

The Politics of History

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*To, for, with
Roslyn*

PART ONE

APPROACHES

1

Knowledge as a form of power

Is it not time that we scholars began to earn our keep in this world? Thanks to a gullible public, we have been honored, flattered, even paid, for producing the largest number of inconsequential studies in the history of civilization: tens of thousands of articles, books, monographs; millions of term papers; enough lectures to deafen the gods. Like politicians, we have thrived on public innocence.

Occasionally, we emerge from the library stacks to sign a petition or deliver a speech, then return to produce even more of inconsequence. We are accustomed to keeping our social commitment extracurricular and our scholarly work safely neutral. We were quick to understand that awe and honor greet those who have flown off into space while people suffer on earth.

If this accusation seems harsh, read the titles of doctoral dissertations published in the past twenty years, and the pages of the leading scholarly journals for the same period, alongside the lists of war dead, the figures on per capita income in Latin America, the autobiography of Malcolm X. We publish while others perish.

The gap between the products of scholarly activity and the needs of a troubled world could be borne with some equanimity so long as the nation seemed to be solving its problems. And for most of our history, this seemed to be the case. We had a race question, but we "solved" it: by a war to end slavery, and by papering over

the continued degradation of the black population with laws and rhetoric. Wealth was not distributed equitably; but the New Deal, and then war orders, kept that problem under control—or at least, out of sight. There was turmoil in the world, but we were always at the periphery; the European imperial powers did the nasty work while we nibbled at the edges of their empires (except in Latin America where our firm control was disguised by a fatherly sounding Monroe Doctrine, and the pose of a Good Neighbor).

None of those “solutions” is working anymore. The Black Power revolt, the festering of the cities beyond our control, the rebellion of students against the Vietnam war and the draft—all indicate that the United States has run out of time, space, and rhetoric. The liberal artifacts which represented our farthest reaches toward reform—the Fourteenth Amendment, New Deal welfare legislation, and the U.N. Charter—are not enough. Revolutionary changes are required in social policy.

The trouble is, we don't know how to make such a revolution. There is no precedent for it in an advanced industrial society where power and wealth are highly concentrated in government, corporations, and the military, while the rest of us have pieces of that fragmented power which political scientists are pleased to call “pluralism.” We have voices, and even votes, but not the means—more crassly, the power—to turn either domestic or foreign policy in completely new directions.

That is why the knowledge industry (the universities, colleges, schools, representing directly fifty billions of the national spending each year) is so important. Knowledge is a form of power. True, force is the most direct form of power, and government has a monopoly of that (as Max Weber once pointed out). But in modern times, when social control rests on “the consent of the governed,” force is kept in abeyance for emergencies, and everyday control is exercised by a set of rules, a fabric of values passed on from one generation to another by the priests and the teachers of the society. What we call the rise of democracy in the world means that force is replaced by deception (a blunt way of saying “education”) as the chief method for keeping society as it is.

This makes knowledge important, because although it cannot confront force directly, it can counteract the deception that makes

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the government's force legitimate. And the knowledge industry, which directly reaches seven million young people in colleges and universities, thus becomes a vital and sensitive locus of power. That power can be used, as traditionally, to maintain the status quo, or (as is being demanded by the student rebels) to change it.

Those who command more obvious forms of power (political control and wealth) try also to commandeer knowledge. Industry entices some of the most agile minds for executive posts in business. Government lures others for more glamorous special jobs: physicists to work on H-bombs; biologists to work on what we might call for want of a better name, the field of communicable disease; chemists to work on nerve gas (like that which killed those six thousand sheep in Utah); political scientists to work on counter-insurgency warfare; historians to sit in a room in the White House and wait for a phone call to let them know when history is being made so they can record it. And sometimes one's field doesn't matter. War is interdisciplinary.

Most knowledge is not directly bought, however. It can also serve the purpose of social stability in another way—by being squandered on trivia. Thus, the university becomes a playpen in which the society invites its favored children to play—and gives them toys and prizes, to keep them out of trouble. For instance, we might note an article in the leading journal in political science not long ago, dealing with the effects of Hurricane Betsy on the mayoralty election in New Orleans. Or, a team of social psychologists (armed with a fat government grant) may move right into the ghetto (surely the scholar is getting relevant here) and discover two important facts from its extensive, sophisticated research: that black people in the ghetto are poor; and that they have family difficulties.

I am touching a sensitive nerve in the academy now: Am I trying to obliterate all scholarship except the immediately relevant? No—it is a matter of proportion. The erection of new skyscraper office buildings is not offensive in itself, but it becomes lamentable alongside the continued existence of ghetto slums. It was not wrong for the Association of Asian Studies at its 1969 meeting to discuss some problems of the Ming dynasty and a battery of simi-

lar remote topics, but *no* session of the dozens at the meeting dealt with Vietnam.

Aside from trivial or esoteric inquiry, knowledge is also dissipated on pretentious conceptualizing in the social sciences. A catch-phrase can become a stimulus for endless academic discussion, and for the proliferation of debates which go nowhere into the real world, only round and round in ever smaller circles of scholarly discourse. Schemes and models and systems are invented which have the air of profundity and which advance careers, but hardly anything else.

We should not be surprised then at the volatile demonstrations for black studies programs which began around 1967-68, or for the creation of new student-run courses based on radical critiques of American society. Students demanding relevance in scholarship began to be joined in 1968-69 by professors dissenting at the annual ceremonials called Scholarly Meetings: at the American Philosophical Association a resolution denouncing U. S. policy in Vietnam; at the American Political Science Association a new caucus making radical changes in the program; at the American Historical Association, a successful campaign removing the 1968 meeting from Chicago to protest Mayor Daley's hooliganism; at the Modern Language Association the election of a young radical English teacher to the presidential succession.

Still we remain troubled, because the new urgency to use our heads for good purposes gets tangled in a cluster of beliefs which are so stuck, fungus-like, to the scholar, that even the most activist of us cannot cleanly extricate ourselves. These beliefs are roughly expressed by the phrases "disinterested scholarship . . . dispassionate learning . . . objective study . . . scientific method"—all adding up to the fear that using our intelligence to further our moral ends is somehow improper. And so we mostly remain subservient to the beliefs of the profession although they violate our deepest feelings as human beings, although we suspect that the traditional neutrality of the scholar is a disservice to the very ideals we teach about as history, and a betrayal of the victims of an un-neutral world.

It may, therefore, be worthwhile to examine the arguments for "disinterested, neutral, scientific, objective" scholarship. If there

is to be a revolution in the uses of knowledge to correspond to the revolution in society, it will have to begin by challenging the rules which sustain the wasting of knowledge. Let me cite a number of them, and argue briefly for new approaches.

Rule 1. *Carry on "disinterested scholarship."* (In one hour's reading I came across three such exhortations, using just that phrase: in a *New Republic* essay by Walter Lippmann; in the 1968 Columbia University commencement address of Richard Hofstadter; in an article by Daniel Bell, appearing, ironically, in a magazine called *The Public Interest*.) The call is naive, because there are powerful interests already at work in the academy, with varying degrees of self-consciousness.

There is the Establishment of political power and corporate wealth, whose interest is that the universities produce people who will fit into existing niches in the social structure rather than try to change the structure. We always knew our educational system "socialized" people, but we never worried about this because we assumed our social norms were worth perpetuating. Now, and rightly, we are beginning to doubt this. There is the interest of the educational bureaucracy in maintaining itself: its endowment, its buildings, its positions (both honorific and material), its steady growth along orthodox lines. These larger interests are internalized in the motivations of the scholar: promotion, tenure, higher salaries, prestige—all of which are best secured by innovating in prescribed directions.

All of these interests operate, not through any conspiratorial decision but through the mechanism of a well-oiled system, just as the irrationality of the economic system operates not through any devilish plot but through the mechanism of the profit motive and the market, and as the same kinds of political decisions reproduce themselves in Congress year after year.

No one *intends* exactly what happens. They just follow the normal rules of the game. Similarly with education; hence the need to challenge these rules which quietly lead the scholar toward trivia, pretentiousness, orotundity, and the production of objects: books, degrees, buildings, research projects, dead knowledge. (Emerson is still right: "*Things* are in the saddle, and ride mankind.")

There is no question, then, of a "disinterested" community of scholars, only a question about what kinds of interests the scholars will serve. There are fundamental humanistic interests—above any particular class, party, nation, ideology—which I believe we should consciously serve. I assume this is what we mean when we speak (however we act) of fostering certain "values" in education.

The university and its scholars (teachers, students, researchers) should unashamedly declare that their interest is in eliminating war, poverty, race and national hatred, governmental restrictions on individual freedom, and in fostering a spirit of cooperation and concern in the generation growing up. They should *not* serve the interests of particular nations or parties or religions or political dogmas. Ironically, scholars have often served narrow governmental, military, or business interests, and yet withheld support from larger, transcendental values, on the ground that they needed to maintain neutrality.

Rule 2. *Be objective.* The myth of "objectivity" in teaching and scholarship is based on a common confusion. If to be objective is to be scrupulously careful about reporting accurately what one sees, then of course this is laudable. But accuracy is only a prerequisite. That a metalsmith uses reliable measuring instruments is a condition for doing good work, but does not answer the crucial question: will he now forge a sword or a plowshare with his instruments? That the metalsmith has determined in advance that he prefers a plowshare does not require him to distort his measurements. That the scholar has decided he prefers peace to war does not require him to distort his facts.

Too many scholars abjure a starting set of values because they fail to make the proper distinction between an ultimate set of values and the instruments needed to obtain them. The values may well be subjective (derived from human needs); but the instruments must be objective (accurate). Our values should determine the *questions* we ask in scholarly inquiry, but not the answers.

To be "objective" in writing history, for example, is as pointless as trying to draw a map which shows everything—or even samples of everything—on a piece of terrain. No map can show all the ele-

ments in that terrain, nor should it, if it is to serve efficiently a present purpose, to take us toward some goal. Therefore, different maps are constructed, depending on the aim of the mapmaker. Each map, including what is essential to its purpose, excluding the irrelevant, can be accused of "partiality." But it is exactly in being partial that it is most true to its particular present job.

A map fails us, not when it is untrue to the abstract universal of total inclusiveness, but when it is untrue to the only realm in which truth has meaning—some present human need, and what we must do to attain it. And so with a historical account. As Kierkegaard put it: "Truth exists only as the individual produces it in action."

Rule 3: *Stick to your discipline.* Specialization has become as absurdly extreme in the educational world as in the medical world. One no longer is a specialist in American Government, but in Congress, or the Presidency, or Pressure Groups: a historian is a "colonialist" or an "early national period" man. This is natural when education is divorced from the promotion of values. To work on a real problem (like how to eliminate poverty in a nation producing eight hundred billion dollars' worth of wealth each year), one would have to follow that problem across many disciplinary lines without qualm, dealing with historical materials, economic theories, political obstacles. Specialization ensures that one cannot follow a problem through from start to finish. It ensures the functioning in the academy of the system's dictum: divide and rule.

Another kind of scholarly segregation serves to keep those in the university from dealing with urgent social problems: that which divorces fact from theory. We learn the ideas of the great philosophers and poets in one part of our educational experience. In the other part, we prepare to take our place in the real occupational world. In political science, for instance, a political theorist discusses transcendental visions of the good society; someone else presents factual descriptions of present governments. But no one deals with both the *is* and the *ought*; if they did they would have to deal with how to get from here to there, from the present reality to the poetic vision. Note how little work is done in political science on the tactics of social change. Both student and teacher

deal with theory and reality in separate courses; the compartmentalization safely neutralizes them.

Rule 4. *To be "scientific" requires neutrality.* This is a misconception of how science works, both in fact, and in purpose. Scientists *do* have values, but they decided on these so long ago that we have forgotten it; they aim to save human life, to extend human control over the environment for the happiness of men and women. This is the tacit assumption behind scientific work, and a physiologist would be astonished if someone suggested that he starts from a neutral position as regards life or death, health or sickness. Somehow the social scientists have not yet gotten around to accepting openly that their aim is to keep people alive, to equitably distribute the resources of the earth, to widen the areas of human freedom, and therefore to direct their efforts toward these ends.

The claim that social science is "different" because its instruments are tainted with subjectivity ignores discoveries in the hard sciences: that the very fact of observation distorts the measurement of the physicist, and what he sees depends on his position in space. The physical sciences do not talk about certainty any more, but rather about "probability"; and while the probabilities may be higher for them than in the social sciences, both fields are dealing with elusive data.

Rule 5. *A scholar must, in order to be "rational," avoid "emotionalism."* True, emotion can distort. But it can also enhance. If one of the functions of the scholar is accurate description, then it is impossible to describe a war both unemotionally and accurately at the same time. And if the special competence of the mind is in enabling us to perceive what is outside our own limited experience, that competence is furthered, that perception sharpened, by emotion. A large dose of "emotionalism" in the description of slavery would merely *begin* to convey accurately to a white college student what slavery was like for the black man.

Thus, exactly from the standpoint of what intellect is supposed to do for us—extend the boundaries of our understanding—the "cool, rational, unemotional" approach fails. For too long, white Americans were emotionally separated from what the Negro suffered in this country by cold, and therefore inadequate, historical

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description. War and violence, divested of their brutality by the prosaic quality of the printed page, became tolerable to the young. (True, the poem and the novel were read in the English classes; but these were neatly separated from the history and government classes.) Reason, to be accurate, must be supplemented by emotion, as Reinhold Niebuhr once reminded us.

Refusing, then, to let ourselves be bound by traditional notions of disinterestedness, objectivity, scientific procedure, rationality—what kinds of work can scholars do, in deliberate unneutral pursuit of a more livable world? Am I urging Orwellian control of scholarly activities? Not at all. I am, rather suggesting that scholars, on their own, reconsider the rules by which they have worked, and begin to turn their intellectual energies to the urgent problems of our time. The true task of education, Alfred North Whitehead cautioned, is to abjure stale knowledge. "Knowledge does not keep any better than fish," he said. We need to keep it alive, vital, potent.

Specifically, we might use our scholarly time and energy to sharpen the perceptions of the complacent by exposing those facts that any society tends to hide about itself: the facts about wealth and poverty; about tyranny in both communist and capitalist states; about lies told by politicians, by the mass media, by the church, by popular leaders. We need to expose fallacious logic, spurious analogies, deceptive slogans, and those intoxicating symbols and concepts which drive people to murder (the flag, communism, capitalism, freedom). We need to dig beneath the abstractions so that our fellow citizens can make judgments on the particular realities beneath political rhetoric. We need to expose inconsistencies and double standards. In short, we need to become the critics of the culture rather than its apologists and perpetuators.

We who are fortunate in having the resources of knowledge are especially equipped for such a task. Although obviously not remote from the pressures of business, military needs, and politics, we have just that margin of leeway, just that tradition of truth-telling (however violated in practice) which can allow us to become spokesmen for change.

This will require holding up before society forgotten visions,

lost utopias, unfulfilled dreams—badly needed in this age of cynicism. Along with such visions, we will need specific schemes for accomplishing important purposes, which can then be laid before the groups that can use them. Let the economists work out a plan for free food, instead of advising the Federal Reserve Board on interest rates. Let the political scientists work out insurgency tactics for the poor, rather than counter-insurgency tactics for the military. Let the historians instruct us or inspire us, from the data of the past, rather than amusing us, boring us, or deceiving us. Let the scientists figure out and lay before the public plans on how to make autos safe, cities beautiful, air pure. Let all social scientists work on modes of change instead of merely describing the world that is, so that we can make the necessary revolutionary alterations with the least pain.

I am not sure what a revolution among scholars will look like, any more than I know what a revolution in the society will look like. I doubt that it will take the form of some great cataclysmic event. More likely, it will be a process, with periods of tumult and of quiet, in which we will, here and there, by ones and twos and tens, create pockets of concern inside old institutions, transforming them from within. There is no great day of reckoning to work toward. Rather, we must begin *now* to liberate those patches of ground on which we stand—in our classrooms, in our studies, in our writing—to “vote” for a new world (as Thoreau suggested) with our whole selves all the time, rather than in moments carefully selected by others.

Thus, we will be acting out the beliefs that always moved us as humans but rarely as scholars. To do that, we will need to defy the professional mythology which has kept us on the tracks of custom, our eyes averted (except for moments of charity) from the cruelty on all sides. We will be taking seriously for the first time the words of the great poets and philosophers whom we love to quote but not to emulate. We will be doing this, not in the interest of the rich and powerful, or in behalf of our own careers, but for those who have never had a chance to read poetry or study philosophy, who so far have had to strive alone just to stay warm in winter, to stay alive through the calls for war. Ultimately, we will be acting for ourselves and our children.

History as private enterprise

Let us turn now from scholars in general to historians in particular. For a long time, the historian has been embarrassed by his own humanity. Touched by the sight of poverty, horrified by war, revolted by racism, indignant at the strangling of dissent, he has nevertheless tried his best to keep his tie straight, his voice unruffled, and his emotions to himself. True, he has often slyly attuned his research to his feelings, but so slyly, and with such scholarly skill, that only close friends and investigators for congressional committees might suspect him of compassion.

Historians worry that a deep concern with current affairs may lead to twisting the truth about the past. And indeed, it may, under conditions which I will discuss below. But nonconcern results in another kind of distortion, in which the ore of history is beaten neither into plowshare nor sword, but is melted down and sold. For the historian is a specialist who makes his living by writing and teaching, and his need to maintain his position in the profession tends to pull him away from controversy (except the polite controversy of academic disputation) and out of trouble.*

The tension between human drives and professional mores leads many to a schizophrenic separation of scholarly work from

* The historian of the eighteenth and nineteenth century was not a professional, and so tended more often to write partisan history, although his very independence in wealth and stature in society (Henry Adams, George Bancroft) meant his partisanship was most often on behalf of national or upper class interests. In any case, his writing had the tang of life and combat so often missing in the professional historian. This is not to close out the occasional transcendence of narrow interest as by Richard Hildreth, who wrote in the early national period, “unbedaubed with patriotic rough” (as he described himself), while Bancroft wrote with nationalist fervor. Hildreth was relatively obscure, Bancroft immensely popular.