

# Letters to the Editor of *Dædalus*

## On history in the twentieth century

May 10, 2006

To the Editor:

Anthony Grafton's essay, "History's postmodern fates," in the Spring 2006 issue of *Dædalus* was interesting and informative, but I share neither his pessimism about the fate of history nor his limited view of important twentieth-century developments. In summarizing other trends among historians in the United States, I will also focus on the post-World War II period. More works deserve mention if readers are to avoid a restricted view of history in this period.

Grafton covers major works by micro-historians, especially Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Davis, and Robert Darnton, and discusses some contributions by Lawrence Stone and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. He mentions other giants of history like William McNeill and C. Van Woodward, but not their main contributions. I can suggest some additional accomplishments and controversies.

Postwar politics – from HUAC investigations and loyalty oaths to mass movements against war and for civil, women's, and gay rights – affected the personnel and content of historical studies. A leftward turn among students, with many choosing academe over more lucrative professions, changed history departments from their former largely conservative white male character.

The geographical expansion of history brought most of the world into history courses. It also created new views of world and comparative history. World historians like William McNeill, Leftan Stavrianos, and Marshall Hodgson brought differing novel approaches to many aspects of world history, a growing field that challenged the privileging of the West over the rest that characterized earlier writings and theories regarding global history. Elements of Marxism were important in post-World War II schools founded by social scientists but adopted by many historians – Dependency Theory, which originated in Latin America, and World Systems Theory, which was begun by Immanuel Wallerstein and divided the modern world into a changing core, a semi-periphery, and a periphery, with the former exploiting the latter. World-oriented historians have often focused on trade, conquest, and migration as transnational forces: Many study trade regions – the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic, and the so-called Silk Route. Migration and conquest sometimes create diasporas, another topic of research.

While European history remained a pioneer, the rapid development of non-Western history brought them a new range and sophistication that could have had more impact had more historians paid attention. Joseph R. Levenson brought a subtlety and sophistication to Chinese intellectual history matched only by Benjamin I. Schwartz. Another historical giant was Thomas C. Smith.

His early works analyzed the development of industry and agriculture in modern Japan, finding many parallels to Western Europe. Smith later applied demographic methods pioneered by the Cambridge Group in England and found significant parallels to Western trends.

Indian and South Asian history have flourished, with an emphasis on theory – often postmodern and/or postcolonial – which have been welcomed by some and contested by others like Richard Eaton. Partha Chatterjee's view of the nation and nationalism is popular among historians of the global South.

Studies of major historical empires have also become significant. Historians of the Middle East have revised many earlier views, especially of the Ottoman Empire. For example, there has been a reaction against the view of Ottoman decline from the late sixteenth century on, with many writing only of a relative decline as compared to that of the European Northwest. The imperial harem, often blamed for the alleged decline, has been rehabilitated in Leslie Peirce's *The Imperial Harem*, which also revises views of how the empire was governed.

History has expanded to cover countries without writing or with writing systems that did not cover as much as did those of much of Eurasia. Methods for using oral history were pioneered by Jan Vansina; historical linguistics to measure migration and material culture, by Christopher Ehret and others; and the use of living languages to supplement incomplete writings, by James Lockhart. Such methods are mainly used for Africa and the Americas.

U.S. history since the 1950s has expanded in many directions, notably revision of views of slavery, Reconstruction, and black history: beginning with the works of W. E. B. DuBois and John Hope Franklin, and then Kenneth Stampp's

*The Peculiar Institution*, which overthrew the dominant view of benevolent slavery, and proceeding through the works of Eugene Genovese, which saw slavery as part of an interlocking social and cultural system. Recent examples include Ira Berlin's *Generations of Captivity* and Eric Foner's works on Reconstruction. David Brion Davis has pioneered in many, including cultural and comparative, aspects of the history of slavery.

Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman brought a novel mathematical economic history approach to slavery in *Time on the Cross*. Some economic historians followed their combination of 'what if' history with mathematics into 'counterfactual history,' while others pursued the mathematics without the 'what if.' Economic historians who came from history departments rather than economics departments tended rather to stress social, geographic, and cultural factors.

The intersection of economic history with ecological and demographic history has flourished in recent decades. For instance, many works on disease have followed Woodrow Borah's work on Latin America's drastic population decline owing to the conquerors' diseases. Alfred Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* is a leading work on ecological history.

Among subjects crossing geographical boundaries, women's history stands out for its contributions and for encouraging the development of other fields – gender, family, male, and gay history. Gerda Lerner, Natalie Davis, and Joan Scott are among its several pioneers. In gay history, George Chauncey's *Gay New York* goes beyond its title in discussing varieties of homosexual culture and practice. General histories can no longer ignore gender, though their mode of incorporating it is not always sophisticated or adequate. The study of women and gender has extended to all parts of the world:

three winners of the relevant AHA Joan Kelly prize since 1997 were books about China, Syria, and Iran.

Also popular have been histories of human relations to the nonhuman – often to commodities. There has been a rise in writing about consumption and a relative decline in writing about production, although both the history of technology and of modes of production have received some attention.

In various fields number crunching, aided by computers, has yielded information about the social and economic history of people for whom we have scant records. Other novel methodologies, such as the Freudian psychohistory of Peter Loewenberg, also have adherents. Many historians use new media, chiefly audio and visual records of individuals, events, and material culture.

The history of science and medicine has become a major field in many history departments. Thomas Kuhn's seminal *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was written when he was in UC Berkeley's History Department. In addition to the usual intrafield controversies, there are disagreements between scientists, who often see their history as a progressive discovery of scientific laws and theories, and historians, who stress the social and cultural aspects of science.

On the theoretical side, a few books with different approaches have been influential, notably, E. J. Carr's *What is History?* which combined a quasi-Marxist approach with relativism toward what is important in different periods. For more relativist postmodernists, Hayden White's *Metahistory* is important, while Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacobs' *Telling the Truth about History* combines a partially postmodern approach with others.

The students I have known have been interested in controversy and in diverse

approaches to understanding the past, and the writers I have known have been enthusiastic, not bored. Surveying the varieties of twentieth-century history seems more a cause for optimism than the opposite.

– Nikki R. Keddie

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June 1, 2006

Anthony Grafton responds:

One point of my piece was that argument is the lifeblood of history. Professor Keddie's response nicely bears this out. In fact, I didn't set out to survey the field, and my original draft was in any case much compressed to fit this issue of *Dædalus*. So I don't propose to argue with Professor Keddie, who offers a different point of view and much supplementary information. I only wish I could share Professor Keddie's optimism about the condition of our discipline – especially as I too work with many gifted and eager students at all levels. But there too, it's salutary to have two points of view expounded.

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