

## AMERICAN VIEWS OF THE PAST

Mostly, the past has been for men a strange country. Remote and inaccessible, its existence is accepted but not important. Known through the curious tales of occasional observers, it is meaningful only to the extent that it affords those who regard it reflected images of their own society.

The first Americans were little occupied with the past. Although they read history, and wrote it, it was the history of their own times; the term in the seventeenth century referred more often to contemporaneous events than to those that had receded out of the memory of living men. Indeed, in a universe in which divine Providence interceded directly in the affairs of men, there was little purpose to the quest for antecedents; behind every action was the same ultimate cause.

In the eighteenth century however, the past, as an unbroken sequence of steps toward the present, emerged with growing clarity in the consciousness of Americans. The general historicism of the era was influential on this side of the Atlantic as in Europe. As the universe fell into a natural order, it was a matter of course to regard the present as the product of a

chain of antecedent events, each link of which was worthy, not merely of curious attention, but of serious study and understanding.

In the United States, the Revolution and the romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century magnified the importance of the past in the views of the citizens of the new republic, anxious to establish their identity as a nation. If history was, or appeared to be, increasingly serviceable also as a tool of analysis in theology and in social science, that simply added practical weight to interests already lively.

By the last quarter of the century, concern with comprehension of the past was evident in the widespread popularity of historical writing, in the flourishing societies dedicated to its study, and by its prominent place in education. Most strikingly, Americans displayed that concern in connexion with the succession of great centennial celebrations between 1876 and 1904, which offered them the opportunity for recollection.

The publications and the orations these festivities touched off expressed what amounted to an official creed, which evoked universal public assent. These commemorations indicated that Americans had, by then, clearly established a meaning, directly relevant to their own situation, for all that had gone before in their history.

Yet the tumult of the expositions, the resounding periods of the orators, could not altogether still the doubts that troubled a few Americans examining the meaning of their past. The hesitations were, at first, not openly expressed; they emerged in these years, as qualifications of, or reservations to, the generally accepted propositions. Not until the very end of the century were the dissenting views forthrightly published. After 1900 they received wider currency, but even then never displaced the older conception. Yet the wedges of doubt are significant revelations of deep changes in American evaluations of their country and their culture.

This paper will outline briefly the underlying assumptions about the past that ran through the popular habits of thought in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the official creed, as it were. It will then indicate the nature of some changes in the views of the past in the half century that followed. The contrast may illuminate a significant aspect of American intellectual history.

The past, by 1875, had acquired the attributes of continuity and regularity. It proceeded in a chain of natural causes and effects, not subject to interruption or caprice. Any given moment in time was inextricably linked to all that had gone before; and each day was the product of its antecedents. Bancroft still found God 'visible in History'; but his Deity

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acted through the steady unfolding of a plan rather than through unpredictable interruptions of the natural order.

The plan was progress. Americans confidently believed that history was the record of man's improvement which would continue indefinitely into the future. From this belief there followed necessarily a negative judgment of the past, which was invariably inferior to the present. Adjectives that connoted age had a clearly unfavourable implication. By contrast, terms of recency and youth were in themselves favourable; and what was progressive was self-evidently desirable.

Yet, the past was not wholly a record of error and ignorance. It was also the future in process and contained within itself the origins of what was to come. It was possible, looking backward, to observe great achievements, landmarks on the path of human progress. Now and then men and institutions had torn themselves out of their context and had thrust themselves forward toward the present. The men and the institutions of the present had therefore a particular affinity to those of their antecedents which had thus narrowed the gap between past and future. Many Americans, for instance, found it possible to recognise as their ancestors Elizabethan Englishmen, but not those of the fifteenth century, for Protestantism was counted one such forward-looking achievement.

Looking backward at such events, Americans could make out another significant aspect of the past. For the past itself justified the changes of the present. Revolutionary change was inherent in the processes of progress; and the heroic incidents of the past, related to those processes, themselves confirmed the validity of further changes. Although, therefore, the past in general was inferior to the present, those features of what had gone before that were related to change were worthy of admiration and emulation.

Americans considered the incidence of such exceptional individuals and events particularly high in their own past. Their whole history was exceptional. It was the virtue of the New World to have been ever new, to have stood always in advance of the rest of the globe. American history, as the idealistic historians from Bancroft to Parkman to Rhodes had described it, was inherently progressive. It put in proper perspective the great transformations that Americans of the day hoped to see in their own society. By the same token, the virtue of the Founding Fathers was in part responsible for the excellence of their descendants.

But the American past was not the exclusive heritage of those descendants. Precisely because of its mission of universal enlightenment, what had

happened in the United States was relevant to the future history of all the peoples of the world. In 1900 it still made sense to proclaim, as Paine once had, that the cause of America was the cause of all mankind.

The multitudes who had actually migrated to the New World certainly had a stake in its past. It was true, the bulk of American immigrants were peasants, pessimistic in their own view of life and alien to the very idea of progress. It was true, almost all the newcomers lacked any historical consciousness whatsoever. Peasant memories rarely ran back beyond the recollections of living men; and even such people as the Jews, who were aware of a distinctive past, had no sense of chronology or of orderly historical development. The past the immigrants had left was a *mélange* of recent events, of mythical heroes, and of a by-gone golden age, inextricably confused. With that past they had broken in the very act of coming to the United States. Once here, however, they had an immediate portion in the American past; it was for them too that independence was proclaimed, that Washington stood at Valley Forge. And even the Negroes found the American past meaningful in terms of their hopes for the future, although with more difficulty, since they suffered in a discriminatory present.

The belief that history was the record of man's progress, past to present, the belief that the great events of the past were acts of liberation, and the belief that the United States had a mission of universal import survived beyond the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But while these notions were being proclaimed in Philadelphia and Chicago and St. Louis, subtle changes in attitude were in preparation that would give them a radically new context.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century Americans were increasingly sensitive to the obligation of subjecting their views of the past to the verification of science. Earlier writers had of course known the need of conscientious scrutiny of evidence. But they had generally approached the task with the faith that the truth was already known to them. The factual detail was malleable in their hands because its function was primarily that of illustrating the larger truth. It was perfectly logical from this point of view to omit or alter details in the interests of that larger truth.

The scientific historians, particularly those in the universities after 1900, enshrined the rules of evidence in a professional canon. These writers had their leading assumptions too, as we have repeatedly been told. But in their eyes, the fact was absolutely intractable; in any encounter, the general idea or ideal had to yield to the specific detail. Often this entailed

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substantial revisions of the accepted version of the American past. So the academic historians rewrote the story of the American revolution and of the Puritan settlement and drew the portraits of the leading characters in terms much less flattering than earlier.

Such revisions undermined the confidence of some Americans in the exceptional nature of their own development. The newer historians emphasised in the American past the identical forces, often material forces, that seemed to have operated elsewhere. Mostly the scientific historians proceeded on the assumption that history was the product of general laws to which nations and individuals alike were subject; and indeed, in the effort to endow their discipline with scientific attributes, some were tempted to seek general laws of historical development either through analogy with the physical sciences or by deduction from the principles expounded in the sciences of man and of society.

The notion that physics or chemistry might supply a precise model for history was attractive but difficult to work out, although Brooks and Henry Adams persistently speculated on the possibility. Sociology was hardly more stimulating; the science of society supplied some helpful concepts, but in the United States it was predominantly a practical science and unhistorical in orientation.

Anthropology furnished the most interesting clues toward a scientific understanding of the past. The science of man was, as a matter of course, preoccupied with theories of human development. Through most of the beginning of the twentieth century, widely read European and American anthropologists had devoted themselves to schemes for classifying the various species of man, for defining the human races. Influenced by the geneticists, they were disposed to believe that heredity was binding in the transmission of social characteristics and that racial qualities, passing from generation to generation, determined the course of human history. A good deal of effort went into the investigation of racial strains and into assessment of their historical import. The influence of anthropological ideas penetrated the writings of many historians, as long debates over the germ theory and over the Teutonic quality of American civilisation testified.

I have no wish to exaggerate the influence of the historians as a group. Their writings were effective to the extent that they conformed to the more general direction of scientific influences on American thought and on American views of the past. Among intellectuals, the conflict over evolution had just drawn to a close. Already battered by the older biblical criticism, by the revelations of geology and astronomy, and by Darwinism,

educated men had by now surrendered the literal biblical account of creation and of human history. They had come to accept the long time span in which the earth had existed without man; they had learned to recognise that man's life on earth was well over six thousand years old, and they were no longer surprised at the suggestion of man's affinity to, or descent from, some other primate. Many had, indeed, adjusted their own faith in progress to these evolutionary concepts in the Spencerian or some other fashion.

But at the end of the nineteenth century these concepts were only just beginning to penetrate popular consciousness. The enormous esteem in which science was held, on account of its practical, pragmatically tested achievements, lent credibility to these ideas. Yet, to accept them involved a painful and reluctant surrender of long-held explanations of man's place in the Universe. The response was sometimes one of complete credulity; the lost continent of Atlantis, life on Mars and in the bowels of the earth, the New Science, made as much sense to the readers of Sunday supplements and the popular magazines as the paleolithic era or the lost civilisation of Minoa. Or the response could be one of shock and indignant rejection. Henry Ford declared history was the bunk because it diminished the grandeur of the past he was coming to venerate. In the same way, Bill Thompson and his followers refused categorically to accept the degradation of the heroic men and events of American history. And the Scopes trial was a confused and inchoate protest against a science which seemed to denigrate the dignity of man by making less of his past. Stubborn fundamentalism was a momentary refuge. But all the evidence was on the side of science; and the evolutionary concepts won their way into popular thought, just as the new history conquered the text-books of the 1920's.

Whatever its particular manifestations, science had a restrictive effect upon American views of the past. By defining the past in terms of general laws, those who applied science to history reduced the role of the individual and minimised his part in shaping the past. At the same time, science in the various forms of its application brought into question the idea of progress as a valid description of the historical process. Henry and Brooks Adams and others took an explicitly pessimistic position. More generally, the emphasis on objectivity and impersonality, encouraged by these attitudes, implicitly denied the possibility of judgments about the values of the present and the future and therefore destroyed the possibility of judgment about the direction of the developments of the past.

Perhaps Americans, or some groups among them, acquiesced in the

limited view of the past that science permitted them because their own lives no longer enjoyed the inner certainty of complete continuity between past and present. While the accepted creed of progress still dominated men's thought everywhere, it is possible, by the turn of the century, to discern incongruous ideas juxtaposed with it.

The local colour literature of the last decades of the nineteenth century had made popular a style of nostalgic reminiscence about the past. In novels, short stories, and poetry a generation of writers had celebrated the peculiar characteristics of places that had once been good and beautiful but that were now fading into a gloomy decline. In its point of view, this whole genre was unoptimistic. It extolled the virtues of the past and decried the evils of the present. Therefore it denied progress.

These writings were particularly the products of New England and of the Old South. It was understandable enough why Yankees should view their past darkly under the reflected shadows of the present. The Civil War had sapped the best energies of the section; its people knew they were declining in importance even at home; and the whole region steadily lost national influence. The more sensitive New Englanders felt themselves outdistanced by vigorous competitors elsewhere and blamed their own loss of vitality upon changes in the composition of the region; the original sturdy farming stock had given way to a degenerate foreign population, crowded into great cities and divorced by heredity and environment from the sources of the section's strength.

In the South the men who had passed through the harsh ordeals of the Civil War and of Reconstruction also looked back nostalgically to a by-gone happy era. Idealising plantation society, they were inclined to ascribe to it all the virtues of which their own lives were deficient. The chivalry, the honour, and the gracious living so conspicuously absent in the present, they painted prominently into their picture of the past; and like the New Englanders, the Southerners indulged themselves in reminiscences of a golden age.

In both sections the developments of these attitudes had characteristic consequences. There was a strong emphasis on the necessity for maintaining the old virtues through strict family life and through traditional religious observances. There was also strong pride of ancestry; Yankees and Southerners were much concerned with the role of their forefathers in the making of the nation. In both sections heredity was exceedingly important; marriage, family life, access to voluntary societies, and other social activities revolved about it. In both sections there was a consciousness

that historical development had proceeded desirably until some defined date, at which the past had taken a sudden reversal, and after which a decline had set in.

Strains of this thinking penetrated literature that the whole nation read in the early twentieth century. So it was often newness that was the villain—the incoming industrialist who disrupted the old way of life of the New England village, or the carpet-bagging merchant in the southern county, or the banker or railroad-builder in the western prairies. By contrast the primitive husbandmen, the simple fishermen, the cowboys, the planters, were the heroes.

In these attitudes two momentous assumptions were involved. First, progress no longer was a continuous process, but rather one that proceeded to some cut-off point; thereafter the appearance of progress was delusive and concealed a host of hidden evils. Secondly, as a practical matter, an ancestry that antedated the cut-off point was a legitimate test of social desirability, of the extent to which any people really belonged in America.

As these ideas gained currency they affected profoundly the elements of the population that had had no such ancestry. The open quality of the American view of the past had until then given immigrants and Negroes a stake in it. The shift of the terms in which that past was described to an exclusive hereditary basis posed the question of whether such people could properly share in it; and that question obliged all those 'outsiders' to justify their role in American history as in American life. There followed the long fruitless arguments over the nationality and religion of Columbus. Or, was it actually Columbus who was the first discoverer and not a Norseman or an Irishman or a Pole? There were zealous searchings of colonial records for hints of the saving presence of some forerunner of each American group. There were bitter disputes as to the identity of the Scotch-Irish and as to the role of various folk in the successive American wars.

Behind all this searching of the past was the eagerness to find a place in advance of the cut-off point, to establish oneself in the United States before the abrupt change that altered its history. The quest emphasised more than ever the importance of the turning point; and it suggests the utility of further inquiry into the nature of the concept itself.

It will not be fruitful to pass judgment on the particular dates men selected. Henry Adams went back to the thirteenth century for his decisive change. His more perspicacious brother, Charles Francis, writing about



Quincy, fixed on 1825 when the railroad appeared. Others of their contemporaries hit on the Civil War. But the year selected is less important than the fact that so many of these people were making a selection.

They were doing so because, in these fitful decades, Americans had frequently had the opportunity to wonder whether human history was not open to abrupt turnings. The depressions of 1893 and 1907 had each evoked widespread fears that all American history to that point had come to an end, and that a new era was about to begin. Strikes, from the Pullman strike to the coal strike to the steel strike, produced similar predictions. Through much of the thinking about the end of the frontier and through much of the argument about conservation ran the same frightening thoughts.

Sometimes, it was true, these speculations located the cut-off point in the future rather than in the past or present. The widespread popularity of apocalyptic literature in the opening years of the century was symptomatic. Stories about the ruin of old civilisations or about the forthcoming end of the world appeared frequently in the popular magazines and on the shelves of the booksellers. These stories occasionally took a scientific form, or they might be didactic in purpose as in the novels of Jack London. But their central incident was a cataclysm, a violent terminus to the peaceful historical process.

Against this background, the new cyclical theories of historical development are understandable. Already Brooks Adams's *Law of Civilisation and Decay* had analysed the rise and fall of cultures in terms of a combination of economic and racial factors, to arrive at the discouraging conclusion that the disintegration of American power was approaching. Just before the World War, the distinguished anthropologist Madison Grant, in a widely read book, *The Passing of the Great Race*, saw in history the elaboration of primal racial forces and lamented that the American branch of the Aryan race had already passed its zenith. Shortly after the war, Spengler's dismal predictions reached the United States; and the second post-war period found Toynbee a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection. None of these works influenced the writing of history. Nor were they read as history; those who turned to them sought a foretaste of disaster rather than information about, or understanding of, any aspect of the past. The significance of the vogue of these books lay in the expression they gave to fears already current; they clothed the general dread of some apocalyptic calamity in the garb of scientific history.

In this perspective, the First World War and the disasters that followed

—depression, war again, and the atom bomb—were items in a familiar series. Each brought home to widening circles the possibility of some imminent turning point at which their future course would take a perilously new direction. And just as earlier the certainty of future progress had been associated in men's minds with the view of a past that was progress, so now, increasingly, the fears of some menacing discontinuity in the future was associated with the view of a past that contained within it some abrupt and decisive turning point.

By the side of the old conception of the past as continuous progress, led by the New World, there had emerged, in the half century after 1875, the new and contradictory attitude toward history as the product of rigid rules subject to uncontrollable turnings. The new view did not crowd out the old. Indeed men often incongruously joined strains of both—in New Deal thinking, for instance. But the very co-existence was a change. This was a sign that some of the certainty of spirit that had animated Americans through the nineteenth century had disappeared. If there were alternative modes regarding the past, that was an indication of uncertainty in the view of the future.