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The Perils of Naturalism: Some Reflections on Daniel J. Boorstin's Approach To American History

DANIEL J. BOORSTIN, THE FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN STUDIES Association, reiterates the advice of another esteemed guardian of American ideals when he asks fellow historians to disenthral themselves from the high-brow angst of European culture and return home to native grounds. To capture the full flavor of their society, William Dean Howells told writers to consider the “smiling aspects of life” which are “the more American”; to recapture the raw materials of our past, Boorstin tells us to reconsider the “forgotten commonplaces of American history.” The novelist instructed Americans to shun the unsuitable tragic visions of Dostoevski; the historian warns us to be skeptical of the undeniable contributions of Freud and Marx lest we blind ourselves to the truer reality in “the very surface of experience.”¹ According to Boorstin, it is the homely aspects of American history that must be recovered from that oblivion which is the inevitable fate of the obvious. No less than Howells, Boorstin has set out to find general truths in ordinary facts, lost values in mundane virtues, uncommon insights in the common sights of history. The discovery of the profound in the prosaic elevates history to the level of philosophy.

“To run down philosophy,” wrote Pascal, “is really to philosophize.”

¹*The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: Phoenix, 1958), p. 1; *America and the Image of Europe* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1960), p. 78. The former work will hereafter be abbreviated as *GAP*, the latter as *AIE*. Other books by Boorstin used in this study will be cited as follows: *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), *CE*; *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), *NE*; *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (Boston: Beacon, 1960), *TJ*; *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), *TI*.

The aphorism applies to Boorstin's interpretation of the American past. For although he claims ideas have had no significant role in American history, his own sense of history is shot through with subtle philosophical ideas and metaphysical assumptions. Reading Boorstin's works, we find that most Americans were economically liberated, politically consensualized, socially adjusted, psychologically sufficient, philosophically ignorant, and thus morally complete. We find, that is, a nation of wholesome people singularly untroubled by the enduring dualisms that have plagued philosophers and intellectual historians. Naturally unreflective, Americans were unified, intact, content, scarcely aware that there may have been real conflicts between beliefs about man and nature, experience and reality, mind and body; between self and society, liberty and equality, rights and duties; between past and present, means and ends, theory and practice; between spirit and matter, being and becoming, essence and existence. Reduced to a single proposition, Boorstin's conviction is that the "genius" of Americans was their unique ability to regard as false the dualism between "fact" and "value," between what *is* and what *ought* to be. Americans could dismiss this perennial tension because they simply took values for granted. In a word, it is the "givenness" of values that Americans have never questioned. Through this felicitous concept Boorstin incorporates Americans into the world of nature by breaking down the radical dualism between the realm of mind and the realm of matter. Because Americans believed ideas were contained within the texture of experiences, human values were accepted as implicit in the facts of nature. Thus for Americans ideals became unnecessary because they were regarded as immanent in the structure of history; theories became "needless" because they were inherent in institution. Similarly, principles were dismissed because they could be realized only in practice, doctrines because they could be actualized only in deeds. In short, Boorstin's America was begotten in a sublime fit of ideological absentmindedness: "The nation would long profit from having been born without ever having been conceived."²

The Catholic doctrine of the Virgin Birth rests on divine revelation; Boorstin's secularized version of the immaculate conception rests on a combination of fact and generalization which historians thus far have not challenged in light of his philosophical premises. Elsewhere I have attempted to explore the philosophical assumptions implicit in Boorstin's supposedly anti-philosophical history.³ My purpose here is simply to ask whether his thesis is historically valid. Does it deepen our understanding

²*GAP*, pp. 8–10; *NE*, p. 219; see esp. chap. I of *GAP*, "How Belief in the Existence of an American Theory Had Made a Theory Superfluous."

³"Consciousness and Ideology in American History: The Burden of Daniel J. Boorstin," *American Historical Review*, 76 (Feb. 1971), 99–118.

of American history or merely enable us to accept what we cannot comprehend? Is it an explanation or a justification? More directly, this essay questions whether the concept of "givenness" sufficiently explains three major episodes in American history which Boorstin has interpreted in his masterly, multivolume study of the American experience: New England Puritanism, the Revolution and the Constitution, and the Civil War. My aim in analyzing Boorstin's interpretation of these three episodes is fourfold: to show how his assumptions force him to exaggerate, if not distort, some central aspects of American intellectual history; to demonstrate that certain thinkers whom Boorstin believes to have been anti-theoretical were profoundly theoretical in their political and social thought; to suggest that the deterministic implications in the idea of "givenness" preclude historical causation and thereby render Boorstin ill-equipped to explain major crises like the Civil War; and finally, to point up the latent moral ironies in Boorstin's naturalistic philosophy of history.⁴

To Boorstin American history is essentially the triumph of matter over mind, of the natural environment over the human intellect. He sees the colonial period as a vast melting pot of European philosophies, theologies and ideologies. The graveyard of abstract theory, America was the resurrection of practical life. The argument is effectively presented in Boorstin's discussion of various political experiments in early America. The Quakers are the outstanding example of the "uncompromising obstinacy" of a zealously committed people. As pacifists, the Quakers re-

⁴Lest intellectual historians bristle, the author would like to make it clear that the descriptions resorted to in this essay derive not from the terminological problems of philosophy but merely from Boorstin's context. Thus "pragmatism" is used in the popular (albeit misleading and vulgar) sense of implying an anti-doctrinaire mentality and a mode of cognition based on practical activity. "Value" is employed in the normative sense of invoking the morally "desirable" or what one "ought" to believe and practice. "Givenness," if I understand Boorstin correctly, is an attitude suggesting that experience is accepted without analysis, reflection or justification. Finally, I term Boorstin's philosophy "pragmatic naturalism," since he is apparently convinced that America's natural environment was the basic reality and that the thoughts and actions of Americans have been, and should be, governed by the primacy of natural facts. To be sure, this description is a far cry from a comprehensive definition of a pragmatist or a naturalist; still it seems, in light of Boorstin's philosophical assumptions, more meaningful than vague political labels like "conservative" or "liberal." In one of Boorstin's earliest works he maintained that the "American philosopher's upward intellectual progression began with idiosyncratic 'ideas' and 'systems' of thought, rose through particular facts toward the desirable but unattainable totality of facts" (*TJ*, p. 139). Boorstin regarded this inverted Platonism as the basis of the Jeffersonian mind. But curiously, although he then sensed the limitations of this nature-drenched, anti-intellectual attitude, and although he criticized Jefferson for being preoccupied with individual rights and oblivious to social duties, Boorstin himself has adopted wholeheartedly this anti-metaphysical philosophy in his later works. As this essay will attempt to demonstrate, much of Boorstin's later scholarship represents an effort to recapture his earlier interpretation of Jefferson's "lost world" where the concepts of mind are subordinated to the facts of nature.

fused to defend their own colony against Indian attacks; as dissenters, they did away with oaths in court. Consequently the Quakers became crabbed, dogmatic, insular, until their "inward plantation" ceased to be a functioning polity. A similar fate awaited the Oglethorpe experiment in Georgia which, conceived remotely in London as a "blueprint" for philanthropy, proved to be an exercise in overplanning easily corroded by the effervescent acid of the American environment. But if the pacifists and philanthropists failed because they were too true to their principles, the Virginians succeeded because they were bound by no preconceived principles. Responding to the mellow climate of their social environment, the Virginia gentry made a virtue of political moderation; unencumbered by any deep spiritual convictions, they made a habit of religious toleration.⁵

The lesson is clear: the purity of doctrine spells failure, the openness to experience brings success. Whatever the validity of Boorstin's thesis in these historical examples, when applied to the Puritans it is conspicuously strained. For although Boorstin regards the Puritan experiment as a success, the Puritans were the one people who brought to America an all-embracing theology, a comprehensive philosophy, an overarching social vision and a passionate intensity about the role of ideas and beliefs in worldly life. How Boorstin transforms the Puritans into American pragmatists is a work of alchemy amounting to nothing less than a re-definition of Puritanism.

Boorstin's description of the Puritans begins in ambivalence and ends in irony. He is forced to concede admiration for the rigor of Puritan doctrine which, after all, provided the cohesiveness and singlemindedness enabling the first Americans to survive the perils of wilderness. Theology is thus granted its instrumental value. But ironically the success of the Puritans meant the failure of Puritanism. Once the Puritans succeeded in mastering nature they stripped the universe of mystery; and once they succeeded in building their own institutions they turned away from God and affirmed almost unconsciously their own system of values. The beginning of the end came with the half-way covenant, when the Puritans took Providence into their own hands and determined for themselves the size and nature of congregation membership. It is important to note, Boorstin stresses, not "why" but "*how*" Puritanism broke down, for the process reveals the Puritans' "willingness to allow experience to give values." The whole story of Puritanism is thus a secular morality tale which Boorstin subtitled "From Providence to Pride." It is a history which shows "how the pragmatic spirit, the belief in 'givenness,' seeped into the interstices of the Puritan dogma and was gradually to dissolve it into a more general faith in the magical definition of American purpose out of the

⁵CE, pp. 33-143.

American success.”⁶ Success, then, engendered pride, the foundation of Christian sin and the foundation of American pragmatism.

But ultimately, according to Boorstin, what saved the Puritans from being sicklied o’er by pure thought was the urgency of practical affairs, namely law and government. It is here, I believe, that Boorstin may exaggerate the case for the easy transition of Puritanism into a form of pragmatism. Years ago Van Wyck Brooks maintained that the Puritans were the first to sense a perpetual alienation of the man of ideas from the man of action which he believed to run through American history: “The eternal issues the Puritans felt so keenly, the practical issues they experienced so monotonously threw almost no light upon one another; there was no middle ground to mitigate, combine or harmonize them.”⁷ It is significant that Boorstin dismisses Brooks’ cultural dualism as merely revealing the “dominance of the Old European-American polarity” over the literary mind.⁸ For it is crucial to Boorstin’s argument that Puritan doctrine was not basically incompatible with pragmatism, that theory did not necessarily bind practice. In the area of law, for example, Boorstin asserts that the Puritans “were among the first to take a consciously pragmatic approach to the common law.”⁹ By studying Puritan legal records Boorstin, himself a barrister, might be able to make a good case for this argument; however, the practical operation of Puritan law may be another matter. If we focus not on legal documents but on the spiritual psychology that characterized the conduct of court trials we may very well find that theology was a lurking influence. To the extent that Puritans viewed illegal behavior as an act of moral disobedience whose implications were infinite in the eyes of God, secular ethics may have been constrained by obscuring the notion of degrees of good and evil and by confusing the state of one’s inner character with the circumstances of one’s external actions.¹⁰ It is difficult to say how much this mentality may have

⁶*GAP*, pp. 36–65; *CE*, pp. 3–31.

⁷*America's Coming-of-Age* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1958), p. 4.

⁸*AIE*, p. 28.

⁹*CE*, p. 21.

¹⁰This point was made by Herbert W. Schneider, one of the few students of John Dewey who has studied Puritan intellectual history: “No one can live long in a Holy Commonwealth without becoming sensitive, irritable, losing his sense of values and ultimately his balance. . . . No matter how trivial an opinion might appear from a secular point of view, it became vital when promulgated as a theological dogma . . . no matter how slight an offense might be, it was a sin against Almighty God and hence infinite. . . . Issues which were trivial in their secular bearings became important and passionate because of the theological issues injected into them, and issues which would have been politically significant even in a secular society became much more so when loaded with holy-passion and inflamed by religious fervor. In fact, the original pragmatic meaning of a question was not infrequently buried under layers of theological debate.” *The Puritan Mind* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1958), pp. 51–52.

affected court sessions. But we do know that in the one instance where the Puritan legal system was put to its severest test—the Salem witch trials—it proved to have no rational ethical basis whatsoever. There were simply no concrete legal referents: objective evidence was dismissed as immaterial; minor events took on spiritual dimensions; behavior was judged symbolically; and hence individual conduct had no certain validity.¹¹ Boorstin is right in demonstrating how much the Puritans were steeped in English legal institutions; but exactly how this emulation led to a “pragmatic” development of law is not clearly demonstrated. Indeed in his discussion of Puritan legality he betrays an interest in what he believes is the methodological weakness of intellectual historians—an interest in theory as opposed to practice. Boorstin is concerned primarily with the letter of the law; the Puritans were just as concerned with its spirit. Both realms are necessary to explain fully the life of law in Puritan New England.

According to Boorstin the imperatives of governance also nurtured in the Puritans a saving practical conservatism. For in the long run the Puritans lost sight of religious dogma and became preoccupied with “platforms, programs of action, and schemes of confederation,” with concrete problems like the selection of leaders and the dispersion of political power.¹² That Puritan leaders were involved in politics is doubtless true; yet the precise nature of that involvement must be considered. To Peter Gay, for example, Puritan politics was “also a religious game” that often dealt with the burning issues of the spirit which infused the rancorous conflicts of the community.¹³ In fact, when Puritan leaders tried to exercise authority in civil areas it frequently proved ineffectual. To use Darrett Rutman’s apt metaphor, Puritan authority was a “mirror” that could reflect Puritan ideals but seldom penetrate New England realities.¹⁴ Boorstin would have us believe that Puritan leaders adapted themselves with relative ease to the worldly demands of political life. Yet while the need for politics suggested social disorder, Puritan Calvinism saw the ultimate ideal as moral order; and while Calvinism originally conceived of the

¹¹True, the Salem trials may have been an isolated instance of the breakdown of Puritan legality. Yet it is significant that Boorstin not only ignores the event, but in his discussion of the earlier gallows confessions he fails to see the absence of any rational ethical sensibility in the fact that Puritans regarded the “sin” of “Sabbath-breaking” as far greater than even the act of murder, a civil crime of only minor importance. Compare, for example, Stephen Fender’s analysis of James Morgan’s confessions (“Precision and Pseudo-Precision in *The Crucible*,” *Journal of American Studies*, I [Apr. 1967], 87–98) with that of Boorstin, who regards the “sermon” as “by no means unique” (*CE*, pp. 13–14).

¹²*CE*, pp. 19, 29–31.

¹³Peter Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 77–78.

¹⁴Darrett B. Rutman, “The Mirror of Puritan Authority,” in *Puritanism and the American Experience*, ed. Michael McGiffert (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969), pp. 65–79.

state as a necessary instrument of repression and God's grace as the only source of salvation, the eventual Calvinist synthesis of politics and religion could result, at least in Europe, in a distinctly radical philosophy that called for the complete regeneration of man through political means.¹⁵ Even though this yearning for political transcendence may have been less characteristic in America, the Puritans' vision of spiritual politics should not be confused with Boorstin's version of secular politics. If the Puritans had a concept of politics it probably had more to do with moral education than material distribution ("who gets what, when, how"—Lasswell). Observing the scrofulous economic disputes in New England, Puritans may have been more inclined to see the prevailing politics as "the conduct of public affairs for private advantage" (Bierce) and to regard a typical politician as one who "would circumvent God" (Shakespeare). The necessity of governance did force Puritans to participate in politics, but the arena of interest politics was what they resorted to, not what they aspired to; the realm of necessity, not the realm of freedom. Unlike Aristotle, Puritans saw politics less as an essential component of the good life than as an unpleasant moral duty thrust upon the elect by the spectacle of civil strife. Consumed with anxiety over the conflicting claims of personal piety and practical administration, and perhaps sensing the incompatibility of religion as a "movement" and politics as an "institution"; and perhaps sensing, too, that the demands of politics conflict with the demands of truth and that political solutions are not answers to theological problems, Puritan authorities would probably have agreed with Weber's dictum: "He who seeks the salvation of souls, his own as well as others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics."¹⁶

Admittedly, recent research suggests that Boorstin is more right than wrong in asserting that the American environment eroded Puritan ideals.¹⁷ My point, however, is that Boorstin's Americanization of the Puritans accords with his theory of "givenness" only by a very unusual

¹⁵Sheldon Wolin, "Calvin and the Reformation: The Political Education of Protestantism," *American Political Science Review*, 51 (June 1957), 428-53; Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), pp. 1-65, *passim*.

¹⁶Weber maintained that in politics the "ethical paradoxes" between means and ends—a dualism which Boorstin's philosophy implicitly denies—would be too agonizing for the religious conscience: "Also the early Christians knew full well the world is governed by demons and that he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for power and force as means, contracts with diabolical powers and for his action it is *not* true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant." "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 123, 126.

¹⁷Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1955); Sumner C. Powell, *Puritan Village: The Formation of a New England Town* (Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University Press, 1963); Darrett B. Rutman,

and questionable view of Puritanism. "Perhaps because their basic theoretical questions had been settled, the Puritans were able to concentrate on human and practical problems"; and in handling these problems they "were concerned less with the ends of society than with its organization and less with making the community good than with making it effective. . . ." ¹⁸ Described in these terms, Boorstin's Puritans emerge as organization men more interested in efficiency than eschatology. Hence they were no different from subsequent generations of Americans whose "genius" was their preoccupation with "process" rather than with purpose, with technique rather than *telos*. Furthermore, since the Puritans came to share the American capacity for looking upon learning and action as one, we should study them not for what they believed but for what they did. Thus unlike Santayana, who saw the Puritans as a unique people possessed by a rare "agonised conscience," ¹⁹ Boorstin sees them offering up a mere overture to America's symphony of consensus and continuity. "The Puritan experience thus shows some persistent characteristics of American history which have encouraged belief in the implicitness of values. Already in that earlier age we see a growing sense of 'givenness.'" ²⁰

It is important we draw out the subtle implications in Boorstin's philosophy. For unless Boorstin possesses some superior insight into the "false consciousness" of Puritanism, unless he can claim that he has perceived the Puritans better than they conceived themselves, one could properly contend that what the Puritans strove to "be" is not synonymous with what they eventually "became," that their theological "defeat" was not necessarily their historical "success," and that "givenness" was not the opiate of the Puritan mind. Even to the most pragmatic of thinkers "givenness" may imply only the crude "primary" level of experience, where events are merely encountered but not necessarily understood. Ascribed to the Puritans, Boorstin's philosophy de-spiritualizes the Puritan mind and drains it of value. For "givenness" suggests not only that there is no meaning beyond life but no meaning in life itself. And to the extent that it denies moral purpose it ignores the whole teleological quest of Puritanism. In this sense it might be said that "givenness" is the opposite of consciousness, a state of mindless drift where there is simply no problem of existence, what Jonathan Edwards called a "nothingness." And the "dreadful

Winthrop's Boston (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1965). Focusing on deeds rather than doctrine, these authors discovered that Puritan theology had less bearing on Puritan conduct than was traditionally assumed by intellectual historians.

¹⁸CE, p. 29.

¹⁹George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," in *Winds of Doctrine and Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957), pp. 186-215.

²⁰GAP, p. 65.

contradiction" of the "absolute Nothing" is, in Edwards' chilling language, "the Aggregate of all the Absurd."²¹ Indeed to Edwards the "givenness" of values would be as repugnant as the utility of virtue; for both notions fail to acknowledge the dialectical tension between the "is" and the "ought," the struggle between fallen man's depraved flesh and his redeeming spirit. If Edwards had a locus of values it was not in the brute givens of worldly doing but possibly in his aesthetic definition of virtue as the appreciation of the intrinsic beauty of pure "Being," or perhaps in nature's "images or shadows of divine things" grasped only by the heightened perceptions of mind, by consciousness at the pitch of passion.²² And if Edwards denied freedom of the will he did not deny the more precious will to moral freedom which lies in the efficacy of human choice. Ironically it is Boorstin's Americans who are not free. Denied consciousness of ethical choice, they can hardly be regarded as the authors of their actions.

It is of course understandable that Boorstin should ignore the metaphysical dread and beatitude of Jonathan Edwards, a figure hardly typical of the Puritan mind. But less excusable is his slighting the writings of Increase and Cotton Mather, Nicholas Noyes and other "Jeremiahs." Perhaps Boorstin must overlook their lamentations in order to sustain his argument.²³ For these soul-sickened Puritans could accept his philosophy only by surrendering their spiritual identity. Instead of looking upon Americanization as a process of adaptation they saw it as degeneration; instead of seeing the values of the past perpetuated into the present they saw those values being perverted; instead of celebrating the triumph of man over the environment they bewailed the "loss of mastery" (Gay) over themselves. In their eyes the demise of Puritanism meant the dulling of conscience, the decline of moral possibility, the end of the noble dream of self-transcendence, and thus the betrayal of Puritanism. To say that the Puritans accepted all this as "given" is to misread grossly their historical significance.

Perry Miller offered a different and a far more empathetic interpretation

²¹Jonathan Edwards, "Of Being," "Notes on the Mind," in *Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections*, eds. Clarence H. Faust and Thomas Johnson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), pp. 19, 28.

²²*Images or Shadows of Divine Things by Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1948).

²³Actually Boorstin does discuss Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*; but whereas other historians stress Mather's dark sense of spiritual gloom, Boorstin sees in the work the sunlight of smiling satisfaction: "The *Magnalia* seems to tell us that God cannot be better glorified than by a display of the successes of the first two generations of his chosen people in the Wilderness. Here we begin to see the face of Pride." *GAP*, p. 57. Compare, for example, Peter Gay's interpretation of the *Magnalia* as "a Jeremiad in the service of a tribe in retreat" (*Loss of Mastery*, pp. 81, 53-87).

of Puritanism. Miller was almost obsessed with rescuing America from the obliteration of consciousness that has numbed our machine civilization.²⁴ On the other hand Boorstin tends to glorify that “one-dimensional” mentality of which Marcuse speaks, a mentality devoted to things, methods and process rather than to ends, values and appreciation. Miller’s Puritans were almost born to be saved from the environment by the life of the mind; Boorstin’s Puritans were born to serve the environment through the life of action.²⁵ Miller’s heroic effort was to awaken America to the potentiality of value; Boorstin’s philosophy eliminates the possibility of human value. Miller the atheist worshipped the Puritans for their quest of ultimate meaning; Boorstin the former ideologue praises them for coming to believe that life can be sustained by mere belief in life itself. In the end, of course, Boorstin is historically correct even though his tacit philosophical assumptions would have appeared odious to the Puritans. The Puritans became Americans and what was lost in the process is, in Boorstin’s view, hardly worth considering. History is the study of success in which there are no moral alternatives to the actual given, to the reality of facts over ideals, a reality which makes inevitable the realm of the “is” and renders unattainable the realm of the “ought.” Thus the difference between Boorstin’s and Miller’s Puritans might be described as the difference between the equanimity of deeds and the epiphany of beliefs, between the world of mundane action and the world of moral thought. Since the Puritans failed to sustain their spiritual quest the verdict of history belongs to Boorstin; yet the verdict of philosophy belongs to Miller. Boorstin’s argument for the “givenness” of values is really a call to the American to lead the unexamined life, to “re-capture” his Adamic “innocence” and become once again “doctrinally naked.”²⁶ In depreciating the joy and agony and the mystery and terror of Puritan ideas, Boorstin apparently wants to save America from the madness of metaphysics. But Miller, perhaps the real “last Puritan,” wanted to save America from itself.

Just as the waning of Puritanism passed without a whimper, the American Revolution went off without a bang. America’s was a unique revolu-

²⁴David A. Hollinger, “Perry Miller And Philosophical History,” *History and Theory*, 7, no. 2 (1968), 189–202.

²⁵Compare, for example, Boorstin’s “The Place of Thought in American Life” (in *AIE*, pp. 43–61) with Miller’s *The Life Of The Mind In America: From The Revolution To The Civil War* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965) and *Nature’s Nation* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1967). In these two posthumous works Miller, though ambivalent about the power of the landscape to influence the American imagination, is acutely sensitive to the tension between intellect and environment and skeptical of the various efforts of the American mind to capture the ambiguities of nature.

²⁶See Boorstin’s remarks on the “Fall of the American Adam” in the chapter “Some American Discontents,” *AIE*, pp. 121–38.

tion, Boorstin insists, because it was a "Revolution Without Dogma." It was a pedestrian affair of legal technicalities and practical politics. Endorsing Tocqueville's insight that a "democratic revolution" did not have to take place in America, Boorstin finds further evidence of the conservative nature of the Revolution in its shunning of all ideology. Maintaining that the presence of a European Enlightenment in colonial America was sheer "myth," Boorstin is pleased that the Revolution produced no significant political theory. As evidence he contrasts the allegedly concrete tone of the Declaration of Independence with the allegedly abstract appeals of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. And by focusing solely on Jefferson's "legal draftsmanship," Boorstin denies Carl Becker's thesis that the colonists advanced their revolutionary argument from sober legal debate to the lofty heights of natural law. According to Boorstin, the colonists had no need to adapt theory to changing circumstances simply because they never acted in terms of theory. What shaped their thought and behavior was merely the common need of redressing imperial grievances, an unheroic effort that required no philosopher's imagination but merely a lawyer's brief. The very absence of philosophical ideas during the Revolution is thus itself among "those positive ideas and attitudes, which actually have done much to reinforce our sense of 'givenness.'" And to discover the meaning of the Revolution scholars should therefore descend from the fantasy of theory and face squarely the pungent confusions of history. "May we not learn as much from the inchoate idea, the pregnant chaos, or the peculiar inarticulateness of a past age, as from its treatises?"²⁷

Boorstin's argument has recently been challenged by Bernard Bailyn. Examining the pamphlet literature of the revolutionary crisis, Bailyn found that the Enlightenment was a pervasive influence in America, that colonists regarded philosophical ideas seriously, and that these ideas were later employed to bestow doctrinal respectability upon crucial issues like direct representation. Yet although Bailyn has demonstrated convincingly that colonial thinkers were not indifferent to the ideals of English Dissenters and French philosophes, he has not completely demonstrated that they regarded political ideas as either objects of intellectual contemplation or instruments of social change—the charge Boorstin imputes to intellectual historians. On the contrary, Bailyn concedes that most political developments in America derived not from Enlightenment theory but from the "mundane exigencies of the situation"; that the colonists were often "superficial" in their use of Locke and classical literature; that English opposition principles were exploited because they offered "a special utility" to Americans struggling against centralized authority; that the

²⁷*GAP*, pp. 66–94, *AIE*, p. 71.

“process” of representative government did not evolve from “theory”; that Otis’ “anachronistic” doctrines of sovereignty had to be discarded for a “more realistic and pragmatic” definition that was “silent on the metaphysics of the problem”; that eventually the “intellectual position” developed by Americans had “deep historical roots” and in fact “crystallized . . . three generations of experience”; and finally, that the colonial writers were scarcely conscious of their use of ideas and concepts whose meanings “had been reshaped in the colonists’ minds in the course of a decade of pounding controversy—strangely reshaped, turned in unfamiliar directions, toward conclusions they could not themselves clearly perceive.”²⁸

Doubtless Bailyn has helped restore the intellectual respectability of the Revolution. By uncovering the vast extent of political discussion in early America Bailyn has shown that the colonists can no longer be regarded as Boorstin’s intellectual mutes. Nevertheless, in light of his splendidly wrought Namierian analysis Bailyn would be hard pressed to demonstrate that philosophical ideas swayed behavior, that principle alone governed practice and theory itself shaped action. Thus a reading of both accounts of the Revolution still leaves one with the impression that the colonists were devoid of idle curiosity toward political speculation and reluctant to impose theoretical ideas upon social reality. Boorstin has argued that Americans were ideologically ignorant; but Bailyn has neither defined his curious use of the term ideology nor shown precisely in what way the “ideological origins” determined the course of events leading to revolution. Without getting bogged down in the endless problem of causation, but staying instead within the anti-intellectual thesis raised by Boorstin, it is fair to say that between Boorstin’s provincial Americans and Bailyn’s cosmopolitan Americans a crucial question remains unanswered: were the colonists revolutionists because they were ideological, or were they ideological because they were revolutionists?²⁹

²⁸Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 28, 161–62, 208, *passim*; “Political Experience and Enlightenment Ideas in Eighteenth Century America,” *American Historical Review*, 67 (June 1962), 339–51; for a perceptive analysis of Bailyn’s methodology, see Gordon Wood, “Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 23 (Jan. 1966), 3–32.

²⁹Admittedly such a formulation may be a false conception of the problem, for it is Bailyn’s achievement to show that ideas interacted with events. Nevertheless, Boorstin has argued that intellectual historians are deluded when they believe that ideas have played an important role in American history; and in so arguing he has posed a dubious distinction between ideas and actions, thought and deed, theory and practice—an epistemological dualism which Bailyn as well as Boorstin would tend to deny. Note, for example, the following exchange:

John A. Garraty: This controversy over the character of sovereignty, as you describe it, makes the Americans the innovators, attempting to develop new ideas. But couldn’t one argue that the innovators at the time were the British? In practice, hadn’t there been a

Perhaps the question must remain unanswered. Even in normal times the exact relationship between ideas and behavior is one of the most vexing problems in intellectual history. In the throes of revolutionary crisis it is expecting too much to believe that theoretical consistency will not succumb to the rush of events and survive the awesome irony of intentions and consequences. The dynamics of revolution are unpredictable and ambiguous, and if the victors are by definition the pragmatists then perhaps revolutionary situations are, at least for intellectual historians, barren ground. Be that as it may, the best time to test Boorstin's thesis is not during the forging of the Revolution but during the framing of the Constitution, one episode in which Americans deliberated at length on the nature of government and on the nature of America.

The Constitution would appear to reaffirm Boorstin's argument. Since the colonists assumed that the values of British government were being perpetuated in the institutions devised at the Philadelphia convention, they were able to develop a political system without recourse to political philosophy. Ignoring theory entirely, the Framers merely had to compromise on details. In America constitutional debate thus became a sublimation of nature and experience. "Our geography and history have led us to an unspoken assumption, an axiom, so basic to our thinking that we have hardly been aware of it at all. This is the axiom that institutions are not and should not be the grand creations of men toward large ends and outspoken values; rather they are organisms which grow out of the soil in which they are rooted and out of the tradition from which they have sprung." Because the colonists held Turner's later assumption that values flowed organically from the land the Constitution was founded in a

division of sovereignty in America from the days of the first colonists?

Bailyn: Yes, but not in point of theory.

Garraty: But which comes first, the theory or the practice? Wasn't the theory an attempt to rationalize the practice?

Bailyn: The division of sovereignty had not been developed through design, but by inadvertence. Because of the failure in England to set up effective administrative machinery, there had grown up an ad hoc division of sovereignty between the local colonial groups and the British power. An attempt to define the principles of federalism to express this situation was begun by Americans first in the late 1760's. It was continued later when discontent under the Articles of Confederation led to the drafting of the Federal Constitution. Had they been worked out sooner, and had the British accepted them, there would have been no Revolution. What was involved in all this was not mere verbal hairsplitting or abstract theorizing but a struggle for power. (John A. Garraty, *Interpreting American History: Conversations With Historians*, Pt. I [London: Macmillan, 1970], 79.)

Bailyn's thesis that what was at stake was a "struggle for power" and not "abstract theorizing," and that the idea of sovereignty developed not from intellectual "design" but from political "inadvertence," is not incompatible with Boorstin's conviction that historians will learn more from the "inchoate idea" and the "pregnant chaos" than from ideological "treatises."

state of consensual bliss. And since the Constitution was America's before Americans conceived of the Constitution, "the American future was never to be contained in a theory."³⁰

Boorstin's argument is highly questionable. For the theoretical content in the Constitution readily comes to light when one examines the dubious assumptions *The Federalist* writers drew upon to construct a new government. In the first place, the authors believed the new republic had a reasonable chance of success mainly because they had been steeped in the "science of politics." Significantly, *The Federalist* is studded with the metaphors of physics: government is referred to as an "orbit," its influence as a "sphere," its function as an "engine"; political society is referred to in terms of "composition," "structure," "cement." Madison, in paraphrasing antifederalist arguments, stated: "The several departments of power are distributed and blended in such a manner as at once to destroy all symmetry and beauty of form, and to expose some of the essential parts of the edifice to the danger of being crushed by the disproportionate weight of other parts."³¹ As the language indicates, the authors saw themselves as enlightened architects working with impersonal forces and weights to erect a government primarily of mechanisms rather than of men. Hamilton, and to some extent Madison, believed that the "maxims of geometry" could be drawn upon in this endeavor: "that there cannot be an effect without a cause" was a principle cited frequently by Hamilton and used implicitly by Madison to prepare his resolution on the issue of factions; "that the means ought to be proportioned to the end" was a maxim used by both to defend the "necessary and proper" powers of the federal constitution; and "that the whole is greater than the parts" was a theorem accepted by the authors to arrive at one of the most paradoxical assumptions in political philosophy—in making a government a good mechanical whole can be constructed out of defective human parts. Many of these notions were regarded as deductive axioms, assumptions that could be maintained only because they were based on a priori theories, on what Hamilton called "certain primary truths, or first principles, upon which all subsequent reasonings must depend. These contain an internal evidence which, antecedent to all reflection or combination, commands the assent of the mind."³²

Boorstin shares a common American attitude that since the Constitution worked and worked well the reasoning behind it must have been purged of abstract theory and grounded in the hard facts of experience. This is another instance of Boorstin's war against dualism and concept, against the difference between fact and theory and the inevitable interaction of the two. Apparently he is convinced that man can reason from the

³⁰*GAP*, pp. 6, 95.

³¹Madison, *The Federalist*, No. 47.

³²Hamilton, *The Federalist*, No. 31; Madison, No. 44.

basis of facts alone without recourse to ordering principles, subjective paradigms, symbols, concepts, visions, ideas; without, that is, imposing theoretical meaning upon facts and experience.³³ Thus the whole effect of Boorstin's interpretation of the Constitution is to see it through the murky prism of morphology, as an outgrowth of the "soil" that can best be explained by the language of nature. But if the Founding Fathers had a unified vision of the Constitution it was that of a machine that could be explained in the language of Euclid and Newton. For the imagery of the machine implied design and purpose, the achievement of mind in nature and use of the best and worst aspects of human nature. The Constitution was an exercise in both theoretical and practical politics.³⁴

Moreover the entire federalist rationale, as Robert Dahl and Robert G. McCloskey have noted, was based on a set of propositions that rest on questionable hypotheses and unproven premises, on "contradictions" which arose, not from consensus and compromise, but from conflicts of value.³⁵ Even the very objective for which the Constitution was formed—the achievement of a "non-tyrannical republic" through the system of "checks and balances"—was not necessarily realized for the reasons the authors assumed it would be. When closely examined, Madisonian pluralism defies both logical analysis and historical experience. It is, in Dahl's words, "an article of faith in the American political credo."³⁶

³³Roland Van Zandt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of American History* (Moulton, The Hague, The Netherlands, 1959). The effort of this technical, epistemological critique is to challenge the alleged distinction between "fact" and "theory" which has, the author claims, dominated American historical thinking.

³⁴The Framers, Arthur O. Lovejoy observed, were concerned "not so much to preach to Americans what they *ought* to do, as to predict successfully what they *would do*. . . ." (*Reflections on Human Nature* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968], p. 46). This shrewd remark deserves two comments relative to Boorstin's thesis. First, the Framers did not necessarily believe that the "ought" could be derived from the "is," the premise of the idea of "givenness." Instead they were aware of the dualism and resigned to forsaking the Puritan search for the good society of precepts and norms. Second, that the Framers were mainly concerned with predictive descriptions of human behavior by no means precludes their thinking theoretically.

³⁵"The more one ponders the ancient cliché that the Constitution was a 'bundle of compromises,' the less satisfactory that seems as a description of what happened in 1787. Rather, the Constitution can be understood as a bundle of unresolved contradictions. The contradictions led, of course, to ultimate compromises in practice, but that is very different from saying that they were written into the Constitution." (Robert G. McCloskey, "The American Ideology," in *Continuing Crisis in American Politics*, ed. Marian D. Irish [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963], p. 21). According to McCloskey, the reason these contradictions were incorporated into the Constitution and perpetuated in American institutions and behavior is not because Americans have accepted values as "given," but rather because Americans "display a pervasive ambivalence about the most fundamental questions of political value" (p. 22).

³⁶After dissecting the illogical structure of Madison's *Federalist* 10, 31, and 51, Dahl concludes: "the more we examine these passages, the more they seem to dissolve before our eyes like the Cheshire cat. Why is the separation of powers necessary to prevent tyranny? Because it provides an external check on the tyrannical impulses of officials. Why does it provide an external check? Because it guarantees that the ambitions of individuals in one department will counteract those in another. Why will these countervailing ambitions be effective? Pre-

Although Boorstin is certainly correct in maintaining that the Founders were unconcerned with transcendent ends and values, it does not follow that they were indifferent to “theory” and “ideology” (the meaning of these terms will be discussed shortly). Indeed were we to accept Boorstin’s placid interpretation of history we might well wonder why *The Federalist* had to be written at all. If Americans shared a common fund of values linking the past to the present, and if the Constitution arose directly from experience, why the prospect of change? In defending the federalist scheme Madison asked why so many opponents believed the “experiment” should be rejected “merely because it comprises what is new?” Appealing to their “glory” as a young people, Madison beseeched fellow Americans: “Hearken not to the voice that petulantly tells you that the form of government recommended for your adoption is a novelty in the political world.”³⁷ Boorstin tells us that the convention dealt primarily with compromises over details. But these very details, which dealt with nothing less than the distribution of power and the political future of America, indicated more than a concern for mechanical adjustments in the body politic. Considering the intensity of the debates, it is more likely that disputes over centralism vs. decentralism and commercialism vs. agrarianism reflected a conflict over the larger question of continuity and change, a tension between tradition and innovation which is hardly acknowledged in Boorstin’s notion of “givenness.”

The assertion that American political institutions “are organisms which grow out of the soil in which they are rooted” also needs to be qualified. Boorstin may be close to the truth when he maintains that American politics was “primarily a by-product of geography.”³⁸ But he is on less sure grounds when he suggests that in America the practical character of political institutions resulted partly from an “encounter with nature” and that in America “knowledge came naturally, and this shaped the very definition of knowledge.”³⁹ These words invoke an environmental naturalism which Boorstin has ascribed to Jefferson, on whom he places undue

sumably because individuals in one department can invoke the threat of rewards and penalties against tyrannical individuals in another department. What then are these rewards and penalties?” The answer, Dahl points out, was not supplied by Madison (*A Preface To Democratic Theory* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963], p. 20). It should be added that Madison could hardly supply the answer since he had earlier concluded that government could not be founded on social, personal or moral factors like status, character or conscience. (See Douglass Adair, “That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science: David Hume, James Madison, and the Tenth Federalist,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 20 [Aug. 1957], 343–60.) With the human dimension eliminated, many of the theoretical foundations of the Constitution rested on the assumptions of political geometry.

³⁷*The Federalist*, No. 14.

³⁸*NE*, p. 402.

³⁹*GAP*, p. 95; *NE*, p. 241.

emphasis; but the description is less applicable to the federalists, to whom Boorstin devotes only a scant page or two. Madison, for example, believed that the natural environment could offer no guidance in making a constitution. It could not be relied upon because the gradations of nature were not completely distinguishable; the human organs of conception were imperfect; and language, which was necessary to convey an accurate correspondence between the natural world and the world of institutions, was inadequate. These problems, advised Madison, presented "a fresh embarrassment" to anyone who sought to deny the dichotomy of man and nature and draw precise lines of jurisdiction in civil society. Thus, politically man was on his own; nature could be perceived only as an "obscurity" as opaque as Melville's whale.⁴⁰

Nor were *The Federalist* authors as sanguine as Boorstin about political values springing in organic unison from the nation's soil. Instead the facts of nature constricted the authors' aspirations. For the environment suggested diversity and heterogeneity. Translated into politics, geography dictated that the republic be a confederation. How then were the Founders to make the case for the unity of political values? How could human consensus be woven from the contrariety of nature's patchwork? Occasionally the authors pointed to the country's rivers and common language and heritage as binding geographical and cultural ties; and more often they simply argued that diplomatic expediency made political union imperative. But ultimately the authors appealed to that most convenient agent of moral uniformity—God. Madison, professing astonishment that the convention surmounted so much particularism to achieve a "unanimity," reflected that the affair must have had in it "a finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution." Hamilton and Madison, noting the amazing extent of agreement during the convention, advised Americans to "let our gratitude mingle in an ejaculation to Heaven for the propitious concord which has distinguished the consultations for our political happiness." Jay was even more explicit: "A strong sense of the value and blessings of union" was "the design of Providence."⁴¹ Of course we should be skeptical of these pious genuflections coming from rationalists. Yet even if the authors were dragging in an overworked Deity merely for the sake of political testimony, it is notable that they had to resort to a supernatural source in order to demonstrate that a national consensus transcended nature. This strong sense of piety, which also gave many colonial thinkers their Christian sense of pessimism, is scarcely recognized in Boorstin's simple environmentalism. Nor can it explain why the Con-

⁴⁰Madison, *The Federalist*, No. 37.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, No. 37; Madison and Hamilton, No. 20; Jay, No. 2.

stitution would soon be enshrined in the nation's mind with the aura of divine sanctity.

Finally, Boorstin's claim that American political institutions and ideas were "implicit in the American experience" is also dubious. It is undeniable that the Founders appealed to experience as "the oracle of truth." But a perusal of *The Federalist* indicates it was not America's but Europe's experience to which they appealed. Speaking of the maritime problems in England, Ireland and Wales, Jay counseled: "Apply these facts to our own case." Discussing Sparta, Athens, Rome, Carthage, as well as Pope Julius II's Italy, Henry VIII's England and Louis XIV's France, Hamilton stated: "From a summary of what has taken place in other countries, *whose situations have borne the nearest resemblance to our own*, what reason can we have to confide in those reveries which would seduce us into an expectation of peace and cordiality between the members of the present confederacy, in a state of separation?" (italics added). Indeed both Hamilton and Madison, who lectured Americans for having little capacity for "novelty" and "innovation" because they gazed on Europe and thus failed to learn "the lessons of their own experience," were themselves delighted to cite the disintegration of medieval "feudal baronies" in order to indict the anti-federalists.⁴² Now it can be argued that the Founders drew upon the lessons of the Old World merely to avoid repeating them; but it may also be replied that they turned to the European analogue because it afforded a richer experience and a more profound source of political wisdom. Whatever the case, the Founders resorted not only to European history but to classical literature and philosophy as guides to political action. Their excessive preoccupation with Europe is, of course, the opening theme of Louis Hartz's brilliant work on American liberalism. As Hartz has shown, the federalists were thinking about Europe's clashing social realities while planning America's uncertain political future. His well-known thesis bears repeating: "The Founding Fathers devised a scheme to deal with conflict that could only survive in a land of solidarity. The truth is, their conclusions were 'right' only because their premises were wrong."⁴³

Like 19th century historicists, Boorstin cautions us to be sensitive to the bewildering variety of American life and thought. Rather than doing what is "academically very convenient"—interpreting the thoughts of "our philosophically inarticulate Founding Fathers by simply letting the European *philosophes* speak for them"—Boorstin tells us that we should allow the "pregnant chaos" and "inchoate idea" to speak for itself.⁴⁴ The

⁴²Jay, *ibid.*, No. 4; Hamilton, Nos. 6, 17; Madison, No. 45.

⁴³*The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Harvest, 1955), p. 86. In their thoughts on foreign policy the Founding Fathers were also influenced by Europe. According to Felix Gilbert, the philosophes "infused a lasting idealistic element into American attitudes toward foreign affairs." *The Beginnings of American Foreign Policy: To the Farewell Address* (New York: Harpers, 1965), p. 56.

⁴⁴*AIE*, p. 65.

rub is, however, that Boorstin perceives in the thoughts of the Founding Fathers what they themselves may have been scarcely aware of: a seamless continuity and pervasive consensus that precluded the need for political theory and preempted the role of the political mind. Devoting only three pages to *The Federalist*, the central political document in American intellectual history, Boorstin himself has not allowed the Founders to speak. In his hands they are indeed "inarticulate."

The argument for America's ideological virginity extends even to the Civil War period, the one period, it would seem, when ideological fever reached white heat. Yet nowhere is Boorstin's faith in the alleged pragmatic character of Americans better illustrated than in his discussion of the 1850s crisis. Perhaps he is able to manage this only by avoiding the complex issues of the causes of the war and the riddle of its inevitability. At most he hints that westward expansion, an ill-defined and unsettling enterprise, did more than anything else to bring on the crisis. "Had the Founding Fathers been more certain, had their provision for the expansion of the national territory been less obscure, the Civil War might either have been postponed or have come much sooner." This ambiguous remark is doubly ironic, for it implies that the Civil War was an indirect product of that "vagueness of the land" which Boorstin believes to have been one of America's greatest resources. Earlier, in *The Genius of American Politics*, Boorstin maintained that whatever "the other 'causes' of the Civil War, if it had not been for the great differences of soil, climate, and topography and what those differences had come to mean in institutions, the Civil War would hardly have been conceivable."⁴⁵ Thus he concedes that geographical diversity, the very diversity which Madison believed would equilibrate factionalism and prevent division, failed to check the disruption of the republic. In this respect Boorstin almost comes close to saying that it was the natural environment, the generative world of nature from which Americans supposedly draw their values, that determined the inexorable course of events leading to war. But Boorstin is not one to see tragic fate springing with Faulknerian terror straight from the nation's soil. Rather than repudiating the pragmatic wisdom of Americans and their robust environment, the war reaffirms both. Hence Boorstin's puzzling chapter title: "The Civil War and the Spirit of Compromise."

The argument is disarmingly simple: since the war was fought along sectional lines, since each side professed to be defending its basic institutions and culture rather than envisioning a new society, "any elaborate phi-

⁴⁵*NE*, p. 274; *GAP*, p. 102. According to Boorstin, it was the very obscurity of the country's landscape, regionalism, and geographical boundaries that provided the invisible ties of union: "If other nations had been held together by common certainties, Americans were being united by a common vagueness and effervescence" (*NE*, p. 219).

losophizing” about the issues would have been “superfluous.” Instead the war provides “an admirable illustration of our tendency to make sociology do for political theory, to merge the descriptive and the normative, to draw the ‘ought’ out of the ‘is.’ Or, in a word, to confirm our belief in ‘givenness.’”⁴⁶ To prove his point Boorstin stresses the “hardheadedness” and “obvious factual basis” of Thomas Dew’s proslavery arguments, the array of statistical data cited by James D. B. de Bow to illustrate the South’s superior wealth, and George Fitzhugh’s *Sociology for the South*, which Boorstin believes best demonstrates the Americans’ peculiar scientific habit of mind. Yet this empirical mentality, Boorstin points out, was by no means confined to the South. Even the abolitionist Wendell Phillips struck this note when he tried to show that the South’s economic deterioration was due to slavery. Lincoln, too, avoided moral heroics and instead appealed to the material interests of the white workingman; and Hinton R. Helper resorted not to ethics but to the “self-evident truths” of northern “progress and prosperity.” Both sides, then, avoided the pitfalls of ideology and brought the sectional debate down to the hard ground of social facts and the dictates of experience. “Every statistical detail became a clue to a way of life. ‘Givenness’ was here expressed in the assumption that life as it was in America—whether in the North or in the South—gave the outlines of life as it ought to be, that values were implicit in experience.”⁴⁷

Boorstin seems scarcely troubled by this common attitude of the North and South. That both sides could appeal to the solidity of facts and arrive at hopelessly different conclusions is simply not a problem. Yet surely this fetish for facticity betrays something more than a gift for empirical discourse. Had Boorstin probed further he might have discovered that both sides were using facts not as objective data but as subjective “symbols” (Becker) or nonlogical “sentiments” (Pareto) or class-conditioned “thought-processes” (Mannheim).⁴⁸ To push historical analysis this far, however, is to open up a new dimension of reality. Now it is not my purpose to criticize Boorstin for failing to pursue this line of research. But it

⁴⁶*GAP*, p. 103.

⁴⁷*NE*, pp. 188–89; *GAP*, p. 106.

⁴⁸The intellectual history of the sectional debate might profit from a “sociology of knowledge” analysis. Wrote Mannheim: “It is with the clashing modes of thought, each of which has the same claim to representational validity, that for the first time there is rendered possible the emergence of the question which is so fateful, but also fundamental in the history of thought, namely, how it is possible that identical human thought-processes concerned with the same world produce divergent conceptions of that world.” *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt Harvost, n.d.), p. 9. For other discussions of the nonrational use of facts, see Carl Becker, “What Are Historical Facts?” in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), pp. 120–37; for Pareto, see Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: Free Press, 1968), pp. 178–300.

does seem proper to ask how he can see the Civil War as the "Spirit of Compromise" when the roots of the conflict obviously lie deeper than the empirical arguments reverberating across the Mason-Dixon. Confining historical investigation within such limits confuses ritual for reality. Paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, how can we expect Northerners and Southerners to have reasoned themselves out of positions they had not reasoned into?

It may even be argued that the very empirical tenor of the debate ruled out the possibility of a solution. From Jefferson to Lincoln, Boorstin contends, American thinkers committed the slavery question "not to the student of ethics or political philosophy, but to the sociologist, the statistician, the master of facts."⁴⁹ Boorstin could not agree more with this perception of the issue, for those who addressed themselves to the slavery issue "were assuming that the values would emerge from the facts. They were presupposing the 'givenness' of values."⁵⁰ Whether Boorstin's account is correct or not, to have confined the slavery controversy to this level of discourse assured its insolubility. For the cold truth is that neither the data of sociology nor the evidence of science can offer anything reassuring on the question of equality, and most likely it was the specter of social equality that lurked beneath the public debates over slavery. To treat the human problem of racial equality as a scientific proposition in what Boorstin terms "descriptive sociology" means in effect we regard man as a natural artifact. Yet the facts of nature demonstrate not the equality of the species but the inequality of mankind, its cruel maldistribution of human abilities and talents. The only way we can resolve what John Schaar has poignantly described as "a serious intellectual embarrassment" is to see the problem with the "inner eye" and fly in the face of facts and the conspicuous inequalities of nature. To do this, however, is to recreate the very dualism between fact and value which Americans, according to Boorstin, have so successfully demolished.⁵¹ Inasmuch as slavery

⁴⁹*GAP*, p. 114.

⁵⁰*GAP*, p. 108.

⁵¹"There is only one way to completely abolish the embarrassment. If we are willing to draw a sharp line between fact and value, and say, in effect, that equality is a preference which men may freely choose regardless of facts, then we are no longer faced with a difficult theoretical task. This essay assumes that we are not willing to draw that sharp line. It is of course correct to say that no conclusions in the imperative mood can be derived logically from statements cast in the indicative mood, and in this sense there is a logical gap between fact and value. Still, most men will persist in asking for more than logic can give on these matters. Most men want to feel that there is a reasonable fit, a fair measure of harmony and appropriateness, between what they think they know about the world and what they think should be done in the world. Certainly that feeling, rather than the prissy satisfaction one gets from being logically impeccable, is the fountain of moral and political theory. Indeed, a rigorous adherence to the 'fact-value dichotomy' renders intelligence cautious just where it must be bold, dumb where it should be articulate. I shall take the large discrepancy be-

was at the center of the debates of the 1850s, and inasmuch as equality and racial adjustment sparked the nervous undercurrents of those debates, it is difficult to see how an imperative ethical issue could have been resolved within a scientific dialogue in which all appeals were to “facts” and “experience.”

Boorstin finds further evidence of America’s homely wisdom in the conservative tone of the constitutional debates. Since both South and North believed they were fighting to preserve established legal rights they were not trying to change the Constitution but to defend it. The aim of Calhoun, Boorstin reminds us, was “not revolution but *restoration*.”⁵² Boorstin is not concerned with what Hartz perceived as the schizoid tensions in Calhoun’s thought—his attempt to repudiate Lockean contractualism in favor of Burkean organicism while at the same time invoking the doctrine of states rights.⁵³ Instead Boorstin is satisfied that Calhoun did appeal to constitutional tradition, an appeal which demonstrates that the Civil War “did *not* significantly interrupt the continuity of our thinking about institutions.” It is this instinctive habit of operating within the bounds of historic institutions that Boorstin finds so peculiarly American: “We can begin to grasp the true proportions of what I have called the continuity of the history of the United States, as contrasted with that of the countries of western Europe, if we try to imagine the leader of a defeated party in any of the recent European civil wars producing a heavy scholarly treatise proving that he had been in the *right strictly from the point of view of constitutional theory*.”⁵⁴

At this point it is time to turn to what might be called the false or unfair parallel. For what needs to be examined is Boorstin’s putative distinction between the “genius” of what he calls American pragmatism and the curse of European theory and ideology. A major purpose of Boorstin’s history is to inform Americans of the “uniqueness” of their political way of life as contrasted to the “pernicious” and “alien ideologies” which have afflicted Europeans.⁵⁵ Americans, he maintains, are immune to ideology because of “the amazing poverty and inarticulateness of our theorizing about politics”; because Americans are interested more in “process” than in “product,” in the way of doing things rather than in the purpose of things; and because the American “Nirvana of Success” “annihilates” all ideas that are unable to adapt to the constant changes of the environment.⁵⁶

tween the observed facts of inequality and the policy or value of equality as a serious intellectual embarrassment.” John Schaar, “Some Ways of Thinking About Equality,” *Journal of Politics*, 26 (Nov. 1964), 868.

⁵²*GAP* p. 124.

⁵³Hartz, pp. 145–200.

⁵⁴*GAP*, pp. 120, 129.

⁵⁵*AIE*, p. 11; *GAP*, p. 183.

⁵⁶*AIE*, pp. 52–61; “Our Unspoken National Faith,” *Commentary*, 15 (Apr. 1953), 327.

By contrast, an ideology is "fixed and rigid," a "posture of truth which some men see in one age and which they seek to get other men to accept as the whole truth"; a ruthless metaphysical vision usually devised by "garret-spawned European illuminati like Lenin, Mussolini, and Hitler."⁵⁷ And because fixated on visionary ends,⁵⁸ an ideology is an image divorced from reality and thus doomed to failure:

The intellectual landscape of contemporary Europe is haunted by the ghosts of lost causes. There is hardly a movement in the checkered history of a European nation which does not have its active partisans today. A catalogue of living philosophies in Italy now is an index to Italian history. In those more metaphysically minded countries, which have possessed dominant intellectual classes, political parties are ideological. Philosophers classify themselves as disciples of dead centuries. And all intellectual life becomes a museum of past ideologies. Where ways of thought are judged by their intellectual consistency and by their aesthetic appeal, by their appeal to a distinctively intellectual ruling class rather than by their ability to become embodied in institutions, the intellectual life of the community becomes one with the speculations of its visionaries and the vagaries of its metaphysicians. And this is true of most of the countries of Europe.⁵⁹

The dichotomy Boorstin draws between American practicality and European dogmatism is a bit much.⁶⁰ He has argued that America's resort to sociology and empirical reasoning during the sectional crisis is further proof of the anti-ideological wisdom of the American people. It seems to me that the exact opposite is true. But to illustrate this point we must first clarify some of the terminological confusions surrounding the concept of ideology.

Currently ideology has a variety of meanings. But historically the word arose as something of an offshoot of the natural sciences. The etymological clue, as Hannah Arendt noted, lies in the suffix "logy," which implies a scientific study of man and society.⁶¹ The empirical side of ideology which, interestingly enough, came to dominate European radicalism (Marxism)

⁵⁷ *AIE*, p. 52; *CE*, p. 154.

⁵⁸ "In a country like Italy, for example, the political debate expresses nothing less than disagreement about the nature of 'the good life' and 'the good society.' To talk to people there is an education in the variety of concepts which sane people can hold of the proper ends of society." *GAP*, p. 138.

⁵⁹ *AIE*, p. 57.

⁶⁰ Boorstin's description of Italy and of Europe in general could just as easily apply to mid-19th century America, a crucial period when intellectual ideas regarding reform and abolition drastically failed to "become embodied in institutions." (See Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* [New York: Universal Library, 1963], pp. 140-222). Similarly, Hartz's treatment of Calhoun's and Fitzhugh's irrational "Feudal Dream" could well be placed in Boorstin's "museum of past ideologies." (See Hartz, pp. 145-200).

⁶¹ *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 468.

and American conservatism (Social Darwinism),⁶² held out the brave possibility of elucidating a natural treatise on the human mind and discovering the natural laws of history and society. In this enterprise, as George Lichtheim has observed, all moral problems were relegated to metaphysics and political theory reduced to “nature,” while reality was regarded not as an absolute essence but simply as “process”—nature and process, the very loci of Boorstin’s description of American values.⁶³ Thus ideology was not so much a metaphysical *weltanschauung* as a naturalistic mode of analysis unencumbered by an ethical concern for carefully defined ends.

In this respect the South’s proslavery apologia is almost the perfect expression of Mannheim’s classic definition of ideology as a conceptual construction by which “ruling groups can in their thinking become so intensely interest-bound to a situation that they are simply no longer able to see certain facts which would undermine their sense of domination.”⁶⁴ Moreover, not only did the South use ideology to preserve order but a proto-Marxist historicism to justify nature. Like Marx’s “scientific socialism,” southern “sociology” purported to offer an empirical description of social relationships based on a scientific study of historical facts and experience. Richard Hofstadter’s epithet for Calhoun can also apply to Fitzhugh: “The Marx of the Master Class.”⁶⁵ Both Calhoun and Fitzhugh anatomized in detail the brutal “exploitation” of labor under capital, the dehumanization of “isolated” man, “the most helpless of animals” in a competitive society, the universality of class struggle and the moral

⁶²In none of Boorstin’s works does he discuss Social Darwinism, the one ideology which, though Spencerian rather than the European positivist variety, captivated the conservative mind in America.

⁶³There were, Lichtheim points out, several expressions of ideology (Hegelian, Romantic, etc.), but it was the positivist variety which comes closest to that which prevailed in 19th century American thought. Regarding positivist ideology, Lichtheim writes: “This philosophy arose from a complex of theoretical and practical problems, of which the original *philosophes*, and their eighteenth-century forerunners, took note in sketching a rudimentary model of world history. Essentially what concerned them was the growth of rationality and the imposition of conscious control upon ‘natural’ chaos. The pragmatic character of this enterprise was never wholly obscured by its theoretical language. It was from the first an attempt to impose ideal order upon the world, by making an appeal to man’s ‘nature.’ Its success or failure was and is bound up with the power of Reason to see through the veil of illusion to the enduring realities of human experience. An understanding of what is involved in the concept of ideology is thus at the same time an exercise in that historical imagination which enables us to see our predecessors as men engaged in an enterprise whose outcome still concerns us. . . . Whatever their residual differences, this is a perspective which liberalism and Marxism have in common.” *The Concept of Ideology and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 46, 43, 46.

⁶⁴Mannheim, p. 40.

⁶⁵*The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 68–92.

hypocrisy of the free enterprise system.⁶⁶ True, they were abortive Marxists, unwilling to carry their analysis to revolutionary or even reformist solutions. Perhaps the reason they failed to arrive at these solutions lies in the mysteries of character or in the realities of southern politics and society. But whatever the case, following Boorstin's reasoning one would have to conclude that Calhoun and Fitzhugh were merely expressing the unconscious instinct of the American genius: instead of drawing the crucial distinction between fact and value, instead of imposing a moral judgment on American society (South as well as North), instead of making a conscience-charged leap from the "is" to the "ought," they drew the "ought" from the "is" and thereby accepted slavery as a "given" of history.

Henri De Man once remarked that "Socialism is a *passion*, not a *cognition*."⁶⁷ That is to say, possession of the same knowledge is compatible with diametrically opposed social attitudes; similar thought-habits do not necessarily lead to similar modes of conduct. What impresses Boorstin is that Northerners and Southerners supposedly reasoned alike; but what depresses other historians is that they behaved differently. Here, ironically, Boorstin seems to be suggesting that although the natural environment may have determined the different behavioral attitudes of Northerners and Southerners, a true continuity of values still prevailed in the area of theoretical discourse (even in "a heavy scholarly treatise" by Calhoun). Thus whereas Boorstin dismisses the colonial Enlightenment as "myth," the South's "reactionary enlightenment" (Hartz) is accorded intellectual legitimacy. Geography having failed America in the Civil War, a consensus would now have to be found in the realm of thought and the unity of mind. Yet even though Boorstin is willing to become an intellectual historian to sustain his argument, the argument remains unconvincing. It is highly doubtful that empirical cognition itself could have resolved the crisis, and no amount of fact-gathering could have led Northerners and Southerners to an understanding of what *ought* to have been done. The "ought"—moral vision, ethical consciousness, human awareness, value judgment—this is the lost dimension in Boorstin's philosophy of history. Boorstin maintains that the dialogic unity of the "is" and the "ought" led to the "Spirit of Compromise." Could it not also be said that it led to the habit of moral evasion?

What Boorstin is suggesting by the idea of "givenness" may be less a

⁶⁶George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South*, in *Ante Bellum*, ed. Harvey Wish (New York: Capricorn, 1960), pp. 43–95.

⁶⁷*The Psychology of Socialism*, trans. Eden & Cedar Paul (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), p. 497; on this problem of epistemology and axiology, see also Sidney Hook, "Marxism and Values," *Marxist Quarterly*, 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1937), 38–45.

characteristic of American history than a facet of his own conception of reality and history. To Boorstin, the historian looks for what was going on; history reveals, above all, change and process; its real essence is development rather than purpose, movement rather than meaning, consequences rather than causes. This philosophy of "process," where all is flux and motion and the only questions raised are "how" instead of "why," is an intriguing historical methodology.⁶⁸ But one may rightly ask whether this methodology has any explanatory value for the study of the past. In historical study the concept of "givenness" results in the fetishism of the "is," whereby what happened becomes that which inevitably had to happen. The irony is that although Boorstin describes Americans as a pragmatic, problem-solving people, major crises like the Civil War emerge from his narrative essentially unresolved. Most likely Boorstin can suggest no solutions to such problems because he cannot explain the causes of events as long as he turns to America's natural environment to find answers to human problems. In short, by confusing the values of mind with the facts of nature Boorstin has negated the human dimension in history. As a result, one has the impression from reading his works that Americans are almost objects acted upon by nature, people to whom history simply happens.

Boorstin's naturalistic idea of "givenness" implies that the material universe is endowed with human values, and that therefore transcendent moral ends are rooted in the very structure of history. Curiously enough, this concept of history bears close resemblance to the 19th century historicism which began with Hegel and was carried forward by the more empirically-minded Marxists (Engels, if not Marx himself). Philosophically, "givenness" means the end of dualism, and thus it presupposes the Hegelian-Marxist conviction that no higher state of moral awareness prevails apart from historical existence. It was this *naturalization* of history which led some 19th century idealists to criticize historicism for dehumanizing the role of the conscious mind in history. Yet we need not call up Collingwood to obtain a critique of Boorstin's pragmatic naturalism. For even John Dewey, who would have readily agreed with Boorstin that facts can give rise to values, believed that genuine knowledge was not automatically "given" by nature but always remained as "unfinished" and "indeterminate" as nature itself. Maintaining that "every case of consciousness is dramatic," and that "drama is the enhancement of the con-

⁶⁸In discussing the decline of Puritanism Boorstin maintains that the significance of the phenomenon "was not *that* it broke down, but *how*." Similarly, in examining early constitution-making in America Boorstin shifts his focus from the "motives" to the "procedure"; and in handling the Civil War he announces to the reader: "I shall direct your attention not so much to the causes of the conflict as to the framework of debate" (*GAP*, pp. 38, 100; *NE*, p. 409). This "process" approach eliminates from history not only metaphysics but causation itself. This approach, it should be noted, is used in almost all of Boorstin's

ditions of consciousness," Dewey insisted that an unreflective acceptance of the presumed "given" in nature exhausted both nature and mind and thereby threatened human consciousness.

When philosophers have insisted upon the certainty of the immediately and focally present or "given" and have sought indubitable immediate existential data upon which to build, they have always unwittingly passed from the existential to the dialectical; they have substituted a general character for an immediate this. For the immediately given is always dubious; it is always a matter for subsequent events to determine, or assign character to. It is a cry for something not given, a request addressed to fortune, with the pathos of a plea or the imperiousness of a command. It were, conceivably, "better" that nature should be finished through and through, a closed mechanical or closed teleological structure, such as philosophic schools have fancied. But in that case the flickering candles of consciousness would go out.⁶⁹

Throughout most of his brilliant scholarly career Daniel Boorstin has been engaged in the heroic task of finding the roots of American democracy and explaining the historical forces which have nourished its development. My quarrel derives not so much from the historical accuracy of his interpretations. For the real problem lies in his assumption that American democracy is an historical fact rather than an unfinished human ideal. Writing history with this premise in mind, he therefore tends to treat the present as the fulfillment of the past and equates the real world of the past with the ideal world. Such an approach to the past empties history of its ethical content, for it presumes that the unfulfilled ideal of democracy has somehow been realized in history. Yet the essence of ethical thought, as Ernst Cassirer has observed, is to transcend the immediate "given" and struggle for the ultimate ideal. "To live in the ideal world," advised Goethe, "is to treat the impossible as if it were possible."⁷⁰ In Boorstin's history, however, noble ideals become almost synonymous with prosaic deeds, and thus in his interpretation of the American past what *had been* and what *should have been* are almost indistinguishable. Boorstin fails to consider that a democracy is cultivated and sustained by deontological pressures, what Bentham called "discourses on what must be done."⁷¹

studies of American history. Yet in some of his later works, and particularly in his discussion of the South in *The National Experience*, Boorstin senses the moral inadequacies in his doctrine of "givenness." Nevertheless, although from time to time Boorstin expresses a murmur of doubt about the doctrine, which was first elaborated in *The Genius of American Politics*, he seems only to re-embrace it in subsequent books and articles. For a discussion of Boorstin's shifting perspectives, see the author's "Consciousness and Ideology in American History."

⁶⁹John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), pp. 306, 349.

⁷⁰Quoted in Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1944), p. 61.

⁷¹Giovanni Sartori, *Democratic Theory* (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 4.

Confusing the real with the ideal, the empirically actual with the humanly possible, Boorstin's approach to history scarcely acknowledges that a democracy may very well depend upon prescriptive examination as well as descriptive narration, ethical insight as well as pragmatic hindsight. Indeed since the distinction between ideals and reality reaches its highest point in a democracy, it would seem imperative for a historian of a democratic nation to develop a heightened critical awareness of the very tension which Boorstin's philosophy of history denies—the tension between fact and value. This essay may be read as “a cry for something not given” in the concept of “givenness,” a plea for the restoration of theory, ideas and moral judgment in the study of the American past. What is imperiled by one-dimensional consensus history is nothing less than the “flickering candles of consciousness.”

