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Teaching and Research in History Today

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WITH MORE THAN 2,000 colleges and universities in this country, it is extremely hard to frame generalizations that hold true about any related subject of importance. And yet it is also true that quite often numerical surveys fail to characterize tendencies, whereas impressions formed by attentive judges appear in retrospect both accurate and significant. In these brief remarks, it is only observations and impressions that I can offer. They are, needless to say, subject to correction by others.*

I believe this panel was chosen so as to obtain a comparison of the present day with a period far enough in the past to show marked differences. Change is usually gradual, but I think a dividing line can be discerned at the time of the Second World War, which disrupted current practices and caused a great movement of people in and out of the academy. I take that disturbed period as giving meaning to the words Then and Now, Earlier and Today; and I begin with the techniques of teaching.

Earlier, courses in history used equally the lecture and the discussion methods, and lectures tended to be formal, prepared presentations. They might be dull or brilliant in diction and delivery, but they imparted facts in organized form. Especially in History A—the freshman course that was often a requirement—the lecture by a full professor gave shape to the assignment just read. The prescribed “third hour” under a supercilious (because indifferent or nervous) graduate student managed somehow to reinforce main points, by repetition and the rectifying of errors. That third hour was part quiz,

part discussion.

Advanced classes with small registrations might be lectured at, but were more often handled by discussion. But there, too, the personality of the man in charge would ensure forceful direction and yield at the end of each session the sense of knowledge acquired.

What changed these two forms of instruction was not so much the result of conscious pedagogical effort—though in the late 1930s there was much talk about the inadequacy of lectures passively received, compared to the value of participation in active discussion. The greater influence, I think, was a cultural change affecting the idea of personality. It would be too much to say that the earlier professor was a hero and the later one an anti-hero; but perhaps this shorthand analogy will suggest the change I have in mind. One small sign of it was the new cliché, that the professor did not teach—he was only an older student learning along with the rest of the class.

Perhaps the age and experience of the returned veterans after 1945, and again after 1952, had something to do with this shift, this democratizing of instruction. In any event, lecturing after the two wars became a very casual causerie—formless and colloquial, interrupted at will by the students. Its practitioners might also be brilliant in their improvisations, or they might be merely incoherent and inaccurate, but they could truthfully say that they were spontaneous, like the students who spoke up when the impulse struck.

With the ideal of informality it was logical to decry the old lecturer as a stuffed shirt and to replace as far as possible lecture courses with discussion groups, seminars, pro-seminars, and that perpetual illusion shared by teacher and taught: "independent work." Now a discussion course is the hardest and the easiest to teach. It is hard—it is exhausting—if the person who runs it is determined to preside over a truly open discussion and at the same time make that discussion progress fairly straight from a fixed point of departure to a suitable stopping place. That is, if the teacher insists on making the sessions impart knowledge and ultimately cover the announced subject of the course.

Contrariwise, a discussion course is the easiest for all concerned if it is a free-for-all exchange of opinions more or less related to the topic of the day in the syllabus. Under the principle of informality, of spontaneity, of the group all "exploring" a subject together, a discussion course can become a weekly exercise in discontinuity, intellectually less profitable even than a bull-session in the dormitory.

Of course, the mental traits displayed on either side of the instructor's desk do not originate in the method itself; they merely *condition* the method. Their origin goes back to the lower schools and the

home, which reflect the habits of the larger society. These influences explain why, for example, so many bright and eager students cannot articulate their thoughts simply and clearly, without "like" and "you know" to fill in gaps between fragments. These able young people have never been made to recast their inspirations into a sentence until self-expression becomes effortless.

On his side, the instructor, who a few years before was one of these bright students, is likely to think in the same fragmentary way. "France occupied the Ruhr—OK?" "Hitler was a madman—OK?" It is the sweep of history reduced to telegraphic dot-and-dash. The habit is obviously detrimental to humanistic subjects, to history in particular, where exact linkage and subtle relations are of fundamental importance. That the student is beset by bad habits much more than by ignorance or lack of ability is shown by the experience I recall sharing with others who teach doctoral seminars: it takes six weeks of firm demands before the students who speak up will meet the point just made and carry the conversation forward. They may talk of relevance, meaning only topicality, but they have little or no practice in determining how and where an idea or fact fits another.

This defect in training is condoned—one might say encouraged, if a defect can be encouraged—by another notable shift between Then and Now in the formulation of historical subjects and courses. Toward the end of the Thirties, there was a good deal of talk about the exhaustion of subjects for dissertations. Ph.D. candidates were reduced to such alluring matters as "Newspaper Opinion on the Death of Calvin Coolidge." Political, social, economic, diplomatic, and military history seemed for various reasons played out. The only new field was cultural history, and that did not appeal widely, because it seemed to require a knowledge of all the other histories, plus philosophy and the arts.

What followed was a reshuffling of historical data on the basis of situations or conditions. As early as 1895, Lord Acton had said, "Study a problem, not a period." And the French historians of the early 1900s, who later developed into the *Annales* group, echoed Lord Acton and declared that events and individuals must be discarded in favor of tendencies and states of mind. In this country, after the war, the course offerings showed the same reorientation. I think it was a spontaneous change as often as it was a result of foreign influence. There seemed to be freshness and free room in subjects such as:

Victorian Women: Stereotypes and Changing Roles

The Mind of the Slave Owner in America

English Urban Life Between the Wars

In these and kindred topics there are "problems," as Acton desired, and there is also a spirit of democracy—no great men to account for what happened, but the great people or its oppressors, all anonymous and powerful. And even "what happened" mattered less than "how it was"—the common life of groups here or there. The transformation turned the materials of history to the uses of what may be called retrospective sociology, though it claims the name of history.

Certainly today, one generation later, the output of books shows the continuing popularity of such themes, as against individuals and events in narrative form. If one browses through university press and remainder catalogues under the rubric "History," one finds:

Class, Culture, and the Classroom

Firearms in Colonial America

Violence in Early Renaissance Venice

The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution

Modern France: Mind, Politics, Society

In one catalogue entirely devoted to history, only one work has a title suggesting a story. It is a *Political and Diplomatic History of the United States*: and it is by a Japanese, originally published by Tokyo University Press, and only distributed by the American publisher.

With this change of aim and object in the historian's attention has come, necessarily, a change in the sources of fact. There has been a rush toward documents of many kinds formerly neglected or casually sampled: police reports, court and town-hall records, business contracts and ledgers, and the like. Any one item means little; all together may establish an important truth. This relation is usually expressed in the conjunction of a book title with its subtitle: *Poverty and Welfare in Habsburg Spain: The Example of Toledo*. The assumption is twofold—that the surviving documents faithfully represent the foregone state of affairs and that the chosen sample, of one town or one county, holds good for the larger scene. It is indeed sociology.

In a comparable way, history and even more, biography, have undergone a merger with psychology, mainly the so-called depth

psychology emanating in the first instance from Freud and his disciples. This venture added new materials to history in the form of unconscious motives—hidden not only from the possessors but also from the observers, including previous historians. Many of the studies that use the word "Mind," whether the mind of a class or of a single figure, propose an interpretation of well-known events that puts their true origin elsewhere than in existing conditions and overt purposes. Thus Andrew Jackson's Indian Wars have been linked with his attitude toward his mother.

To generalize from these new departures—the sociological and the psychological—we may say that like the earlier Marxist and economic interpretations, they profess to find an ultimate cause, a prime mover of history, which makes mere description superficial. In that regard, this way of writing history shows the cultural pressure of science. The view that individuals conscious of their goals produce in their multiple interactions the sequence of events we call history seems no longer acceptable. That older view inevitably accords greater power to some figures, and this offends our sense of equality; we would rather have blind forces than great men.

The same distrust informs the prevailing style of biography, which in its reaction against the former mode of admiration for achievement takes care that everybody shall be shown in such full detail that what is trivial and common to all human lives swamps the rest—namely the things that made the subject worth writing about. Thus a recent life of Ernest Hemingway tells us at length about the trees and the lawn at his parents' house and what his first wife wore at her wedding but says little or nothing about his early teachers or the influence of the Civil War on his family.

A great new resource for both the minute detail and the subtle belittling is oral history. In its simplest form, it now impels the researcher to visit the relatives, classmates, and other survivors of the subject wherever they may be and record their recollections and imaginings on tape. We may shortly expect that the publisher's blurb will express the author's thoroughness by the number of cassette-miles traveled.

This suggestion of numbers brings us to Quantification, the ultimate device by which any of the humanities hopes to emulate science. Quantification in history means only counting, though it is often called measurement. The difference is important. True scientific measurement implies a homogeneous substance divisible by means of a standard unit devised for the purpose. The measure obtained can then enter into correlation with other measures of other substances. In history, there is no homogeneous substance; a verbal abstraction has

to do duty for it. For example, "violence" in Venice or anywhere else is a collection of acts having widely different origins, features, and aims. And it cannot be handled direct: the historian has to rely on reports or "indicators."

The sorting and counting can be done well or ill, depending on the supply of data and the skill of the researcher. But at best, when one is asked, for example, to trust an account of higher education in Tudor times on the basis of matriculations at Oxford and Cambridge, or when present-day religious faith is gauged by church attendance, the reader of charts and percentages is entitled to regret the particularity and vividness that were inherent in the best narrative history.

Perhaps the responses to the work of Fernand Braudel, the ranking *Annaliste* of our time, are themselves "indicators" of the situation I refer to. Braudel has received universal praise for his vast, painstaking inquiry which used numerical data wherever possible and which drew from them "phases" and "cycles" of significance. But as early as its first appearance, J. H. Plumb respectfully pointed out that Braudel himself continually deplored the scarcity and unreliability of the figures and that the conclusions reached did not differ from those obtained earlier from literary sources. More recently, Jonathan Israel has pointed out, respectfully also, how much historical matter Braudel's quantitative method leaves out—politics, diplomacy, wars, treaties, and ideas. The quantifier's faith in the single underlying cause is palpable, and the question that this premise raises is whether it is not a negation of history.

If the older sense of what history is, how it feels and how one thinks it, is now discounted or forgotten, it is appropriate to ask how this traditional school subject is now taught to the young, whether under its own name or diluted into "social studies." Fairly recent visits to schools that I have paid either as a grandparent or as member of a commission on the teaching of history sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, suggest that various innovations, derived in part from the new ways of scholarship, have modified the character of history courses, at least from the seventh grade up through high school.

These new ways and devices can be readily understood from a mere listing and their underlying principle can be defined in one word: discontinuity. The net effect is: bits and pieces. Begin with the very idea of Social Studies. It is a composite of facts and terms arbitrarily picked out of the disciplines of economics, sociology, anthropology, demography, and political science and supposedly glued together around "problems." What comes out in practice is certainly not discipline and hardly understanding, which would require long and

serious study of a series of contexts in each of the associated subjects. What is actually given is at most terminology, verbalizing; what is retained is at best thought-clichés attached to certain facts and dates.

When the course is called History and is unmixed, the same discontinuity is likely to result from the same use of "problems" as a teaching method: how did the U.S. Constitution get written and adopted? What "factors" made the entry of the U.S. in the two world wars inevitable? If such topics are ever linked with others it is by means of rapid summaries that are necessarily dry and a chronology that lacks associations with historical images. These methods go well with the devices; all cultivate the mind in bits and pieces—film strips, slides and other visual aids, field trips, unguided discussion of the "problems," projects (including "acting out" in class the framing of the Constitution), and as the perfect culmination of discontinuity, multiple choice tests.

Nor should it be forgotten that when a textbook is used, it is printed in a manner to encourage the habit of hop, skip, and jump: each double spread in quarto size is filled with pictures, maps, charts, and diagrams in four colors. Among these islands of attraction there is a black and white river of printed text meandering irregularly and looking as superfluous as the prose of a good display ad. Picture and caption do all the work.

In high school, a further distraction is often introduced in the form of "research." In one such enterprise, the teacher of a European history course formed teams of twos and threes, each of which was to pick "a nation in the news" and then consult the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* to find two recent articles on the nation selected, preferably in periodicals that the library was sure to have, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. These articles were to be read and digested, and the results of some of these efforts would be reported on orally in class two weeks later.

The entire class of about twenty trooped into the library together, debating what nations to choose. The researchers disturbed the few students already there, and the unprepared ordeal of consulting and interpreting the *Readers' Guide* taxed the teacher's resourcefulness as much as the students'. One team told me in confidence that the previous project had been much more fun—a single group of three had impersonated Karl Marx, Gladstone, and an anarchist whose name was forgotten, in a debate on their respective "systems." The class had voted, not on the best system but the best performance.

The title of this course was Modern European History, an elective. But in the catalogue—for large high schools now have catalogues like colleges to display their profusion of electives—recognition was given

to the mental strain arising from the study of regular history. Below "Modern European History, 1815 to the Present" was "Famous Men and Women in Modern Europe," the description stating that this alternative was for those who thought the rigors of the other would be too great for them.

In November, 1985, Diane Ravitch gave in the *New York Times Magazine* an excellent account of the situation as she has recently observed it. The title of the piece was "Decline and Fall of Teaching History," and the picture on the first page showed a class in Flatbush engaged in "global studies." In other high schools one finds the history of Asia or of Africa offered "to counterbalance the provincialism of studying only the United States or the Western World." Indeed, in one school at least, the Home Economics department cooperates by demonstrating the preparation of "an Oriental meal." It is clear that what is meant by the "fall" of history teaching is that it has fallen into silliness—it is make-believe, and the only people who do not see through it are the teachers.

Good teachers, intelligent and themselves well taught, are still to be found, but as Professor Ravitch points out, two great obstacles stand in their way—the pupils' inability to read well and the bugbear of "relevance." The second of these a really good teacher can surely dispose of in five minutes by asking what is relevant about the sinking of the *Titanic* seventy-five years ago that there should be movies about it—"But it's a gripping story, Miss Jones!" "Well, so is history if rightly conceived and presented."

The other obstacle is more baffling. Not to read is by and large not to learn—history or anything else. One despairing teacher in the Northwest hit upon the idea of getting the Speech department of her school to use its students in making tapes of her textbook assignments. She then sent her students, not to the library—there isn't any—but to the General Learning Center, where they listened to the tapes and came back to her class somewhat "historicized."

This episode is a good indication of where we are. We may note in passing that the failure to read is also a manifestation of the Discontinuity Principle. When reading instruction abandoned the alphabet—the phonics method—and took up "look-and-say," it failed to teach reading and it succeeded in forming the habit of bits and pieces. It is customary to blame television for most of our intellectual ills. We are told that on the screen the image must change every eighteen seconds—discontinuity reduced to a system. That surely reinforces school practices, but it does not start them. Television is a result, not a cause. The snippets of news is for minds who have been brought up on snippets of everything, including global studies and oriental meals,

and who have been denied the discipline of the most continuous, integrated of all subjects—history.

Note

* These remarks were given at the Organization of American Historians annual meeting, April 11, 1986, in New York City.