“The future is certain,” a Soviet joke assures us, “it is only the past that is unpredictable.”¹ For historians, alas, the future is hardly certain, and the fact that the past is unpredictable has become no laughing matter. Indeed, it has caused a good deal of concern in recent years and the growing conviction among many that the venerable craft of the historian is in a state of crisis.

This was not always so. The unpredictability of the past was an accepted fact to those who thought seriously about history. The dialectic between the past and the present was seen not only as inescapable but as salutary. History, Henry James observed, “is never, in any rich sense, the immediate crudity of what ‘happens,’ but the finer complexity of what we read into it and think of in connection with it.”² This truth was built into the graduate program at Columbia University when I was a student there thirty years ago. On our comprehensive written examinations, there was one question that was repeated year after year: “Discuss the changing interpretations of: . . .” which was followed by a varying list of the basic events: the American Revolution, the creation of the Constitution, Jeffersonian Democracy, the causes of the Civil War, the nature of the Populist revolt, and on and on.

Historians were, and I think still are, comfortable with the fact that our understanding of these standard historical occurrences inevitably varies from generation to generation because they perceive that, of necessity, we view them through the prism of a changing present. Nor have historians conceived of this prism as a prison that condemned them to a flawed vision. There was confidence that, although we might operate in cycles of historical interpretations, the general movement was upward toward an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the past. The present was not merely a hindrance; it could provide new ways of seeing things, new tools, new perceptions of human motivation or economic forces that helped us to gain a surer sense of past generations. When the French historian Marc Bloch made the familiar observation, “Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past,”

¹ Quoted in Stephen Lukes, Marxism and Morality (Oxford, 1985), 146.
² Henry James, The American Scene (1907; rpt. edn., New York, 1946), 182.
he quickly added, “But a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present.”

There is one area of historiographical unpredictability, however, with which many historians have not learned to make their peace. This involves not changing interpretations of well-agreed-upon standard events but changing notions of which events—and which people—should constitute the focus of the historian’s study.

The direction in which American historiography has moved during the past several decades becomes clear by discussing the ideas of a prominent and influential American historian, John Higham of Johns Hopkins University. In two articles, “The Cult of the ‘American Consensus’” and “Beyond Consensus,” that he published in 1959 and 1962 respectively, Higham took his colleagues to task for treating our history much the way dairy companies treated our milk: homogenizing it so that all the separate particles were blended together in one indistinguishable mass. Earlier historians, Higham insisted, “had painted America in the bold hues of conflict”: class against class, section against section, ideology against ideology, and had viewed the American past as jagged and discontinuous, filled with cataclysms and sudden change. For historians in the conservative years after World War II, on the other hand, American history looked more like one long, happy voyage with few fundamental differences and with an enduring consensus. “The phrase ‘the American experience’ has become an incantation,” Higham charged, as he pointed to his colleagues’ emphasis on uniformity, stability, “the persistence of a national character, the triumph of a single homogeneous culture.”

More than twenty years later, at the 1983 annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Higham issued another critique of the direction in which his colleagues were moving. In a paper titled “Beyond Pluralism: the Historian as American Prophet,” Higham argued that somewhere in the late 1960s the ruling paradigms of homogeneity and consensus were replaced by the paradigms of fragmentation and heterogeneity. The ideal of the national community was replaced by the ideal of the local community: the town, the parish, the family, the ethnic group. Thus the very things Higham had been decrying in the late 1950s and early 1960s—the exaggerated belief in consensus and homogeneity—had been vanquished. But Higham was far from pleased. The more we learned about the specific, he complained, the less we understood about the larger scheme of things. Historians had lost their sense of coherence and direction. Higham described his colleagues by using the metaphor of a field of solitary gophers, each digging its own hole. Our task now, Higham concluded, was to rediscover our national unity and our national identity.

What had happened between the early 1960s and the early 1980s to lead

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Higham to change the title of his critique from "Beyond Consensus" to "Beyond Pluralism," and to lament at the end of this period the demise of the very thing he seemed to be inveighing against at its beginning? For our purposes, the most decisive factor was the advent of a stream of modern American historiography beginning in the late 1960s and blossoming in the mid-1970s that was—and is—convinced that there can be no real sense of the whole without exploring the parts, without understanding—often for the first time—the consciousness and actions of workers, women, ethnic, religious, racial, and national minorities, immigrants and their progeny, who participated in a myriad of separate geographical, occupational, fraternal, and religious communities that together constituted the larger society.

This shift was never total or inclusive. Throughout the years since the mid-1970s, historians continued to explore all the standard phenomena that have traditionally concerned them. Revisionism characteristically and perhaps inevitably tends to overstate. But these overstatements—especially the occasionally stupid ones—should not be elevated into an expression of what the new approaches are all about. The great majority of those who have sought to expand our historical vision to new groups of people and new areas of expressive culture mean to do just that: to expand our knowledge, to supplement our approaches, not to erect new fences and shut still more doors.

In 1965, I published a study of the politician William Jennings Bryan that tried to use him to understand his small-town and agrarian midwestern and southern constituencies. In the years following the publication of my Bryan study, I turned to a history of black protest thought in America and attempted to utilize the same approach: that is, I began by focusing on the thought of the black leadership. Increasingly, I was troubled by my assumption that one necessarily can derive the consciousness of people from the goals and aspirations of their leaders, and I turned gradually and then decisively to folk materials to enable me to hear more directly the voices of people who had not left traditional historical sources behind them. Although I felt quite lonely and vulnerable as I was writing this work, this, as it turned out, was precisely the direction in which many historians, especially younger ones, were moving.6

The new historiography was fashioned by what has been perhaps the most important intellectual breakthrough by historians in the past two decades: their changed attitude toward the folk whom they now began to see not as inarticulate, impotent, irrelevant historical ciphers continually processed by forces over which they had no control but rather as actors in their own right who, to a larger extent than we previously imagined, were able to build a culture, create alternatives, affect the situation they found themselves in, and influence the people they found themselves among.

This historiographical trend has brought forth a series of laments from both within and without the profession. Once, we have been told, American history

was written by those who had a sense of the entire tradition, who wrote of a nation, not of its bits and pieces, whose writings did not divide the American people into their constituent elements but helped unite them by giving them a sense of a common tradition and a shared past. In 1982, C. Vann Woodward deplored the "fragmentation of the profession into highly specialized fields." "People of a democratic tradition," he insisted, "can surely be interested in the historic plight of the powerless, but they have a natural and abiding concern for power and those who have wielded it and to what effect—a concern that historians should never have neglected anyway. If they can now revive the art of the craft, historians can also reclaim a general public."\(^7\)

This tendency to decry the historiographical present and look with nostalgia upon the historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose sweeping, politically focused narratives supposedly encompassed the whole tradition and communicated with a wide audience, smacks of what Eric Hobsbawm has called "invented tradition."\(^8\) In reality, for the most part, these earlier historians were concerned overwhelmingly with a decided minority of the population in terms of class, ethnicity, region, and gender, and tended to confuse the history of one group with the history of the nation. Moreover, historians today probably communicate with a much broader public than their predecessors ever did, both through the secondary schools and colleges, which contain a far larger portion of the population than at any other time, and through such institutions as the National Museum of American History, whose recent popular exhibits on the black migration to Chicago and the internment of Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor could not have taken place without the new scholarship, whose ultimate influence cannot be measured by the direct sales of books, which is never the way to gauge the influence of scholarship either in the sciences or the humanities.

But, if the practice of creating a Golden Age of Historiography, in comparison with which current historians pale, cannot be taken literally, it helps us to understand the nature of the debate we are engaged in. This practice was manifest at least as early as 1962, when the current historiographical stream was still a trickle. In his presidential address to the American Historical Association that year, Carl Bridenbaugh of Brown University painted a bleak picture of the future of the historical profession in the United States. In former days, Bridenbaugh maintained, the ablest historians were amateur scholars, men who had known life at first hand, and shared a common culture. "Today," he lamented,

we must face the discouraging prospect that we all, teachers and pupils alike, have lost much of what this earlier generation possessed, the priceless asset of a shared culture. Today imaginations have become starved or stunted... Furthermore, many of the younger practitioners of our craft, and those who are still apprentices, are products of lower middle-class or foreign origins, and their emotions not infrequently get in the way

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of historical reconstructions. They find themselves in a very real sense outsiders on our past and feel themselves shut out. This is certainly not their fault, but it is true. They have no experience to assist them, and the chasm between them and the Remote Past widens every hour . . . What I fear is that the changes observant in the background and training of the present generation will make it impossible for them to communicate and to reconstruct the past for future generations.9

Bridenbaugh’s jeremiad was met with embarrassed silence and treated, when it was treated at all, as some sort of idiosyncratic aberration. While it is true that no other scholars have picked up his unfortunate tendency to read an entire group of young historians out of the profession by asserting that the culture they were raised in forever barred them from comprehending the American past, it is also true that Bridenbaugh was quite prescient in one important respect: the young historians then preparing to take their place in the profession were different from the generations before them in their greater degree of heterogeneity and marginality and these differences did leave their mark on the generation’s historical work.

Where he went wrong was in his prediction that that mark would have primarily negative results. In fact, it is no accident that the heterogeneous historical generation Bridenbaugh so feared turned out to understand one fundamental aspect of the American past—its heterogeneity—infinitely better than its predecessors had. The decades following Bridenbaugh’s presidential address were characterized historiographically by an exciting and pioneering dynamic in which historians explored unchartered groups and institutions; made the expressive culture of the folk and of popular entertainment part of American culture; wondered openly about the direction of cultural diffusion and hypothesized that cultural influence could proceed from the socioeconomic bottom to the top as well as vice-versa. The generation that Bridenbaugh predicted would not and could not understand the American past has done more to enable us to understand it in its full complexity and diversity than any preceding generation of historians.

It is this very accomplishment that has proven to be most troubling to so many. Although the current debate is usually billed as political versus social and cultural history, or narrative history versus analytic history, or fragmentary history versus synthetic history, it makes complete sense only when it is seen as what, at its root, it really is: a debate about the extent to which we should widen our historical net to include the powerless as well as the powerful, the followers as well as the leaders, the margins as well as the center, popular and folk culture as well as high culture. The primary criticism of contemporary historiography has little to do with what kind of history we practice and almost everything to do with the subjects of that history. This is really what is objected to by those who so fear the directions in which many contemporary historians are moving. When Gertrude Himmelfarb, who has written of what she terms “the current prejudice against greatness,” charges, on page 17 of her book, The New History and the Old, that for the social historian “the infrastructure is what the historian thinks it is,

not what contemporaries may have judged to be the most significant aspects of their lives and times,” we arrive at the nub of the problem: how broad, how comprehensive must our history be to know what “contemporaries” thought was significant? How far must we go beyond the political, economic, and military leaders even to begin our understanding of political, economic, and military history? Himmelfarb tells us on the very next page by the insertion of two revealing adjectives before the word “contemporaries.” Social history, she writes, by devaluing the political realm “makes meaningless those aspects of the past which serious and influential contemporaries thought most meaningful” (italics added). The point is made even more clearly eight pages later when Himmelfarb complains that “the social historian, rejecting any such ‘elitist’ idea as the good life, seeking only to understand any life, indeed regarding it as a triumph of the historical imagination to explore the lowest depths of life, to probe the unconscious, unreflective, irrational aspects of life, denies that man is the distinctive, indeed unique animal Aristotle thought him to be—a rational animal, which is to say, a political animal.” Indeed, Himmelfarb goes so far as to assert that the new history “involves a radical redefinition of human nature.\(^{10}\)

To comprehend why such apocalyptic language is used—and it is used often, as witness Theodore Hamerow’s charge that many of the new historians feel “they must be ruthless in destroying conventional methodology”—it is necessary to locate the historiographical debate within the larger debate concerning the current directions of American culture itself: a debate in which William Bennett, while he was still Secretary of Education, accused those faculty desiring to expand the cultural canon of “trashing” Plato and Shakespeare.\(^{11}\) The larger contemporary debate between those like Allan Bloom on the one side who “know” what culture is and what it is not, who have a map of its fixed perimeters and a profile of the identity of its creators and its followers, who perceive culture to be something finite and fragile, which needs to be conserved and protected from the incessant Philistinism that threatens it, and those on the other side who believe that worthy, enduring culture is not the possession of any single group or genre or period, who conceive of culture as neither finite nor fixed but dynamic and expansive, helps to frame our own specific historical debate and makes it clear that our discussions are not taking place in some academic vacuum apart from the outside world.\(^{12}\)

But there is still another context that helps to elucidate the full meaning of our debate. The complaints against the current historiography center not just on its subject matter but on its degree of complexity and relative inaccessibility to a larger public. We first heard charges like these not in the discipline of history but in that of physics and the sciences in general. During the 1920s, the New York Times published a series of editorials bitterly lamenting the fact that educated people could no longer grasp those theories on the cutting edge of science.


“What common folk must be content to do in regard to Dr. Einstein,” the Times concluded reluctantly in 1921, “is to accept the judgment of experts on his work, just as they do in many other domains of specialized knowledge.” The Times seemed loath to accept its own advice, however, and continued to return to the problem throughout the decade, always with the same negative results. In a 1923 editorial titled “IT SIMPLY CAN’T BE DONE” the Times asserted, “The attempt to explain his theory to people who know only the elements of arithmetic, algebra and geometry is quite hopeless. The thing cannot be done, and, however humiliating the confession may be, most of us will be obliged either to take our Einsteinism on trust or just ignore it.” Five years later, the paper used an editorial titled “A MYSTIC UNIVERSE” to proclaim, “Countless textbooks on Relativity have made a brave try at explaining and have succeeded at most in conveying a vague sense of analogy or metaphor . . . Understanding the new physics is like the new physical universe itself . . . We can only hope for dim enlightenment. The situation is all the harder on the public because physics has become unintelligible precisely in an age when the citizen is supposed to be under the moral obligation to try to understand everything. Nor are things made easier for the common man . . . when theory changes from year to year.”

In a recent survey of modern physics, Nick Herbert wrote of “the reality crisis in physics.” Quantum theory, he observed, “irreparably smashed Newton’s clockwork” and taught us that the world is not a deterministic mechanism, but did not teach us what the world is. The late Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman had this advice for those interested in quantum mechanics: “Do not keep saying to yourself, if you can possibly avoid it, ‘But how can it be like that?’ because you will go ‘down the drain’ into a blind alley from which nobody has yet escaped. Nobody knows how it can be like that.”

History, of course, is not physics, and historians neither can nor want to claim the level of complexity and abstraction attained by Albert Einstein and his colleagues. Nonetheless, historians today are engaged in a similar debate centering on matters of synthesis, complexity, and accessibility because their own discipline and related humanistic disciplines do not inhabit a planet apart from the sciences; they are part of the same cultural matrix out of which the new scientific attitudes and approaches have sprung.

In 1928, the New York Times observed that, while Alfred Tennyson defined faith as believing what we cannot prove, “The new physics comes perilously close to proving what most of us cannot believe; at least until we have rid ourselves completely of established notions and forms of thought . . . The Quantum invites us to think of something which can be in two places at the same time.”

13 New York Times, editorials, July 8, 1921, February 6, 1923, January 28, 1928. See also editorials in the issues of April 26, 1920 and January 30, 1922.
14 Nick Herbert, Quantum Reality: Beyond the New Physics (Garden City, N.Y., 1985), xi–xii, 246, and passim.
Much of contemporary historiography invites us to rid ourselves of established notions and to stretch our imaginations in similar ways.

If the *Times* had trouble with the concept that something can be in two places at the same time, what are we to say when we learn, for instance, that a culture can move in two directions at the same time? In my own work on Afro-American folk thought, I was searching for that moment in post-Civil War history when American blacks, whose culture during slavery had remained so very African in so many ways and so autonomous in so many respects from the white culture that surrounded it, crossed over into the process of unmistakable cultural amalgamation. But I found that, every time I focused on a new form of cultural expression that seemed to function as a mechanism for deep acculturation to the larger society, I discovered important degrees of cultural revitalization as well. In so many modern forms of their expressive culture, Afro-Americans exhibited the tendency to surge outward into the larger society even as they nurtured a strong centripetal urge that continually drew them back to central aspects of their traditions. My own findings were duplicated by the sociologist Mark Slobin in his study of Jewish music in America. We each independently found that such recent developments as the modern recording industry acted not only as a force for cultural amalgamation but also served to preserve important elements of group tradition. That is, developments that common sense and logic tell us must have reduced a group’s cultural autonomy turn out on closer inspection to have been more complex and to have enabled people to move simultaneously outward and inward. Thus it is difficult to disagree with Slobin’s rejection of the older progressive models of cultural change and accommodation in favor of the recognition that what we are faced with is “a dynamic state of flux.”

Contemporary scholars have demonstrated again and again that, in penetrating the culture of a neglected group, historians often find more than they bargained for. What looked like a group becomes an amalgam of groups; what looked like a culture becomes a series of cultures. Americans on the eve of World War II might have seen only a monolith when they looked at Japanese-Americans, but historians must see something vastly more complicated: the *Issei* born in Japan and legally barred from becoming U.S. citizens, the *Nisei*, born and raised here and thus citizens by birth, the *Kibei*, born here but raised in Japan and thus legally Americans and culturally Japanese, as well as those who lived in cities and those who lived on farms, those who struggled to maintain the old ways and those who hungered for acculturation. The complexity I speak of is not the complexity of specialized languages or esoteric methodologies but the complexity of people and the cultures they create.

This is not to say that we must fragment every group we study to the point where generalizations become impossible, but if we generalize the things we study right out of their complexity, we are doomed to futility. There can be no meaningful political history of labor or industry in the United States without understanding the cultures and social structures of the urban-industrial working

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class—the bulk of them immigrant and black—at the turn of the century. There can be no complete political history of women’s rights in the United States without an understanding of the impact of the new immigrants, so many of whom came from Southern and Eastern European cultures in which women occupied a decidedly subordinate place. We have not begun to understand our political history sufficiently because we have too frequently artificially separated it from the larger cultural context of which it was a part.

Just as scientists have traveled light years from Copernicus’s conviction that the Ptolemaic universe must be a misconception because God would not have expressed Himself in such complicated terms, and have spent much of their time attempting to articulate the complexities of the universe we do inhabit, so, too, historians find themselves again and again complicating simple pictures, finding intricacies where before we had certainties, turning unity into multiplicity, clarity into ambiguity. It is possible to see this development, as a number of critics have, as an act of perversity and failure. It is also possible to view it, as I do, as a sign of the maturation and seriousness of our profession. In any case, it is in the midst of this fluid state that we are hearing increasingly insistent demands that we get our act together, carry the enterprise forward, formulate syntheses that allow us to make our current findings immediately intelligible to a broad public, and incorporate larger doses of narrative style in our work, as our illustrious scholarly ancestors did.

We have to comprehend, finally, that we ourselves have a good deal to do with the reception of the history we write and teach. If we tell people continually that history is invariably narrative storytelling about those whose power, position, and influence are palpable, then that is precisely what they will expect from us. But this is only one form of history, and it is incumbent upon us to inform the public, by deed and word, that there is no exclusive preferred form for the writing of history and that no single group in history and no one aspect of the past—the social, the political, the cultural, the economic—is inherently more important, or more essential, or more relevant than the others. If we have respect for our audience, then we must realize that ambiguity and paradox and uncertainty are not strangers to them. They know these things are part of life, and they certainly can be taught to see them as part of history.

But historians will be in no position to teach these lessons if we ourselves do not strive to increase not only our tolerance for and acceptance of the complexities of the past but our tolerance for and acceptance of the complexities and ambiguities of our own profession.