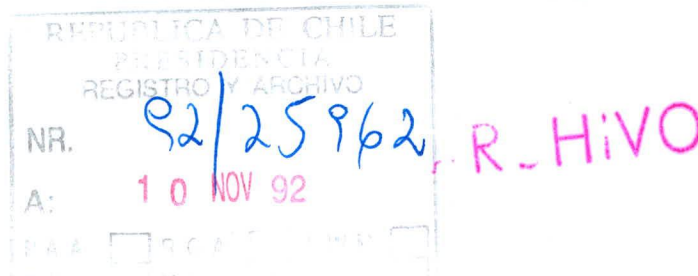


Dear President Azocar



November 5, 1992

I've sent you two articles by the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb which I feel give a lot of insight into why America is in such a state of crisis. What we have here is a massive breakdown in standards. Since standards are what civilization is all about what we have here in America is a breakdown in civilization.

I believe the key to understanding how American society unraveled with such remarkable speed though is in understanding black-white racial incompatibility. Basically what it comes down to is that if blacks are judged by the same standards used to evaluate whites, Asians, Hispanics and Indians they appear to be significantly less intelligent than these other groups. Liberals find that intolerable so they say the flaw lies in the objective standards which are used to judge them. This then is what opened the floodgates for an assault on standards in all fields and in every area of life. The attack on standards for the sake of "equality" was increasingly joined by groups such as leftists, homosexuals and feminists (female leftists and lesbians) who also want to see standards broken down so that they can advance their various agendas. Whereas it was originally considered simply racist to defend standards it's now also considered fascist, homophobic and sexist. Needless to say, no society can survive such an onslaught of such pure idiocy.

The American news media is always full of talk about how wonderful diversity is. I'm not opposed to diversity. My ancestry is Irish, German and Swedish so I'm very much a product of diversity as are most white people in this country. I've never understood why the Jews were considered different. None of the Jews I've ever known seem different. Mexicans and Koreans are different but they're easy people to live with. Many of the small stores in my neighborhood are Korean owned and I even used to be a volunteer English tutor for Korean immigrants. I know many of them and I like them.

The idea that diversity is always good though is simply a lie. Racial integration with blacks has turned our cities into jungles and ruined our education system. America's great ability in assimilating different types of people has broken down because of the blacks. America no longer works.

I often see the European Right condemned in the news. Slogans such as "Germany for Germans" are condemned as fascist. I see nothing wrong with it though. I believe that Germans and other Europeans have the right to be left alone to live as they've always lived. I see nothing extremist about such feelings. In some ways America is quite a bit different from the European countries. America is breaking apart because of the failure to assimilate blacks but it could well be that the European countries have a much lower breaking point. Just because America can (or at least used to be able to) assimilate groups as diverse as Russians, Romanians, Assyrians and Armenians doesn't mean that countries like Germany could also do so. I often write to the various members of the European Right because I want them to know the truth about "multiculturalism."

There is such a thing as truth but the problem with truth is that there is no divine law which says it must always turn out to be pleasant. The reason why truth is often ignored is because it often turns out to be quite unpleasant. The truth is though that America is rapidly unraveling and that can no longer be ignored. This whole country is just white hot with racial tension. I believe that at some point in the near future it will explode. I've sent you these articles because I want you to know why this is happening.

Sincerely, *Michael Flanagan*
Michael Flanagan
3629 N. Christiana
Chicago, IL 60618
USA

y, September 3, 1992

By James Warren

Jay Hilgenberg, star center for the Chicago Bears, split for Cleveland last week. He was chagrined that the club would pay him only about \$800,000 for spending six months a year jamming a football up from between his legs to a quarterback.

Hilgenberg was not alone in being discontent. Many Americans are discontent about lots of things these days. Are they justified?

"Oh, Our Aching Angst," declares Sept. 14 *Forbes*, which devotes a big chunk of a 75th anniversary issue to long, thoughtful responses to why we're so unhappy from 11 prominent authors, scholars and pundits, including Saul Bellow, John Updike, former Ronald Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan, urbanologist James Q. Wilson, sportscaster Dick Schaap, poet John Ashbery and historian Gertrude Himmelfarb.

Forbes, unabashed defender of the free market, believes that we're unjustifiably awash in pessimism. Introducing the section, *Forbes* editor James Michaels cites an array of economic statistics, including some on median family income, tax burden and life expectancy, to argue that our lot is far better than ever.

Writers and academics are in no small measure to blame for spawning a myth of national decline from their own "highbrow griping," Michaels contends.

Most of the 11 essays don't really concur. In the process, they show the limits of Michaels' own economics-driven analysis. There are many criteria other than exports and productivity.

Confident cheerleader

Forbes, still optimistic after 75 years, invites a panel to disagree

Magazines



Peggy Noonan



John Updike

For starters, Noonan focuses on Baby Boomers like herself and sees an abdication of responsibility when it comes to the political process. "We have recused ourselves from a world we never made." Our prime interest becomes money, "hoping that it will keep us safe."

"We feel bad," Updike writes, "because a once-sinewy nation, exultant in the resourcefulness that freedom brings, now seems bloated and zombified, pillaged and crumbling all around us. Benjamin Franklin's exhortations to thrift haunt us, in a world that makes debt not merely a necessity but a virtue."

In sports, Schaap finds that we've been disappointed by players and teams in ways that go beyond greed

and selfishness. Even the much-lauded purity of Ivy League sports is a bit of an illusion. Check the number of Ivy athletes who summer in Wall Street firms thanks to alumni ties. Heroes everywhere are tough to come by. "Sports has let us down."

Our frequent inability to confront intricate problems worries Bellow, whom *Forbes* photographed wearing a New York Yankees cap askew, an odd shot that, like the design and photos for the entire section, is eye-catching.

Given the "oceanic proliferating complexity of things," Bellow writes, "we are paralyzed by the very suggestion that we assume responsibility for so much. That is what makes packaged opinion so

attractive."

If there is an essay that's most challenging to *Forbes'* own thesis of our being needlessly glum, it comes from Himmelfarb, a conservative and a specialist in Victorian England who'd seem a natural ally of the *Forbesian* view. (People magazine, take note: It's unmentioned, but she's the mom of Dan Quayle's much-touted chief of staff, William Kristol.)

We think things are so bad, she writes, "because they are bad. Indeed, they may be worse than we think." Forget statistics on wages and prices, our real problem is having created a "de-moralized" society in which moral criteria and judgments are too often deemed undemocratic these days, especially by liberal intellectuals. An underclass gets away with murder (quite literally, at times) and the society's elite, which should know better, looks the other way.

Yes, we are hearing more talk of traditional "family values." But Himmelfarb suspects that it's too late. A breakdown in civility, the legal system and public education is too great. Our angst is justified.

Quickly: September *National Geographic* gives a fine overview of the history of the African slave trade. ... September *Smithsonian* takes readers to the raucous literary competition known as the poetry "slam" at the Green Mill bar on Chicago's North Side, concluding that it's a distinctly positive, trend-setting development despite the qualms of fuddy-duddies in academia. ... Discursing on the Fergie mess, Sept. 7 *People* quotes a gossip columnist as concluding that hubby Prince Andrew "is a nice guy but has the brain of a husk."



**Gertrude Himmelfarb
in Washington, D.C.
at the National
Arboretum**

A de-moralized society?

"... There is nothing sentimental or utopian about our present 'malaise.' Nor is there anything fanciful about our fears and grievances, indeed, there is something fanciful in the attempts to deny them. We have, in fact, as individuals and as a society, good reason for alarm ..."

By Gertrude Himmelfarb

Why, we are asked, if things are so good, do we think that they are so bad? The short answer is that we think they are bad because they *are* bad. Indeed, they may be worse than we think.

We think, for example, and quite rightly, that unemployment is bad. But unemployment, and the state of the economy in general, is only part of the problem, and, perhaps, the least part of it. Most of the unemployed will find employment. They will also find themselves saddled with a host of other problems that may be less immediately, personally urgent, but that are no less serious and troubling because they are more permanent and intractable.

I am not talking about the "malaise" that was bandied about in the Carter Administration, a bit of psychobabble referring to an emotional, inchoate species of discontent—"alienation," "anomie" or whatever other modish term was current at the time. I am talking of the justified discontent of the responsible citizen who discovers that economic and material goods are no compensation for social and moral ills.

A hundred and fifty years ago, while his contemporaries were debating "the standard of living question"—whether the standard of living of the working class had improved or declined in those early decades of industrialism—Thomas Carlyle reformulated the issue to read,

"the condition of England question." That question, he insisted, could not be resolved by citing "figures of arithmetic" about wages and prices, earnings and expenditures. What was important was the "condition" and "disposition" of the poor: their beliefs and feelings, their sense of right and wrong, the attitudes and habits that would dispose them either to a "wholesome composure, frugality and prosperity," or to an "acrid unrest, recklessness, gin-drinking and gradual ruin."

We do not use such language today, to our great loss. We are more comfortable adding up "figures of arithmetic" than analyzing or judging "conditions" and "dispositions." Those figures provide fodder for "pessimists" and "optimists" alike, the former concluding that recessions are an inevitable feature of the economy and that the living standards of the poor, if not of the rich, are in a permanent state of decline; the latter that the present recession is temporary and that in the long run the poor as well as the rich will benefit from a productive, expanding economy. But if the debate were enlarged to include the question of condition and disposition, some of us might find ourselves in the awkward position of being economic optimists and at the same time moral pessimists. Indeed, we might be all the more pessimistic because we would be deprived of the comforting view that a sound economy is necessarily

Gertrude Himmelfarb, the historian, is best known for her writings on Victorian England, including *The Idea of Poverty and The New History and the Old*. In 1991 she delivered the Jefferson Lecture, established by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the highest government award for intellectual achievement in the humanities.

conducive to a sound society. We might even be inclined to reverse that formula, to entertain the possibility that a sound society is the precondition for a sound economy.

In fact there are "figures of arithmetic" bearing upon moral and social issues as well as economic and material ones. Victorians called these "social statistics"—statistics relating to religion, education, literacy, pauperism, crime, vagrancy, drunkenness, illegitimacy. These statistics were meant to elucidate the "condition of England question": the moral, spiritual, cultural and intellectual state of the poor in particular and of the country as a whole. We no longer use the term, but we too have social statistics, in a quantity and degree of precision that would have been the envy of the Victorians.

Our social statistics are far more depressing than those produced by the supposedly "dismal science" of economics. There are, to be sure, some brave souls, inveterate optimists, who try to put the best gloss on them. But they are hard put to counteract the overwhelming evidence on the negative side.

It is not much consolation to be informed that the high rate of divorce is partly compensated for by a moderate rate of remarriage, since no degree of remarriage nullifies the fact of divorce, which itself testifies to an unstable marital and family life. Nor is it reassuring to be told that a

greater proportion of Americans enjoy a higher education than do most other nationalities, if that higher education is higher in name alone—indeed if it is intellectually lower than ever before, and lower than that of other nationalities. Nor that elementary school children today have computer skills that their college-educated parents lack, if they have to use those skills to correct primitive spelling mistakes or to be instructed in the multiplication tables. Nor that more cassettes and CDs are sold than ever before, if more of them spew out hard rock music or soft (or hard) pornographic rap. Nor that heroin addiction may be decreasing, if crack-cocaine addiction is increasing. Nor that the white illegitimacy rate is considerably lower than the black illegitimacy rate, if both rates are rapidly increasing. Nor that middle-class blacks are faring better, materially and socially, than ever before, if a considerable and growing black "underclass" is faring so much worse that it is becoming a permanent "outcaste" class.

For a long time Americans found it hard to face up to such depressing facts, even when they appeared in the hard guise of statistics. Instead we expended much ingenuity in "decoding" these statistics—qualifying, modifying, interpreting, explaining them, in the hope that we could explain them away. We could not confront them candidly because it was, and is, part of the liberal ethos—the prevailing American

Bishop faces censure for ordaining gay

Sex Videotape Scandal
Jolts Front

Drugs and Crime Next Door

Gang Violence at All-Time High; Turf Wars Blamed

St. Ann's Had An Early Start in Condom Distribution

Murder becoming second nature

Many feel immune to Chicago's record homicide pace

Divorce Is a Tough Row

St. Crime: Homicides in the San Fernando Valley are rising rapidly than in Los Angeles as a whole.

slayings have residents worried

MOM WHO KILLED CRACK-ADDICTED DAUGHTER: U.S. in the pink of health despite AIDS, murder, drugs

Violence at Home 'They Don't Want Anyone to Kill'

A Boy Money Can't Buy Impoverished Youth Down \$100

Smuggling of drugs big business

Families headed by single parents rise

The number of single parents heading their own households rose 14.7% from 1989 to 1990

Antigay Violence Banks cut corporate donations to Scouts

Teen-Age And Parer

Teacher Now Face

New York Times — A Federal grand jury heard charges

State Department officials said they were unable to explain the Arab nations' motives, and whether the steps are geared to peace negotiations. It is unclear partly because there has been no public indication of change from Saudi Arabia.

Drug, alcohol tests for newborns?

Ismael Cervantes

to Scouts

ethos—that such disagreeable things should not, and therefore could not, be happening. They violate the idea of progress that is so much a part of that ethos: the idea that material and moral progress are the necessary by-products of a free society, an expanding economy, a mobile social structure, a diverse and highly accessible system of public education and an even more diverse and accessible popular culture.

Those statistics also go against the grain of our ethos in being so “moralistic.” While it is generally assumed that moral progress goes hand in hand with material progress, this assumption is rarely made explicit, because moral concepts, still more moral judgments, are understood to be somehow undemocratic and unseemly. We pride ourselves on being liberated from such retrograde Victorian notions. And they were, indeed, an important part of the Victorian ethos. In 19th-century America, as in England, morality was not only a natural part of social discourse; it was a conscious part of social policy, the test of any legislative or administrative reform being its effect upon the character as well as material welfare of those affected.

Today we have so completely rejected that Victorian ethos that we deliberately, systematically, divorce morality from social policy. In the current climate of moral relativism and skepticism, it is thought improper to impose any moral conditions or requirements upon the

beneficiaries of the public largesse—not only upon welfare recipients but upon artists and other free spirits seeking grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. Such conditions are regarded as infringements of freedom (even, some have argued, of the First Amendment), as an arrogant usurpation of authority (who are we to decide what is moral and what is not?) and as an intolerable imposition of bourgeois, patriarchal, archaic “values.”

We are now confronting the consequences of this policy of moral “neutrality.” Having made the most valiant attempt to “objectify” the problems of poverty, criminality, illiteracy, illegitimacy and the like,* we are discovering that the economic and social aspects of these problems are inseparable from the moral and psychological ones. And having made the most determined effort to devise remedies that are “value-free,” we find that these policies imperil the material, as well as the moral, well-being of their intended beneficiaries—and not only of individuals but of society as a whole. We have, in short, so succeeded in “de-moralizing,” as the Victori-

*The National Center on Health Statistics informs us that “illegitimacy” is no longer acceptable, being derogatory and old-fashioned. The preferred term is “nonmarital childbearing.”

Why does it take a Magic to get us to think about AIDS?

TURNING UGLY

Big Rise in Homicide — Broken Homes

Abortion fight moves to

Can we recover from the divorce revolution?

Stripper Stuns Audience of Schoolchildren

RAP RAGE!

Hot Ice-T: Would I want to blow cops away? Definitely

Teen poll reveals

A rally against condoms

15 churches reaffirm abstinence for teens

COMMENT

Like it or not, parents must talk about AIDS

Shooting ends homicide hiatus in Minneapolis

Government strikes birth control chapter in health handbook

Charges in Sex Scandal

a Stranger to Suburbs

Fall of a Beloved Priest

Linden Pastor Arrested on Drug Charge

ence Up

20 Years of War on Drugs, and No Victory Yet

Against Mother Spurs Murder

Teen poll reveals

15 churches reaffirm abstinence for teens

COMMENT

Like it or not, parents must talk about AIDS

ans would say, social policy—divorcing it from any moral criteria, requirements, even expectations—that we have “demoralized,” in the more familiar sense, society itself.

This is our present “malaise.” There is nothing sentimental or utopian about it; it is not the product of an exacerbated sensibility, or romantic aspiration, or yearning for personal “fulfillment.” Nor is there anything fanciful about our fears and grievances; indeed, there is something fanciful in the attempts to deny them.

We have, in fact, as individuals and as a society, good reason for alarm.

It is this “condition” of society, this “disposition” of the people, as Carlyle would have said, that liberal intellectuals cannot credit or appreciate. They can sympathize with the sentimental idea of “malaise,” but not with the realistic one. They do not understand the anxieties of those who believe that the “social order” (the very term seems to them archaic) is in an acute state of disorder, that the “moral order” (another archaic term) is demoralized, or that the “legal order” has abdicated responsibility for law and order. They are contemptuous of “philistines,” as they see them, who are less than respectful of an “art community” that flaunts its contempt for ordinary people while demanding to be subsidized by them. They have no misgivings about a “sexual revolution” that has legitimized every form of sexual behavior and has made all “lifestyles” equal before the law, before society, even, some claim, before God. They have, in short, divorced themselves not only from conventional morality but also from all those conventional people who still adhere to that morality.

The moral divide has become a class divide: the “common people,” as they are invidiously called, versus the “new class.” The new class—no longer new, indeed firmly established in the media, the academy and the professions—is, in a curious way, the mirror image of the underclass. One might almost say that the two classes have a symbiotic relationship. In its contempt for “bourgeois values,” its misguided notions of “compassion” and its advocacy of social policies reflecting such “enlightened” attitudes, the new class has contributed, if not to the enlargement and perpetuation of the underclass, at least to its legitimization. By the same token, the new class is in an irreconcilably adversarial relationship to the working and middle classes, who are still committed to bourgeois values, the puritan ethic and other such benighted ideas.

By now this “liberated” ethos no longer seems so liberated; “political correctness” is the last refuge of old revolutionaries who have lost their

nerve. It is also so dramatically at variance with the social realities that even some liberals are beginning to have second thoughts. After decades of silence and denial, it is now finally respectable to speak of the need for “traditional values”—moral values, family values, social values. It is even respectable (although this is still resisted by many liberals) to suggest that the weakening of these values, partly as a result of the demoralization of social policy, has contributed to our present ills. It is not, however, at all clear that the traditional remedies will now suffice.

Conservatives have always looked to “intermediate” institutions to sustain and disseminate these values—to family, church, neighborhood, occupation, interest group. The difficulty is that these very institutions have become so enfeebled that they are hardly capable of sustaining and disseminating received values, let alone reviving dormant ones, without considerable assistance from the state. Yet conservatives have little confidence in the state, and with good reason. It is the state, after all, that has not only abdicated responsibility for these values but has actually subverted them—by shifting responsibility from individuals and private associations to the state, by transferring power from local to federal government, by enacting a welfare program that emasculates the family, by legalizing pornography in the name of the Constitution, by permitting educational institutions to be perverted for political purposes, by creating a legal system more solicitous of the rights of criminals than of law-abiding citizens.

This is the challenge that confronts us. Families, churches, communities cannot operate in isolation, cannot long maintain values at odds with those endorsed by the state and popularized by the culture. The task is critical and difficult. It is to restore a polity that reflects and supports the values implicit in the very idea of a social, a legal and a moral “order”—a federalist polity, in which local and state governments assume responsibility for some of the controversial issues that confront us. And it is to encourage a “counter-counterculture” that will resist the now entrenched “counterculture.”

No counterrevolution is complete, and this is likely to be less so than most, for cultures are more resistant to change than politics. But even a modest restoration would be significant—a return not, as some fear, to a long-since-discarded puritanism but only to the *status quo ante*—ante the excesses and excrescences of the most recent decades. Only then can we hope to overcome our present state of “acid unrest, recklessness, gin-drinking, and gradual ruin,” and attain that “wholesome composure, frugality, and prosperity” that Carlyle understood to be the disposition of a healthy society. ■

Liberal intellectuals have, in short, divorced themselves not only from conventional morality but also from all those conventional people who still adhere to that morality. The moral divide has become a class divide.

Tradition and Creativity in the Writing of History

Gertrude Himmelfarb

For the historian, as for the philosopher, the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns is being superseded by a quarrel between the Moderns and the Postmoderns. If the great subversive principle of modernity is historicism—a form of relativism that locates the meaning of ideas and events so firmly in their historical context that history, rather than philosophy and nature, becomes the arbiter of truth—postmodernism is now confronting us with a far more subversive form of relativism, a relativism so radical, so absolute, as to be antithetical to both history and truth. For postmodernism denies not only suprahistorical truths but historical truths, truths relative to particular times and places. And that denial involves a repudiation of the historical enterprise as it has been understood and practiced until very recently.

Postmodernism—or poststructuralism, the terms are by now used interchangeably—is most familiar as a school of literary theory (and, in a more specialized sense, of architecture), but it has become prominent in such other disciplines as philosophy, anthropology, law, theology, and history. Deriving from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others, its more immediate progenitors and most frequently cited authorities are Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Derrida is generally associated with such “deconstructionist” ideas as the “aporia” of discourse, the indeterminacy and contrariness of language, the “fictive” and “duplicious” nature

of signs and symbols, the dissociation of words from any presumed reality. Foucault is more directly responsible for the emphasis on the “power structure” immanent in language, not only in the particular signs and ideas that “privilege” the “hegemonic” groups in society, but in the very nature of rational, logical, coherent thought—“logocentric,” “totalizing,” “authoritarian” discourse, as it is characterized.

In literature, postmodernism amounts to a denial of the fixity of any “text,” of the authority of the author over the interpreter, of any “canon” that privileges great books over comic books. In law, it is a denial of the fixity of the Constitution, of the authority of the founders of the Constitution, and of the legitimacy of law itself, which is regarded as nothing more than an instrument of the ruling class. In philosophy, it is a denial of the fixity of language, of any correspondence between language and reality, indeed of any “essential” reality and thus of any proximate truth about reality. In history, it is a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past. Postmodernist history, one might say, recognizes no reality principle, only the pleasure principle—history at the pleasure of the historian.

Postmodernist history can be understood only in relation to what might be called “modernist” history. Modernist history too, as it emerged in the nineteenth century, is relativistic, but with a difference, for its relativism is firmly rooted in reality. It is skeptical of any fixed or total truth about the past, but not of partial, contingent, incremental truths. More important, it does not

GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB, a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of *FIRST THINGS*, is author most recently of *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians*. This essay was originally presented at a conference sponsored by the Institute on Religion and Public Life.

FIRST THINGS
NOVEMBER 1992

deny the reality of the past itself. Like the political philosopher who makes it a principle to read the texts of the Ancients in the spirit of the Ancients, so the modernist historian reads and writes history in the same spirit, with a scrupulous regard for the historicity, the integrity, the actuality of the past. He makes a strenuous effort to enter into the minds and experiences of people in the past, to try to understand them as they understood themselves, to rely upon contemporary evidence as much as possible, to intrude his own views and assumptions as little as possible, to reconstruct to the best of his ability the past as it "actually was"—in Ranke's famous and now much-derided phrase.

Modernist history, like modernist literature and art, is an exacting discipline, requiring a great exercise of discipline, self-restraint, even self-sacrifice. The greatest of modernist poets, T. S. Eliot, once said, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." And so it is with the historian, who strives constantly to transcend his own present in order to recapture the past, to suppress his own personality in order to give life to generations long since dead. This self-sacrifice is all the greater because the historian is well aware that his effort will never entirely succeed, that the past will always, to some degree, elude him.

Historians, ancient and modern, have always known what postmodernism professes to have just discovered—that any work of history is vulnerable on three counts: the fallibility and deficiency of the historical record; the fallibility and selectivity of the historical process; and the fallibility and subjectivity of the historian. As long as historians have reflected upon their craft, they have known that the past cannot be recaptured in its totality, if only because the remains of the past are sparse and are themselves part of the present, so that the past itself is, in this sense, irredeemably present. They have also known that the writing of history necessarily entails selection and interpretation, that there is inevitable distortion in the very attempt to present a coherent account of an often inchoate past, that, therefore, every historical work is necessarily incomplete, imperfect, tentative.

Historians have also known—they would have to be extraordinarily obtuse not to know this—that they themselves live and act and think in their own present, that some of the assumptions they bring to history derive from their own culture, that others reflect their particular race, gender, and class, and that still others (although this is made much less of today) emanate from ideas and beliefs that are unique to themselves as individuals. It did not take Carl Becker, in 1931, to discover that "everyman [is] his own historian"; or Charles Beard, in 1934, to reveal that "each historian who writes history is the product of his age." Beard himself said that

these propositions had been familiar "for a century or more"—thus antedating even Marx. Forty years before Beard delivered his famous presidential address to the American Historical Association, William Sloane, the *echt* establishment professor of history at Columbia University, inaugurated the first issue of the *American Historical Review* with a lead article announcing: "History will not stay written. Every age demands a history written from its own standpoint—with reference to its own social conditions, its thought, its beliefs, and its acquisitions—and thus comprehensible to the men who live in it."

It is useful for historians to be reminded of what they have always known—the frailty, fallibility, and relativity of the historical enterprise—if only to realize that these familiar truths are not the great discoveries of postmodernism. They are, indeed, very different from the tidings brought by postmodernism. For the presumption of postmodernism is that all of history is fatally flawed, that because there is no absolute, total, final truth, there are no relative, partial, contingent truths. More important still is the presumption that because it is impossible to attain such truths, it is not only futile but positively baneful to aspire to them.

In a sense, modernism anticipated and tried to forestall the absolutistic relativism of postmodernism by creating a "discipline" of history. Conscious of the deficiencies both of the historian and of the historical record, acutely aware of the ambiguous relationship between past and present, the profession created a discipline of checks and controls designed to compensate for those deficiencies. This was the meaning of the historical revolution that drew upon such diverse sources as Enlightenment rationalism, Germanic scholarship, and academic professionalism, all of which converged to produce what was once called "critical history." (This is not to be confused with Nietzsche's "critical history," a history in the "service of life" in contrast to "monumental" and "antiquarian" history; or the neo-Marxist usage of "critical," as in "critical legal theory.")

Critical history put a premium on archival research and primary sources, on the authenticity of documents and the reliability of witnesses, on the need for substantiating and countervailing evidence, on the accuracy of quotations and citations, on prescribed forms of documentation in footnotes and bibliography, and on all the rest of the "methodology" that went into the "canon of evidence." The purpose of this methodology was twofold: to bring to the surface the infrastructure, as it were, of the historical work, thus making it accessible to the reader and subject to criticism; and to encourage the historian to a maximum exertion of objectivity in spite of all the incitements and

temptations to the contrary. Postmodernists deride this as the antiquated vestige of nineteenth-century positivism. But it was the norm of the profession until recently. "No one," John Higham wrote, "including the 'literary' historians, rejected the ideal of *objectivity* in the ordinary sense of unbiased truth; no one gave up the effort to attain it; and no one thought it wholly unapproachable." This was in 1965, well after Becker and Beard had "relativized" history but before Foucault and Derrida had "postmodernized" it.

This is the crucial distinction between modernists and postmodernists, between old-fashioned relativistic relativists, one might say, and the new absolutistic relativists. Where modernists tolerate relativism, postmodernists celebrate it. Where modernists, aware of the obstacles in the way of objectivity, take this as a challenge and make a strenuous effort to attain as much objectivity and unbiased truth as possible, postmodernists take the rejection of absolute truth as a deliverance from all truth, a release from the obligation to maintain any degree of objectivity or aspire to any kind of truth.

Critical or modernist history was once the antithesis of traditional history—premodern, mythical, honorific, heroic history—what Nietzsche called "monumental" history. For the postmodernist, however, critical history is only another form of traditional history, concealing its ideological structure behind a scholarly facade of footnotes and facts ("facts," in the lexicon of postmodernism). This facade, the pretense of factuality and objectivity, compounds the deceit by fostering the illusion of truth. To "demythologize" or "demystify" traditional history, postmodernism has to expose not only its ideology—the ideology that serves the interest of the hegemonic, privileged, patriarchal groups in society—but also its methodology, the scholarly apparatus that gives it a specious credibility. This is the twofold agenda of postmodernism: to free history from the shackles of an authoritarian ideology and from the constraints of a delusive methodology. The ultimate aim is even more ambitious: to liberate us all from the coercive ideas of reality and truth.

Theodore Zeldin was one of the first historians (as distinct from philosophers of history) to rebel against what he called the "tyrannies" of history: causality, chronology, and collectivity (nationality and class). Instead of the traditional narrative history based upon these categories, he proposed to create a history, in the manner of a *pointilliste* painting, composed entirely of unconnected dots. This would have the double advantage of liberating the historian from the tyrannies of the discipline, and liberating the reader from the tyranny of the historian, since the reader would be

free to make "what lines he thinks fit for himself." More recently, Zeldin has gone so far by way of liberation as to liberate himself from the tyranny of history itself. Truth, he now says, can be found only in "free history," otherwise known as fiction—in testimony to which he proceeded to write a novel with the apt title *Happiness*.

Not all postmodernists go so far as Zeldin in seeking that ultimate liberation from history, but all do share his aversion to the conventions and categories of traditional history. This is not the familiar kind of revisionism that involves the revision of a particular historical account, analysis, or interpretation of an event or period. It is not revisionism at all, but rather a repudiation of all of traditional history—a profound skepticism about the assumptions, intentions, methods, and conclusions of earlier works of history, and a relativism tantamount to nihilism about the very enterprise of history.

To the traditional historian, the postmodernist philosophy of history appears to be more philosophical than historical and more literary than philosophical. Hayden White, the most systematic exponent of this genre, opens his most influential work, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, with a chapter entitled "The Poetics of History," explaining that each of the subjects dealt with, from Hegel to Croce, represents a particular aspect of the "historical imagination": metaphor, metonymy, irony, romance, comedy, tragedy, satire. (Another of his essays is aptly titled "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact.")

For the postmodernist, there is no distinction between history and philosophy or between history and literature. All of history, in this view, is esthetic and philosophic, its only meaning or "reality" being that which the historian chooses to give it in accord with his own sensibility and disposition. What the traditional historian sees as an event that actually occurred in the past, the postmodernist sees as a "text" that exists only in the present. And like any text, the historical event has to be parsed, glossed, construed, interpreted by the historian, much as a poem or novel is by the critic.

The resemblance between postmodernist history and postmodernist literary criticism extends to the fact that in both disciplines theory has become a calling in itself. Just as there are professors of literature who never engage in the actual interpretation of literary works—who even disdain interpretation as an inferior vocation—so there are professors of history who have never (at least to judge by their published work) done research in or written about an actual historical event or period. Their professional careers are devoted to theoretical speculation about the nature of history in general

and to the promotion of some particular methodology or ideology of history.

A traditional historian, who still believes in the distinction between the philosophy of history and the practice of history (and who suspects that most philosophers of history know more about philosophy than about history), is not surprised to find postmodernism dominating the pages of *History and Theory*. But when it appears in the *American Historical Review*, and not on the part of philosophers of history but of actual historians, even the most placid historian, unmoved by the winds of doctrine, can hardly fail to take notice. Thus an essay in a recent issue of the *Review* casually observes that "contemporary historians seldom believe anymore that they can or should try to capture 'the truth', but that this does not absolve them from passing judgment on their subjects." The author, Michael Kazin, concludes by citing the authority of an earlier president of the American Historical Association, Gordon Wright, who had given it as his credo that "our search for truth ought to be quite consciously suffused by a commitment to some deeply held humane values." The quotation actually speaks against Kazin, for it makes the closest connection between truth and humane values. But that was 1975, when it was still possible to speak respectfully of the "search for truth," and, indeed, to speak of truth without the ironic use of quotation marks.

The philosopher Richard Rorty recently reported, with unconcealed glee, that it is getting more and more difficult to find "a real live metaphysical prig" who believes in such outmoded ideas as "reality" and "truth." One can still find a good number of historians—"real live historical prigs"—who persist in believing in those ideas. But one can also find more and more historians today, and not only philosophers of history, who share Rorty's scorn for such priggish ideas.

The disdain for truth, not as an ultimate philosophical principle but as a practical, guiding rule of historical scholarship, was dramatically illustrated a few years ago by a controversy that erupted in the profession and was widely reported in the press. A book on the Weimar Republic by a young Princeton historian, David Abraham, was criticized by several eminent historians for being full of errors—misquotations, faulty citations, unwarranted deductions from the sources; whereupon an equally eminent group of historians rallied to the defense of the author in a symposium in the *Radical History Review*. The first line of defense was to impugn the political and personal motives of the critics: political, on the ground that the real objection to the book is not scholarly but ideological (the thesis of the book being Marxist or neo-Marxist); and personal, the older "establishment"

historians resenting the novice who presumes to infringe on their turf. The second line of defense was to belittle both the seriousness of the errors and the standards of scholarship that make so much of them. The mistakes are said to be innocent faults of transcription such as occur in any archival research. (It is not explained how it happens that most of them tend to support the contentious thesis.) Besides, the truth or falsity of specific quotations and assertions is of little moment; what matters is the plausibility of the thesis itself. An article by Thomas Bender, entitled "'Facts' and History," defines the "historical imagination" as a process of "imaginative creation," and warns young historians not to become "fact fetishists" like some of their benighted elders.

A truly creative exercise of the historical imagination is a recent book by the distinguished historian Simon Schama. Entitled, with conscious irony, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*, the book consists of two essays tenuously related to each other, each reinterpreting an episode in American history. The first, on General Wolfe, the commander of the British forces in North America in the Seven Years' War who died in the battle of Quebec, is meant to demythologize the conventional heroic account of his death and thus the "patriotic martyrology" traditionally associated with the "pieties of imperial history." The essay opens and closes with a memoir by a soldier present on that occasion, related in the first person and in the colloquial speech of the time, which presents a picture of Wolfe at his death that is less romantic and decidedly less heroic than the familiar one.

Only at the very end, in an "Afterword," is the reader told that the memoir and the soldier himself are entirely fictional. The essays, Schama then explains, are "historical novellas," rather than history proper, "works of the imagination, not scholarship," containing characters, scenes, and passages that are "pure inventions"—although based, he adds, on what the documents "suggest." Since this book, like Schama's earlier one on the French Revolution, is not burdened with footnotes, we have no way of knowing where the documents end and the inventions start. Indeed, it is not until this point, two hundred and fifty pages after the conclusion of the essay on Wolfe, that we discover that some of the most dramatic parts of the narrative, which carry the weight of his thesis and which have all the earmarks of authenticity, are completely fictional. (When this essay was published earlier in the English journal *Granta*, it was without the afterword and thus without any intimation that it was anything but conventional history.)

A similar caveat, this time in the introduction rather than afterword, appears in the much admired book *Black Odyssey*, by another eminent Harvard

professor, Nathan Huggins. The reader is forewarned that the style is "evocative and impressionistic" rather than "descriptive and analytical," and that the approach to the subject risks "some distortion." Instead of a conventional historical account of the African background, Huggins explains that he presents "a model, something of an archetype," not an actual village but an "ideal African social context." The reality, he admits, is far more diverse and complicated, the actual "African experience" covering two centuries and hundreds of peoples with widely differing political, social, economic, even sexual characteristics. That disclaimer, however, is soon forgotten as the reader is immersed in the dramatic (and surely idealized) portrait of a natural, stable, harmonious community that was to be violently destroyed by the slave trade. In the absence of footnotes (or such mundane facts as dates, statistics, or documents), and in the "evocative and impressionistic" style that Huggins aptly describes, the reader is apt to accept his claim that this "model" has an "essential validity," a psychological "truth," which transcends the historical reality. Even the professional historian, knowing that the "archetype" does not, in fact, correspond to the reality, is moved by that portrait. "There are more erudite illustrations of the slave trade than Huggins's," one reviewer observes, "but few which make the individual's predicament so palpable."

These examples have deliberately been chosen from highly respected historians who are not thought of, and do not think of themselves, as postmodernists. (Schama has explicitly dissociated himself from this school.) But they share a view of the historical enterprise that effectively deconstructs or "problematizes" history by obscuring the distinction between fact and fiction, thus creating what the postmodernist regards as a higher form of history, "historiographic metafiction."

Many historians who shy away from any suggestion of fictional or even "metafictional" history welcome the invitation to be "inventive," "imaginative," "creative"—words bandied about so frequently in the profession today that one almost does not notice them or consider their implication. Instead of "recreating" the past, historians are now told to "create" it; instead of "reconstructing" the past, to "construct" it. Where once we were exhorted to be accurate and rigorous, we are now urged to be imaginative and inventive. Where relativism was once taken to mean that we could only hope to attain probable, not absolute, truth, today it is taken as license for any possible or plausible interpretation. Formerly, when historians invoked the idea of imagination, they meant the exercise of imagination required to transcend the present and immerse oneself in the past. This was, as J. H.

Plumb noted, the genius of the great nineteenth-century historians: "Empathy, imagination, the attempt to place oneself in an historic situation and into an historic character without pre-judgment." For the postmodernist it means exactly the opposite: the imagination to create a past in the image of the present and in accord with the judgment of the historian.

Schama cites Macaulay's view of historical imagination to support his own excursions into fictional history. History, Macaulay writes, is a "debatable land" governed by two hostile powers: "Instead of being equally shared between its two rulers, the Reason and the Imagination, it falls alternately under the sole and absolute dominion of each. It is sometimes fiction. It is sometimes theory." But Schama does not quote the rest of this passage, in which Macaulay places significant limitations on the dominion of the imagination.

A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque. Yet he must control it so absolutely as to content himself with the materials which he finds, and to refrain from supplying deficiencies by additions of his own. He must be a profound and ingenious reasoner. Yet he must possess sufficient self-command to abstain from casting his facts in the mould of his hypothesis.

Nor does Schama quote another passage in the same essay describing the "art of historical narration" as the ability to affect the reader's imagination "without indulging in the license of invention"; nor, later still, Macaulay's comparison of the historian to the dramatist, "with one obvious distinction": "The dramatist creates: the historian only disposes."

It may be said that postmodernist history is of little importance in the profession at large, that it is confined to a self-described "vanguard" which has few disciples in theory and fewer still in practice. In sheer numbers, this may be the case, although it is difficult to make such a quantitative calculation. But the question of influence is not determined by numbers, as anyone who has followed the fortunes of Marxism in the academy and in the culture at large is acutely aware; Marxism in the thirties was far more influential than the number of avowed Marxists would suggest. And so it is with any intellectual or cultural movement. The word "vanguard" itself is deceptive. In its original military meaning, it referred to the advance troops of an army, and the efficacy of the vanguard was assumed to depend on the size and strength of the troops behind it. In its present sense, a vanguard may exist and thrive, and profoundly affect the

culture, without any army—with “fellow-travelers” in place of troops. It is a long time since anyone has been foolish enough to ask, “How many divisions has the Pope?”

Postmodernism is far less prevalent among historians than among literary critics, although even in history it exercises a disproportionate influence because it tends to attract a disproportionate number of the best and the brightest in the profession, especially in the younger generation. How can bright, ambitious young historians resist the new, especially when it has the sanction of some of their most prestigious elders and is already so well ensconced in the profession? And how can they resist the new when it carries with it not only the promise of advancement but the allure of creativity, imagination, inventiveness? And not only creativity but liberation from the tedium and rigor of the old “discipline” of history?

This last is a matter of more than passing importance, both in explaining the attraction of postmodernist history and its influence. In the old benighted days, an aspirant in the profession was required to go through the mandatory initiation rite known as “Historical Methodology.” That course, once the centerpiece of the graduate program, is now obsolete because the idea of any “methodology,” let alone a uniform, obligatory one, is regarded as arbitrary and oppressive. The absence of such a course, the lack of any training in what used to be confidently called the “canon of evidence”—even more, the disrespect for any such canon—is itself a fact of considerable importance in the training (or non-training) of young historians. It has even affected some older historians, including some traditional ones, who now feel sufficiently liberated to dispense with such impediments to creativity as footnotes. This methodological liberation has done more to transform the profession, making it less of a “discipline” and more of an impressionistic “art,” than any conscious conversion to postmodernism. It may, indeed, prove to be the decisive victory of postmodernism.

Finally, there are the politically liberating aspects of postmodernism that make it so seductive. Some Marxists, neo-Marxists, and old-fashioned radicals are suspicious of postmodernism as apolitical, passive, and thus essentially conservative. Jürgen Habermas is not alone in characterizing Foucault as “neoconservative” because his “theoretical gestures” offer no positive alternative to capitalism. “Since it commits you to affirming nothing,” Terry Eagleton says of postmodernism, “it is as injurious as blank ammunition.” But he goes on to exempt some leading postmodernists from that stricture, including Derrida himself. “Derrida is clearly out to do more than develop new techniques of reading: deconstruction is for

him an ultimately *political* practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force.” Similarly, Foucault, in spite of his own criticisms of Marxism, is said by one of his admirers to be “continuing the work of the Western Marxists by other means.” Other commentators see postmodernism as peculiarly congenial to the newer forms of radicalism. Peter Stearns, editor of the *Journal of Social History*, notes the connection between postmodernism and the “currently fashionable protest ideologies of the academic world”—anti-racism, anti-sexism, environmentalism. “Postmodernists,” he observes, “are clearly spurred by a desire to find new intellectual bases for radicalism, given the troubles of liberalism and socialism.”

The radicalism of postmodernism is, in fact, far more radical than either Marxism or the new modish ideologies, both of which share a commitment to Enlightenment principles and discourse, appealing to reason, truth, justice, morality, reality. Postmodernism repudiates both the values and the rhetoric of the Enlightenment—that is, of modernity. In rejecting the “discipline” of knowledge and rationality, postmodernism also rejects the “discipline” of society and authority. And in denying any reality apart from language, it subverts the structure of society together with the structure of language. The principle of indeterminacy is an invitation to creation *ex nihilo*. It presents the historian with a *tabula rasa* on which he may inscribe whatever he chooses, including the most deterministic of theories. This is why the indeterminacy of postmodernism lends itself to the determinacy of the race/class/gender trinity. By deconstructing the “text” of the past, new histories can be created in accord with the race/class/gender dispositions of their creators.

The political potential of postmodernism has been seized most enthusiastically and imaginatively by feminist historians, who find the old Marxism and even some forms of the new radicalism unresponsive to their concerns. It is no accident that some of the leading postmodernists in America today are feminists, and that postmodernism figures so prominently in feminist literature. Joan Wallach Scott explains the political relationship between the two:

A more radical feminist politics (and a more radical feminist history) seems to me to require a more radical epistemology. Precisely because it addresses questions of epistemology, relativizes the status of all knowledge, links knowledge and power, and theorizes these in terms of the operations of difference, I think poststructuralism (or at least some of the

approaches generally associated with Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) can offer feminism a powerful analytic perspective.

Feminist history is profoundly subversive not only of traditional history but of earlier varieties of women's history. It belittles the kind of women's history that focuses on the experiences of women in particular events or periods. It even repudiates the "mainstreaming" of women's history into general history—the "add-women-and-stir" recipe, as it is now scornfully called. The new feminist history, unlike the old women's history, demands that all of history be rewritten from a "consciously feminist stance," a "feminist perspective"—the perspective of the feminist historian rather than of the women who are the ostensible subjects of history. It is because of this ambitious goal that feminist history requires, as Scott says, a "radical epistemology" that defines all of history as essentially, irredeemably political. If conventional history is an instrument of patriarchal power, feminist history, by the same token, must be an instrument for feminist power.

Some feminists have been remarkably candid in describing their intentions and practices. "We are all engaged in writing a kind of propaganda," Ellen Somekawa and Elizabeth A. Smith explain in a recent essay. "Our stories are inspired by what could be called a worldview, but what we would call politics." Since there is no objective basis for one story rather than another, the only grounds for judging one better than another are "its persuasiveness, its political utility, and its political sincerity." This presents feminists with something of a dilemma, for political expediency might be best served by concealing or denying the theory upon which their history is based. Any history that "problematize[s] the past, reality, and the truth" makes for difficult reading and therefore reduces its effectiveness; moreover, it might be more compelling if it assumes the "mantle of objectivity" and "mythologizes" its own story by presenting it as true. Somekawa and Smith sympathize with those who resort to this stratagem, but they themselves resist it. A truly radical history, they insist, requires nothing less than a totally demythologized history.

Thus it is that the "poetics" of history becomes the "politics" of history. Postmodernism, even more overtly than Marxism, makes of history—the writing of history—an instrument in the struggle for power. If nothing is true and everything is rhetorical, and rhetoric itself reflects the structure of power, then the historian, like the proletariat of old, is the permanent bearer of the "class" war.

What is sauce for the goose. . . . If the feminist historian can and should write history from her perspective and for her political purpose, why

should the black historian not do the same—even if such a history might "marginalize" women? And why not the working-class historian, who might marginalize both women and blacks? (Feminist historians have criticized E. P. Thompson and other social historians on just this ground.) And why not the homosexual historian, who might marginalize heterosexuals? For that matter, why not the traditional dead-white-male (or even live-white-male) historian, who might marginalize (who has been accused of marginalizing) all other species?

If "Everyman his own historian" must now be rendered "Everyman/woman his/her own historian"—or, as some feminists would have it, "Everywomyn her own herstorian"—why not "Every Black/White/Hispanic/Asian/Native American. . ."? Or "Every Christian/Jew/Catholic/Protestant/Muslim/Hindu/secularist/atheist. . ."? Or "Every heterosexual/homosexual/bisexual/androgynous/polymorphous/misogamous/misogynous. . ."? And so on, through all the ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, national, ideological, and other characteristics that distinguish people? This sounds like a *reductio ad absurdum*, but it is little more than is already being affirmed in the name of "multiculturalism."

Multiculturalism has the obvious effect of politicizing history. But its more pernicious effect is to demean and dehumanize the subjects of history. To deny the generic "man" is to deny the common humanity of both sexes—and, by implication, the common humanity of all racial, social, religious, and ethnic groups. It is also to deny the common history they were once presumed to share. Traditional historians, even many radical historians, are troubled by the prospect of a history so pluralized and fragmented that it lacks all coherence and focus, all sense of continuity, indeed, all meaning.

From a postmodernist perspective, this is all to the good, for it destroys the "totalizing," "universalizing," "logocentric," "phallogocentric" history that is said to be the great evil of modernity. Postmodernism proposes instead to privilege "aporia"—difference, discontinuity, disparity, contradiction, discord, indeterminacy, ambiguity, irony, paradox, perversity, opacity, obscurity, chaos. "We require a history," Hayden White explains, "that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot." The modernist accuses the postmodernist of bringing us to the abyss of nihilism. The postmodernist proudly, happily accepts that charge. Paul de Man has been described by his admirers as "the only man who ever looked into the abyss and came away smiling." In view of the recent revelations about de Man's early Nazi and anti-Semitic writings, this is a chilling tribute.

What is the future of postmodernism? Is it just another of those intellectual fashions that periodically seize the imagination of a bored and fickle academia? Whatever happened to existentialism? In France, the source of most of these fashions, deconstruction is already passé. Can it much longer survive here? Given the volatility of intellectual and academic life, it is hard not to anticipate a post-postmodernism. The question is, what form will that take?

In history, as in literature and philosophy, there may well be—there almost certainly will be—a disaffection with postmodernism, if only because the appeal of novelty will wear off. The “herd of independent minds,” in Harold Rosenberg’s brilliant phrase, will find some other brave, new cause to rally around. Out of boredom, careerism (the search for ways to distinguish and thus advance oneself in the profession), and sheer bloody-mindedness (the desire to *épater* one’s elders), the young will rebel, and the vanguard of today will find itself an aging rearguard—much as the “new history” of an earlier generation (social history) has been displaced by this newer history. What is not at all clear, however, is the nature of the rebellion—whether it will be a counterrevolution leading to a restoration (or partial restoration) of an older mode of history, or whether it will usher in a still newer mode, the configuration of which we cannot begin to imagine.

One might think that a counterrevolution is already under way in the form of the “New Historicism,” the latest version of Marxism. But while some of the members of this school (Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton, most notably) criticize postmodernism for being insufficiently revolutionary and overly esthetic, they are also attracted to those aspects of it that are truly subversive. Thus Eagleton praises feminist postmodernism not only for insisting that women have equal power and status with men, but for questioning the legitimacy of *all* power and status. “It is not that the world will be better off with more female participation in it; it is that without the ‘feminization’ of human history, the world is unlikely to survive.” In the common cause of radicalism, structuralists and poststructuralists, new historicists and feminists, have been able to overlook whatever logical incompatibilities there may be in their theories. (This presents no great problem for deconstructionists, who have an infinite tolerance for contradiction and a great contempt for “linear” logic.) Like the communists and socialists of an earlier generation, they have formed a “popular front,” marching separately to a common goal. Thus the new historicism, so far from presenting a clear, unambiguous alternative to postmodernism, has become an ally of it, if a somewhat uneasy one.

It is a cliché that no counterrevolution is ever quite that, that the *status quo ante* is never fully restored. In the case of history, what will stand in the way of a full restoration of traditional history is not, as one might think, ideology; one can foresee a desire to return to a more objective and integrated, less divisive and self-interested history. What will be more difficult to restore is the methodology that is at the heart of that history. A generation of historians (by now, several generations as these are reckoned in academia) lack any training in that methodology. They may even lack the discipline—moral as well as professional—required for it. Eagleton speaks of the “laid-back” style of postmodernism. It is “laid-back,” however, not in the sense of being casual, colloquial, commonsensical—on the contrary, it is contrived, abstruse, recondite—but in the sense of ignoring, even deliberately violating, the conventions of logic, consistency, evidence, and documentation. The postmodernist argument is that these are the “totalizing” practices of a totalitarian discipline. But they are also the hard practices of a difficult discipline. Gresham’s law governs history as surely as economics: bad habits drive out good, easy methods drive out hard ones. And there is no doubt that the old history, traditional history, is hard.

Hard—but exciting precisely because it is hard. And that excitement may inspire a new generation of historians. It is more exciting to write true history (or as true as we can make it) than fictional history, else historians would choose to be novelists rather than historians; more exciting to try to rise above our interests and prejudices than to indulge them; more exciting to try to enter the imagination of those remote from us in time and place than to impose our imagination upon them; more exciting to write a coherent narrative while respecting the complexity of historical events than to fragmentize history into disconnected units; more exciting to try to get the facts (without benefit of quotation marks) as right as we can than to deny the very idea of facts; even more exciting to get the footnotes right, if only to show others the visible proof of our labors.

The political theorist William Dunning said that one of the happiest days of his life was when he discovered, by a comparison of handwriting, that Andrew Jackson’s first message to Congress was actually drafted by George Bancroft. “I don’t believe,” he wrote to his wife, “you can form any idea of the pleasure it gives me to have discovered this little historical fact.” Every historian has had this experience—the pleasure of discovering a fact that may appear in the published work in a subordinate clause or footnote, but that, however trivial in itself, validates the entire enterprise, because it is not only new but also true. The postmodernist historian can never have that satisfaction.

Postmodernism entices us with the siren call of liberation and creativity, but it may be an invitation to intellectual and moral suicide. Foucault has hailed the “death of humanist man,” and friends and critics agree that postmodernism is anti-humanistic. By the same token, it is profoundly antihistorical. Hayden White commends the great historians who “interpreted the burden of the historian as a moral charge to free men from the burden of history.” One may think it bizarre to include, as he does, Tocqueville in that company, but one cannot doubt that that is indeed the aim

of postmodernism. To free men from the “burden” of history is to free them from the burden of humanity. Liberationist history, like liberationist theology, is not a new and higher form of the discipline; it is the negation of the discipline.

If we have survived the “death of God” and the “death of man,” we will surely survive the “death of history”—and of truth, reason, morality, society, reality, and all the other verities we used to take for granted and that have now been “problematized.” We will even survive the death of postmodernism.⁷¹

The Grand Canyon

From the eastern rim Jorgé throws a rock into the deep and we hear nothing in return. An American lady says as she walks away that it's a nice place to visit and her voice trails off. And “breathtaking” says someone else we'll never get to know.

The Japanese teenagers stare solemnly down while the people from France speak in interested tones as they point toward the west then north, south. Our leaders are not here. We are ungoverned, listening, needlessly, for the lost rock.

And I think of the old woman who told me she could never see the joy in staring into this large hole in the earth. “Give me a casino,” she affirmed that day, “where losses and wins are strictly defined, where my feet are secure and chance answers back as clear as a bell.”

Jorgé puts a quarter into the viewer, moves it every which way. The old woman is dead and he is fourteen, seeing a country that's not quite his, living as if the world were all Guadalajara, where he was born, trusting, like home, this lovely and foreign edge.

Barbara Wuest

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES Nov. 5, 1992

Campaign Coverage Wasn't Evenhanded



Dennis Byrne

Now that the election is over, I hope it's possible to say, without being labeled a GOP stooge, that the media's campaign coverage was unfair.

All in all, the press covered Republicans as if they were strangers who had soiled the living room rug. That view will be discounted as sour grapes, but as someone who has

voted for the Democrat in every presidential election except one since 1964 and who has been in the news business since 1965, I think I can tell when the Republicans have been jobbed.

Just a few of the many examples:

- NBC's "Today" show last Saturday conducted an in-depth interview of an expert who threw dirt on President Bush's late surge in the polls. Turns out the "expert" was a Democratic pollster; no GOP expert was interviewed.

- Last week, the "Today" show bombarded the Republican with embarrassing questions about things like Irangate. When a Democrat came on, Bryant Gumbel put on his most serious face, fixed the candidate with his toughest glare and pitched this softball: Why are the cities being ignored? Considering Bush's systematic neglect of the cities, the Democrats themselves couldn't have crafted an easier question.

- "CBS Sunday Morning" last weekend devoted its lead story to whether Bill Clinton's "New Democrat" strategy would work. Interviewing a string of Clinton workers and supporters, and no Republican "experts," guess what the conclusion was?

The problem was also local. Carol Moseley Braun's Senate campaign was as content-starved and barren of issues as Bush's, but you weren't told about it because adoring reporters were too busy writing about her "charm" while sharing the joys of her victory lap. (The notable exceptions, such as the balanced coverage by Sun-Times political columnist Steve Neal and WMAQ-Channel 5's expose of Braun's slippery ethics, prove the rule.)

Meanwhile, the righteous Tribune added to her bandwagon by running polls conducted by an outfit that often works for local, and mostly Democratic, candidates. It's the sort of thing generally ignored by the groveling Tribune and Democratic partisan who is the town's only, yet inconse-

quential, media critic.

I don't buy the screwy idea that the media stole the election; Bush capably lost it all by himself. Nor is the problem the fact that liberals outnumber conservatives in the nation's newsrooms. (Newsmen who deny this imbalance are pulling your leg.)

No, the problem is the growing notion (as I heard it expressed recently by a news executive) that objectivity is impossible in this business. True, everyone has biases, formed by a lifetime of circumstance. But what is supposed to make this business a profession is the effort to present information undistorted by prejudice or ideology. Sadly, newsmen who feel that way increasingly are being replaced by those who believe that it's their job not so much to provide information, as to make a case.

The republic will survive this media conceit by increasingly eliminating the media middle men, as Ross Perot did. True, candidates will become better liars if they're not questioned by knowledgeable and skillful journalists. But it's a price the public seems increasingly willing to pay to escape the witless biases of agenda journalists.

Dennis Byrne is a member of the Chicago Sun-Times editorial board.

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
Nov. 4, 1992

NEWSMAKERS

Spike's AIDS theory

Here's filmmaker Spike Lee's theory about AIDS: He says it's a government plot targeted at gays, blacks and Hispanics that went out of control. "I'm convinced AIDS is a government-engineered disease. They got one thing wrong, they never realized it couldn't just be contained to the groups it was intended to wipe out. So, now it's a national priority. Exactly like drugs became when they escaped the urban centers into white suburbia," he wrote in a long advertisement for Benetton that appears in the Nov. 12 issue of Rolling Stone.

Tumor was cancerous

A tumor removed from actress Audrey Hepburn's colon was found to be cancerous, a Los Angeles hospital spokesman said Tuesday. Doctors at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, calling it a "low-grade malignancy," were confident they removed the entire tumor before it affected any of the 63-year-old actress' organs.

Leno can relax now

Contrary to a report in the Nov. 8 New Yorker, "Tonight Show" host Jay Leno will not be replaced by "Late Night's" David Letterman if Leno's ratings slip during this month's sweeps, NBC said. "We have a long-term commitment to Jay," said NBC spokesman Curt Block. "This is a marathon, not a sprint. Jay's getting good ratings against strong competition." Translated: ABC's brainy "Nightline" has better ratings, but that's apparently OK with NBC.

Chicago Tribune wires

NEWSMAKERS

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
AUG. 27, 1992

as their plan for creating jobs in Texas."

Spike Lee sticks to his guns

Spike Lee has called on blacks to forgo work and school to attend the Nov. 20 opening of "Malcolm X," his new film. "We're telling them they've got to turn out to support this film and support Malcolm," the black director said in Wednesday's Los Angeles Times. Lee has refused to shorten the film, which runs about three hours, and said he won't change an opening title sequence featuring a burning American flag that becomes the shape of an X. He also said he won't edit out footage of the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers. "It's not Hollywood,

this ain't Walt Disney," Lee said. "This is about the state of race relations in the world."

High spires, golden arches

Visitors touring Salisbury Cathedral in England this month and next will receive a scroll imprinted with historical notes about the building, bound with tape that serves as a voucher for a two-for-one deal on Big Mac or McChicken sandwiches. The cathedral will share the profits. "If we have to indulge in a bit of honest commerce to make ends meet," a church official told Newsweek, "then I say amen to that."

From Chicago Tribune wires

Ministry of Constitutional Development
and of Communication



Ministerie van Staatkundige Ontwikkeling
en van Kommunikasie

Verwysing:
Reference: 3-A5/5/1

Privaatsak
Private Bag X802
PRETORIA
0001

Tel: 012-341 1380

1992-10-20

Mr Michael Flanagan
3629 N. Christiana
Chicago, IL 60618

Dear Sir

"CAN AMERICA AVOID SOCIAL CATASTROPHE"

By direction of mr R P Meyer, Minister of Constitutional Development and of Communication, I acknowledge with thanks receipt of your above-mentioned articles.

Best regards.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "H. v. d. Westhuizen".

H VAN DER WESTHUIZEN
ADMINISTRATIVE SECRETARY

en/40