts, carbon dating, and aerial photographs like those that revealed the arrangement of farmers' fields to Marc Bloch while he wrote his masterpiece on French rural history. Readily giving up the idea of "scientific" methods, we acknowledged the benefits stemming

from postmodernism's searing critique of language use, but we also kept in mind the horror of being imprisoned in the present.

Historians rarely devise theories; they borrow them. But our attachment to empiricism means that we often return them the worse for wear. Postmodernism presented an altogether different challenge from that posed by the social construction of reality or of explicating modernization without the aid of Whiggish assumptions about progress. Yet all three encounters showcased historians at their best: capable of sloughing off worn-out meta-narratives and seeking help from other disciplines while maintaining a collective equilibrium in the presence of academic earthquakes.

I've learned that writing and teaching the history of one's own country represents a special intellectual enterprise, unlike that of studying Germany or China or Nigeria. The difference is that with the history of the United States, a relatively open-ended inquiry collides with the vigilant censors of national self-interest.

The nation—through its various official and unofficial representatives—cannot be indifferent to what we academic scholars say about the American past, because our shared understanding—yours and mine—of what it is to be an American grows out of what we believe to be true about our nation's history.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas has described the case well: "Any institution that is going to keep its shape needs to control the memory of its members; [and therefore] it causes them to forget experiences incompatible with its righteous image and it brings to their minds events which sustain the view . . . that is complimentary to itself." Events have proved her right.

The findings of the social historians were not received as happily among politicians and pundits as they were in academia. The hard, often bitter stories of slaves, women, laborers, immigrants, and other outliers threatened to undermine the heroic story of the American nation. Certainly the U.S. Senate felt that way the day it passed a resolution condemning the National His-

tory Standards of 1996. Edited by my colleague Gary Nash, the Standards had brought to their attention the path-breaking research of the last quarter century. The senators did not appreciate newcomers like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth popping up in history textbooks.

This is an old fault line, one that I had explored in my first public speech, an address to the local Unitarian Church, in 1965. I chose the topic of Americans' shared values and how they abraded politics. My remarks drew upon Martin Diamond's quip that the history of the United States could fruitfully be taught as the American legacy and the fight among the heirs. That Sunday I spoke of the tension between those who valued equality but esteemed freedom more, and their mirror opposites. Common convictions didn't ameliorate feelings. Instead, the different priorities exacerbated them. This fight among the heirs of the American legacy can be traced to the origins of our nation.

Americans in 1776 had to create the sense of nationhood that other countries inherited. I saw this with sharp clarity during a year spent in France. My elder son went to a French school where geography figured prominently in the curriculum. His geography text featured a centerfold picture of pairs of men and boys stretching across the two pages like a string of paper dolls. At the far left, the man and boy, obviously father and son, were dressed in contemporary clothes; the man held the hand of the next boy, who wore knickers and knee-high boots. He was holding the hand of another version of his father, this one wearing a 1940s double-breasted suit. The next pair evoked the fashion at the turn of the twentieth century, and so on, ending with a man of the Carolinian age in a doublet and hose.

This schoolboy's text graphically captured the essence of French nationhood. It sprang from this unbroken chain of fathers and sons who had lived long in the land and propagated. Think of the contrast with the United States on the eve of independence. Americans had not only not lived long in the land, the land they lived in had belonged to other people, many of them still living on

terrain the new nation coveted. So they relied instead on the affirmation in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit happiness.

My story of discovering that journalism was not for me probably makes history sound like a second choice. In the ensuing 53 years, I have realized that it was the one calling that would make my life coherent. I enjoy the way history straddles the humanities and social sciences. Aristotle said in the *Poetics* that the dramatist must make the possible appear probable. For historians, the challenge is to make the actual believable. At the same time, historians eschew the precision of social scientists by staying true to the unpredictability and messiness of the remembered life.

The relationship between memory and history is tangled. Our own recollections contain but a small patch of what has happened, so history must supply the deficiency of memory. But history is not memory. The past as a series of events is utterly gone, and its consequences have become incorporated into the present. What lingers are the material traces and written records, what historians turn into evidence with their questions. These never speak for themselves. Yet some traces lie close enough to the surface to be uncovered by an errant investigator who strays from the beaten track or tract. And then, like hastily buried treasure or poorly planted land mines, they deliver shocks.

Remembering and forgetting determine the history we tell. It could also be said that history orders the chaos of the past through stories that then create meaning. When historians look back on their careers of history writing—and, yes, lifetimes of learning—they are lucky if they can feel good about the chaos defied and the hope in the narrative told.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁵ Henry Layton, *Observations Concerning Money and Coin, and Especially Those of England*, (London: [Printed for Peter Buck . . .], 1697): 15. [Available in EEOB facsimile ed. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2011).]
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- ⁸ J. G. A. Pocock, quoted in Norman Birnbaum, “Conflicting Interpretations of the Rise of Capitalism: Marx and Weber,” *British Journal of Sociology* 4 (1953): 134; and “Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3 (1972): 118.
- ⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner, 1958): 47–62.
- ¹⁰ H. Stuart Hughes, “The Historian and the Social Sciences,” in *Generalizations in Historical Writing* (Philadelphia: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963): 35, 48. [Bobbs-Merrill Repeat Series in European History.]
- ¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted in Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1949): vii.

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