Who the Historian Is and the Issue of Objectivity

I had been thinking about the problem of self and history for a long time before that conference in England. Doing research at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1950s, I was among social scientists who sought to emulate the physical sciences. Survey research was in vogue and so was scientific "objectivity." In 1958 I gave a paper in Los Angeles before the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association about the question of objectivity in history. The edited version, below, was published in The American Historical Review, 66 (4) (*July, 1961*): 987–993 *in a section labeled "Notes and Suggestions."*

CHAPTER 2

Should We Learn More About Ourselves?

For years historians have grappled with the problem of attaining objectivity. Some of us have concluded that beyond individual practice of the orthodox canons of careful scholarship, there is little more that can or should be done; that bias is inevitable and the variety of views that arise out of individual and free scholarly enterprise will somehow result in truth. Some contend that bias is desirable, essential even, for history as art.

Such resignation or optimism seems premature. We do not know precise facts about the biases of the individuals who comprise our profession. Most writing on historical method has discussed history as a science or an art. (Should it deal with the general or unique? Is its proper form analysis or narrative?) Or has it dwelt on the ways of dealing with documents, the difficulties of determining what we call fact, and, in short, the methods historians use in their study, rather than the nature of historians? Too little is known in empirical terms about those who profess history, how they function, and what influences condition their views.

It may be undesirable to analyze historians and the nature of their views. The results could be used for unwise ends. But a study done with proper regard for the confidential nature of individual viewpoints might be highly enlightening and useful. Some initial studies have been made. Since 1958 the American Historical Association's Committee on Graduate Education in History has engaged in an extensive survey of the contemporary training of historians.[1] A large-scale study of the origins, motivations, problems, and predilections of graduate students, including those in history, is now being made out of the University of Chicago by the National Opinion Research Center. The Social Science Research Council has touched upon the subject in its bulletins on historical method and the social sciences,[2] and historians have been included in several studies of various phases of academic life and outlook.[3] All of these studies are admittedly only beginnings. Should we go further, delve deeper?

A survey of the economic, ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds of historians might bring more insight into some of the factors that may condition the writing of history. Are most professors of history in the United States white, Protestant, and male? From what economic levels do they come? Are they the products of cities and towns? Historians were included in the survey of *The*

Academic Mind by Paul Lazarsfeld and Wagner Thielens, Jr.,[4] but it might be valuable to have a survey specifically on the "historian's mind," yielding data to be presented in anonymous and statistical terms on the occupations of the parents, the places of birth, the race and sex, the present and previous religious and political affiliations, the occupational background, the places of residence, and other pertinent information about those who teach and write history.[5] A study of this kind could also show us something of the nature of the differing specialists—whether Americans who specialize in European history, for instance, differ in background from those who specialize in American history.

There are obvious limitations to the insights that can be derived from survey research. Psychological studies of the motivations, value judgments, personality traits, attitudes, and working patterns of individual historians are perhaps needed.

Modern psychology tells us that choices are usually not the result of accidental influence, but are made in response to deeper psychological drives. In choosing a vocation, people are often motivated by a desire for fame and fortune, for power and status, for freedom and variety, for creative outlets and good companionship, for security or a desire to serve others. A man of gentle temperament might be attracted to history because he deplores the tough give and take of business or the law. Or one who is temperamentally a conservative might be attracted to history because it supports his wish for a close link with the past. A man from a lower-middle-class family might see the position of a professor of history as one of security and prestige. A psychological analysis might be difficult to do, but it would be valuable to know what motives predominate among those who choose to go into history, in what order, with what effect upon historical scholarship, and how historians compare in motivations with those who choose to go into other professions.

Once the historian has entered the profession, has chosen a field in which to specialize, and has begun to lecture and to write, he must constantly weigh and assess, select and reject, as he faces the raw material of history. Some of his criteria for selection may be conscious and articulate: he may think an event or person or institution important because it has affected the lives of a great number of people; he may select his material in terms of the amount of publicity an event, idea, or person has received; or he may assess what was important in the past on the basis of his notions about the present or even of predictions about the future. Other not so conscious considerations may creep into the process. Frederick J. Teggart once said, "The selection of materials by the historian and the mode in which he presents his theme are determined by the conscious or unconscious desire to glorify the actions of the group to which he belongs."[6] Thomas Cochran has charged that historians take the written record "easiest to use and most stirring from a sentimental or romantic standpoint."[7]

Others have said that considerations of literary style affect the choice of subjects—for example, the desire to narrate an exciting story or to maintain stylistic unity. Some historians may feel more at home with ideas, with words, and so are apt to be attracted to and attach most importance to subjects or events that have an obvious ideological content. Others, because of distaste for the material aspects of everyday life, may refuse to study tax or census records. The historian's own character and temperament may also influence his reaction to events and personalities of the past. So will certain acquired attitudes and value judgments. As Howard K. Beale asserted, "even in 'objective' history, the historian's own attitude toward the place of the Negro in human society, toward the relative importance of property and human rights, or toward the desirability of an agrarian or an urban way of life becomes significant, as does his belief in or distrust of democracy or aristocracy."[8] Very likely an historian's attitudes and interpretations may also change as he grows older.[9]

Historians are, of course, aware of a variety of ways in which their individual biases may influence their choice of subjects, their methodology, and their interpretations. New research into the subject may give the profession more thorough and accurate knowledge of itself and might delineate in fuller and more precise form the forces that touch the historians. Contemporary social scientists have developed elaborate techniques to study the processes of decision-making in business and in government. It could be just as important to study the decisions scholars make. Reporting their conclusions in abstract and anonymous terms, a team of historians and psychologists might, as one way of proceeding, survey a representative sampling of historical textbooks for recurrent themes and implicit attitudes; analyze the changes in attitude manifest in some historians' writing over a period of years; and then ask the historians themselves about their methods of work. Certainly some historians might frown on the prospect of undergoing psychologists' depth interviews and personality tests. Yet it is entirely possible that a reasonable sampling of historians would be willing to be interviewed (physicists, biologists, anthropologists, and other scientists have been willing).[10]

A study of the functioning of the profession could stop at the exploration of the motivations and attitudes of individuals, but it might also be enlightening to analyze the cultural and institutional environment in which those individuals work. Using the traditional sociological concepts of social role, social status, and social function, Florian Znaniecki has made a general analysis of men of knowledge. He describes the discoverer of truth, the systematizer, the contributor, the fighter for truth, the eclectic and historian of knowledge, the disseminator of knowledge, and the explorer, and he speaks with considerable insight about the role and function of each one.[11] Perhaps historians would fall into other categories as well.

Whatever is done, we could use more factual information about the nature of the historian's social environment.[12] If historians generally confine their work and social relationships to others within the profession, then this must have an appreciable effect upon their values and habits of work. If, as we know, they tend to associate with members of certain academic professions rather than others, this is relevant. If they have many or few relationships outside the academic world, with what kinds of groups do they associate? What percentage participates in politics, and in what ways? What percentage travels, and where do they go? Who goes to scholarly conferences, who does not, and what influence do such conferences have upon historical writing? To what extent is historical writing influenced by the nature of "the academic marketplace" and by the economics of publication? And what is the effect of the private foundations upon historical scholarship?

Academic historians in the United States were first preoccupied with political history because that was what was respectable in Europe at the time, and they were trying to establish their academic respectability. By 1910 the historian could afford to listen to the dissenting voices of Carl Becker, Frederick Jackson Turner, and James Harvey Robinson because by that time history had become stabilized and institutionalized as a profession.[13] If the development of the profession as a profession has had strong influence on the methodology and emphases of history, then it is important to ascertain what the profession's current status is in the academic world and what effect this has on the history now being written.

The questions that might be asked are endless. An historian's values and activities are influenced by professional standards, but they are also adapted to the institutional needs of his employer. To what extent do the exigencies of departmental or college jurisdiction or of course content for teaching purposes influence the kinds of history being taught and written? The question is often asked, can a Catholic historian in a Catholic university write history which tends to refute traditional Catholic tenets? We do not ask an equally legitimate question, to what extent do historians in public universities and colleges work within the ideological confines of the Protestant ethic?

Research librarians and other nonhistorical professional groups surely must influence the methodology and content of historical writing, but we do not know exactly in what ways and how much. If historians tend to confine themselves to subjects for which documentation has already been collected, then perhaps we need a more thorough analysis of the sociology of archive collecting. Since research libraries are often financed by gifts and endowments, historians need insight into what kinds of people or organizations preserve records about themselves and subsidize archive collecting, and with what motivations. If the research library caters to the interests of the groups most likely to donate

gifts and endowments, then what types of events, institutions, and interpretations are neglected as a result of this? Whatever constitutes power or prestige for a research librarian is bound to affect his decisions about what archives to collect. Many people think that what has been well publicized or, on the contrary, what is very rare must therefore be important. It is possible that the librarian's criteria of importance do not coincide with all the needs of scholarship.

Historians are influenced not only by their fellow professionals and the institutions within which they work but by the attitudes and interests of the great public audience which in one way or another pays their bills and to whom most of them sooner or later, directly or indirectly, will address themselves. To understand the historian, it is obvious we must try to understand the culture in which he lives and the psychological and institutional reasons why the Western world seems to want so much of its history written about change and conflict, anguish and struggle, pain and sin. We might learn why some social classes are more historical-minded than others and why a region or an organization begins to demonstrate an interest in its own past at one particular time. We might explore the motivations that cause a business corporation, a trade union, or a church to take an organized interest in its own history, and we might note with care and perception what aspects of their own history these organizations emphasize most, when, and why.

If our profession sets out to achieve a greater degree of self-awareness than it now has, it should not do so as a substitute for but rather as an aid toward greater wisdom and insight, not as a panacea for all its problems but as a first step toward a richer union of scientific study and human art. It is possible that the results of all the studies herein suggested will tell the profession only a little more than it knows already. The evidence may show that personal and environmental influences are almost entirely offset by rigorous professional training. We may decide that biases are indeed inevitable and even desirable. Nevertheless, the evidence should be gathered, weighed, and utilized for whatever it is worth. Surely there is something to be said for that age-old adage, "Know thyself."

A POSTSCRIPT

At the time I submitted this paper to *The American Historical Review* for publication, it contained several sentences and indeed whole paragraphs that the editors deleted. I resurrect them now for the sake of what they illustrate.

I wrote, and they deleted: "Even in recent explorations of the frontier between history and the other social sciences, far too little emphasis has been placed on what seems to be an obvious way to bring the methods and perspectives of the other social sciences into the service of historiography—namely, for

psychologists, sociobiologists, economists, political scientists, and cultural anthropologists to investigate and describe what the history profession is as a whole, how it functions here and now, what the influences upon it actually are, and how the historian really does go about his work. Social scientists have studied business executives, trade union leaders, governmental bodies, primitive societies, and some aspects of the academic world with such questions in mind. The time has now come when social science questions and techniques should be used to analyze particular academic disciplines, with the history profession given high priority."

I wrote, and they deleted: "What historians tell the world about its past may have a profound effect upon what that world does in relation to the future. Therefore, the public at large is entitled to know who is writing our history and who—what types of people, representing what viewpoints—are not participating in the process of interpreting the story of the past to future generations. Once we know what the overall factual situation is, something can be done about it. Conscious effort can be made to recruit historians from backgrounds which are now underrepresented, and scholarships and research grants can be distributed with this goal in mind."

Instead of that paragraph, the editors inserted: "The result could be used for unwise ends."

I wrote, and they deleted: "What historians, for what reasons, and by what means, attain positions of power and leadership within their profession? What kinds of historians, by what processes, become editors of scholarly journals, officers of scholarly associations, dispensers of research grants, chairmen of departments? What effects has this had on the writing of history?"

I wrote, and they deleted: "History serves at least three general social functions and possibly more besides. It is one of the instruments by which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next, one of the cements of our society. It tells people who they are and therefore how they are expected to behave . . . History is also an instrument of power, utilized both by those already in power and those challenging the status quo. We get king and battle history when kings are ascendent; nation and war history when nationalism is rampant; parliamentary and economic history with the rise of the middle classes. In each age historians tend to concentrate not only on the individuals or groups in power or aspiring to power, but also on the techniques of attaining power."

I wrote, and they deleted: "It has been suggested that a re-exploration of history can be therapy, freeing a nation or a group of people from the tyranny of misconceptions about their past . . . the history profession has not yet explored the full potentialities of its role and destiny."

It was at about this time that Betty Friedan was publishing *The Feminine Mystique,* which became a bible for the American feminist movement. Before

Friedan's book, I had given a lecture to the freshmen at Mills College in Oakland, California about what it was like to be a female historian in a profession in which women outside all-female colleges comprised a fraction of one percent. The ratio of females has improved since that time, and a ghetto has been created for women's studies. The female perspective has yet to be fully appreciated in all its dimensions, probably because females are still seen primarily in terms of role (the debate is about what that role should be) rather than in terms of self.