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Ancients and Moderns

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THE BATTLE between narrative history and social scientific history, which has broken out again in the pages of the *American Historical Review*, is a new battle of ancients and moderns. Like many battles of the books, it is deeply foolish and tends to bring the reading of books into disrepute.

It is the old battle of the sciences against art, poetry, and the humanities, refought in history as analysis against narrative, model against story, number against word. The official battle was joined in the seventeenth century. Plato banished poets from the Republic, of course, but his notion that science and poetry are adversaries was not taken up in the ancient world. Plato himself wrote poetic prose, Lucretius a few centuries later presented an atomistic physics in poetry, and down to Galileo and beyond the dialogue served science as much as it served comedy and tragedy.

T. S. Eliot (1960) invented a phrase to describe what happened in the seventeenth century: "dissociation of sensibilities."¹ What he meant was that poets and other folk, browbeaten by the New Scientists, started to think of science and poetry as alternative means for sensing (and for sensing different things), not any

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longer as complements together *making* sense of one world. The scientific and poetic sensibilities were dissociated, never to rejoin.

Before the New Scientists, Eliot noted, Shakespeare, Jonson, Marvell, Herbert, and Eliot's own beloved John Donne used science as material for their poetry and did not think they were blurring genres in doing so. Donne's "Song" argues from experiment—

Ride ten thousand days and nights . . . And swear
No where
Lives a woman true and fair

—and ends with what an econometrician would call a low assessment of prior probabilities:

If thou find'st one, let me know;
Such a pilgrimage were sweet
Yet do not; I would not go,
Though at next door we might meet.

. . .
she
Will be
False, ere I come, to two or three.

Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" is the type of scientific poem, even of economic science: Had we but world enough and time I could court you, Lady, to satiation. But time is scarce, and life especially. The rate at which one should discount a distant pleasure is therefore positive and high. The optimal consumption plan, therefore, is to sport us while we may.

Compared to these Tudor and metaphysical men, the New Scientists of the seventeenth century were altogether grimmer, inventing the scientific paper and enforcing a mass amnesia of the earlier forms. Poetry, rhetoric, casuistry were to be forgotten in science, put away with old Aristotle and other childish toys. In this fashion the New Scientists disabled the West for three centuries in the making of moral and even of many scientific arguments. Since Descartes our epistemology has started from the strange proposition that fact and value are to be argued in radically different ways, the one by compelling demonstration and the other by angry assertion and counterassertion.

Bertrand Russell was the consummation.² With him it was *Prin-*

cipia Mathematica, on the one hand, or anything goes, on the other. When the Great War began, this atheist said that he felt as though God were speaking to him, ordering him to become a pacifist, to lose his job, and to go to jail for his opinions, irrationally and passionately held. He became for 50 years the exemplar of the modernist split of fact and value. Santayana (1986: 441) describes Russell during the war exploiting his retentive memory to advocate values without the check of reason:

This information, though accurate, was necessarily partial, and brought forward in a partisan argument; he couldn't know, he refused to know everything; so that his judgments, nominally based on that partial information, were really inspired by passionate prejudice and were always unfair and sometimes mad. He would say, for instance, that the bishops supported the war because they had money invested in munition works.

As our students irritatingly but accurately put it, "That's just a matter of opinion." The persuasiveness of the seventeenth century's fact/value epistemology may be judged by the difficulties we have in shaking our sophomores out of it. They absorb it right from their televisions. The rationalist and irrationalist forms of modernism, furthermore, are two sides of the same coin: I'll flip, you choose—fact or value. The Rand Corporation, after all, is in Santa Monica. Modernists cannot reason with most of their opponents; on most matters they can only shout and sneer. They shout: You are an unscientific fool if you do not believe that in building Dallas the form should follow the function; or you are an ignorant knave if you do not believe that political science should be reduced to mathematics; and on the value side, you are an insensitive jerk if you cannot feel the New Wave.

The New Science, we historians should be the first to recognize, was a contingent historical event, not a way of talking that fitted the seams of the universe. It arose out of the chaos of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, and in particular out of the Thirty Years War: Descartes, for one, was on leave from fighting it when he devised his methods for avoiding argument and finding certitude. One can understand why men weary with killing each other over transubstantiation would want to find some way of ending all argument.

They succeeded too well. I have spoken to philosophers who have seriously argued that scientists do not argue: say the philosophers, scientists prove. *Hypotheses non fingo*, Newton wrote proudly—I don't speculate. This "science" is supposed to be something unarguable. How do you know? The tough, sure, and authoritarian men of the seventeenth century said so.

It is worth reflecting that over the past century the word *science* has become specialized in English to the old *Oxford English Dictionary's* sense 5b: "physical and biological science." Not in other languages: not in Italian, French, German, Polish, Spanish, Tamil, Hindi, Korean, Turkish. I am told that an Italian mother will brag about her studious son, *mio scienziato*, "my learned one." She does not mean that he is a physicist. When we assume that there actually exists an object Science, quite distinct from the object Poetry, because we English speakers talk about it so much, we are being medieval realists and modern provincials.

Unsurprisingly, the English late nineteenth century produced the worst nonsense about science versus everything else. William Thomson, Lord Kelvin (1888–89), for example, an inexhaustible fund of arrogant remarks soon to be proven wrong, such as that physics was very nearly complete in 1890 and that the sun was going to burn out in a few million years (unless, as he said with a sneer, some new form of energy were discovered), said also: "When you cannot measure, your knowledge is a paltry thing. . . . You have not arrived at the stage of science."

In our century the distinction drawn between science and non-science has been made part of the intellectual furniture by such writers as Bertrand Russell and then on the humanistic side by I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, and others. The humanities have taken to preserving a space for themselves by denying that they are sciences.³ So bruised are they now in the struggle for university funding that the humanists positively delight in being considered useless and ornamental. The German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1982: 242, 244, 249), for example, among innumerable others, accepts the distinction between natural sciences and *Geisteswissenschaften* as somehow fundamental (cf. McCarthy 1975: xxii–xxiii). It is like the Berlin Wall and the Brezhnev doctrine. The truce of the academy has been, You leave the human spirit to us humanists and we will leave everything else to you. People become very nasty indeed at the border crossings be-

tween these realms, where parapsychology intrudes on physics, for instance, or brain research on the spiritual.

The science/humanism distinction in history does not hold up, and it's about time that historians pointed out this fact. History is an especially important case because it so plainly does not fit into either category of the two cultures, and especially not now, so long after the social scientific revolution in history. Many universities (Chicago, for example) are reduced to leaving it up to individual option whether a historian wants to be classified with the division of the humanities or with the division of the social sciences.

My friend Robert Fogel makes few mistakes, but one of his most egregious ones is persisting in calling nonnarrative history "scientific history" (Fogel and Elton 1984: ch. 1). Collingwood (1956: 257ff., esp. 269, 281) had it right when he contrasted "scientific" history with scissors-and-paste history. He was using the older (or Italian or German) meaning of *science*. Scientific historians, he said, ask questions and see their way to answering them. Scissors-and-paste historians merely gather up what is lying about. These days we might split the scissors-and-paste history into two parts, "significance test history," on the one side, and "insignificant text history," on the other, but both would be "nonscientific" in the non-English sense: not systematic, not question-answering.

I am often assigned by my colleagues in the Department of History at Iowa to pass expert judgment on some job candidate in quantitative matters. The assignment does not please me. I can judge the overall intellectual quality of a candidate as well as my colleagues, I suppose, according to what is known locally as the Aydelotte criterion: Does this person have a first-rate mind? But the judgment has almost nothing to do with his or her ability to manipulate the counters of science, those convenient 3 × 5 cards on method that the New Scientists and their modern followers have provided us. Being a good scientist is not the same as using significance tests properly (the more so in this case, as almost no one in economics or history or sociology does). Good scholarship cannot be broken down into various requirements like a recipe for quiche: so many eggs, so much cheese, so much flour, and the like, each to be tested for authenticity by a separate specialist and assembled after the tests for baking.

The science/poetry or science/humanism split and the recipes for scholarship that it supports do not survive close scrutiny. One linguist, Solomon Marcus (1974), studied fully 52 alleged distinctions between scientific and poetic thinking—such as rational versus irrational and effable versus ineffable—and could find nothing in them. We have fallen in love with distinguishing science from nonscience, the “demarcation problem” so called, and the love knoweth no laws.

True, each science has its special topics, to use the old rhetorical terminology, each some special way of arguing part of its case. But the ways of arguing have nothing to do with the metaphysics. To take a remote example: Suppose Martin Buber is correct that *I-thou* is not the same *I* as *I-it*, that we have a different relation to God than to the universe. Nonetheless, we often argue about them in the same way. Mainly the arguments are general topics, the shared ways of being a human arguer. We pile up instances of martyrs and miracles the same way we pile up instances of magnetic reversals in continental drift, for the same argumentative purpose. The way we argue does not depend on *how things are*, the seams in the universe. For all the gleaming promises of the New Scientists, we cannot know how things really, truly are, in the mind of God or in some other place outside human argument.

To apply this to social science history, one is not making a metaphysical statement when one says that the rioting of French crowds can be measured and postdicted, at least to standards that satisfy human argument. The question has nothing to do with ultimate metaphysics, or ultimate epistemology or ultimate ontology, for that matter. It's not ultimate. It has to do with the practices of human argument in the writing of history, here and now.

I can apply all this to a piece of history I am supposed to know something about, the history of British enterprise in the late nineteenth century.

Any historian talking about entrepreneurial failure must use metaphors.⁴ In the hardest as in the softest sciences, a choice of metaphor is a choice of worldview, of the evidence to be examined and the sort of story to be told.

The metaphorical distinction popular among historians and other noneconomists between quantity and quality of life, for instance, will leave the economist cold, because income properly defined captures it all. In the economist's pervasive metaphor, a

set of comprehensive accounts will include as income the time to smell the roses, too. If in 1900 British (and Japanese and German) people worked less intensely than Americans, as Gregory Clark (1984) has shown, then the British (and Japanese and Germans) consumed a commodity called leisure in greater amounts than Americans did. Clark worries that social pressure, ca'canny and the like, may have cost more in income than the average worker was actually willing to pay. But anyway, the economist's metaphor draws out the evidence for some partially compensating differential.

David Landes and Martin Wiener do not like the metaphor of a set of accounts. They prefer the metaphor of a foot race. Their subordinate metaphor of “leadership” uses it, as, for example, in Landes's (1969) chapter headings “Closing the Gap” and “Short Breath and Second Wind,” concluding with “Some Reasons Why,” taken from an account of a cavalry charge. The main question of the second half of Landes's book is, “Why did industrial *leadership* pass in the closing decades of the nineteenth century from Britain to Germany?” (Landes 1965: 553).

As Landes immediately points out, there is supposed to be reason in general history for asking such a question, namely, that the balance of power in Europe has long been thought to depend on industrial leadership. Yet one might doubt that political power has in fact depended on economic power, and especially on the leadership in such power. A large enough alliance of straggling, winded followers, after all, could well have fielded more divisions in 1914, or even in 1917. The case of Soviet Russia after Stalin-grad is worth reflecting on, as are those of North Vietnam and Afghanistan.

That history uses metaphors and stories does not make it touchie-feelie or vague. An open criticism of the literary devices of history can provide criteria for accepting or rejecting them.

In the debate about Victorian failure, I would argue that the metaphor of leadership is not apt. What is not apt about it is that it assumes silently that 2d place is no better than 10th. Number 1 or defeat. It agrees with the motto of the great American football coach Vince Lombardi: “Winning isn't the most important thing; it's the only thing.” Landes (*ibid.*) is certainly correct when he notes that “within fifteen years [of cheering the Prussian victory over perfidious France] . . . the British awoke to the fact that

the Industrial Revolution and different rates of population growth had raised Germany to Continental hegemony and left France far behind." He is certainly correct that some British people at the time did fret about German "hegemony" and did feel that they needed urgently to "awaken" (the metaphor of waking up is used again on p. 554). Yet even when Landes is imparting balance to the discussion, he unconsciously reaffirms the importance of coming first and only first: "To be sure, it is easy to demonstrate the exaggeration of these alarms. Germany's gains still left her far *behind* Britain as a commercial power" (ibid.: 555).

The metaphors of defeat and decline are too harshly fixated on number 1 to be right. The Lombardi lemma governs narrowly defined games well enough. The talk of "league tables" makes sense for literal leagues of literal football. But it does not make sense when applied to the voluntary choices and unforeseen consequences of 45 million souls. The souls were choosing in late Victorian times, and their residence in Britain gave them steadily expanding choice during the century after 1870. The prize for second in the race for economic growth was not strange defeat or the merely silver medal. The prize was by world standards great enrichment, if marginally less enrichment than a few others. By 1988 Britain had 8% lower income than West Germany, so obedient and thorough. What boots it?

To take another way of telling the story, and another set of metaphors, Bernard Elbaum and William Lazonick (1986: 1), who are dubious about the health of advanced capitalism, favor medical metaphors of what went wrong in Britain: they speak of an "affliction," the "British disease," and "diagnosis."⁵ The metaphors are not mere ornaments. Disease, with its secret causes apparent only to the trained doctor, fits the rest of the Elbaum and Lazonick story, a scene of silent struggles on the shop floor rather than open competition in markets. The "hermeneutics of suspicion," as it has been called—the wisdom to see through false consciousness—is the social doctor's role. The social coach or general has a more public skill.

You can see that themes in storytelling are crucial to the historiography of Victorian failure, clustering around certain proverbs. The optimists want the story to be one of "normal" growth, in which "maturity" is reached earlier by Britain. Elbaum and Lazonick, by contrast, want the story to be one of the penalties

of an early start, as, in a more sociological vein, do Landes and Wiener. The story of the tortoise and the hare has lasting appeal.

The pessimistic story goes: Failures to keep up in technological change were the reason that British growth slowed by comparison with its mid-century pace and by comparison with that of the new industrializing countries. The failures in technological change also caused British shares of world markets to fall.⁶

The optimistic story, on the other hand, goes as follows: The failures were small by world standards even in the industries used as worst cases; and in other industries Britain did well (McCloskey 1973; Sandberg 1974; Floud 1976).⁷ But whether Britain "did well" or not in keeping up with technological leadership was unimportant to its growth (McCloskey 1981). Britain in those days, like the United States now, could be expected to grow slower than new industrial nations. The falling share of markets was no index of "failure," any more than a father would view as a "failure" his falling share of the poundage in the house relative to his growing children. It was an index of maturity.

Martin Wiener (1981: 158) has Britain "surrendering a capacity for innovation and assertion" by 1901. Such a remark, or its opposite, would be hard to bring to test. And it jars in the alternative and optimistic story, which tells of a necessarily less bulky Britain nonetheless engaging in such innovation and assertion as radar, the Battle of Britain, analytic philosophy, and the structure of deoxyribonucleic acid. The circle of narrative—namely, that one needs the moral to tell the story, yet the story makes the moral—is similar to the "hermeneutic circle" on the reader's side (that one needs to know the context to know the details, but the details to know the context). It is not breakable. The stories wanting to be told by Wiener or McCloskey or Landes or Floud will affect if not fix the stories told.

Historians do not need to be reminded that the way of telling the story of British entrepreneurial failure is important ideologically. Elbaum and Lazonick (1986: 11) are explicit: "In historical perspective, however, state activism must be absolved from bearing primary responsibility for Britain's relatively poor economic performance," because, after all, the poor performance, according to their way of telling the story, dates far back into the age of *laissez faire*. They end the chapter by attacking the Thatcher government for its "supposition that there are forces latent in Britain's 'free

market' economy that will return the nation to prosperity." They express confidence instead in "the economic benefits of industrial planning" (ibid.: 16). Though Elbaum and Lazonick in fact put part of the blame on the workers, the notion that the bosses did it is popular on both sides of the House—on the Labour side for the usual reasons and on the Conservative side because the story elevates the bosses to a heroic role. T. H. Burnham and G. O. Hoskins (1943: 271) put it in a way that would please all the pessimists from Ayn Rand to Tony Benn: "If a business deteriorates it is of no use blaming anyone except those at the top."

The optimistic story, by contrast, views competitive capitalism as a worldwide system, in which sometimes one region, sometimes another, will take a minor lead, but in which all regions to varying degrees are dragged along by market forces. In this set of metaphors and storytelling conventions, the main event in British economic history over the past century is *not* the "falling behind" (since it is merely the others catching up, as one may judge from the recent "falling behind" of that paragon of energy, the United States, and the prospective "falling behind" of Japan). The alternative, sociological argument overexplains the failure. The attitudes that Landes and Wiener describe would have made ordinary economic life impossible. Yet the great British public has now three times more housing, food, clothing, education, and innocent merriment than in 1870.

The main event, according to the optimistic way of telling the story, is the trebling of British income while other countries achieved British standards of living and beyond. A 200% increase of income is more important than a 20% "failure" to imitate German habits of workmanship and discipline. Looked at from India, Britain is one of the developed nations. The major economic event of the past century is not the relatively minor jostling among the leaders in the pack of industrial nations, but their appalling, growing lead over the followers bringing up the rear. The trouble with the race-course metaphor in the literature of British failure (or the sickness metaphor, disabling the leading horse) is that it entails a choice of a relatively uninteresting thing to be explained. The economists and historians appear to have mixed up the question of why Britain's income per head is 6 times that of the Philippines and 13 times that of India—which sociology, politics, and culture must of course contribute to explaining—with the much more delicate question of why Britain's income per head is in some tiny

and therefore uncertain degree less now than France's and more than Belgium's (Maddison 1989: 19).

In the face of a world-girdling explosion of incomes, the historiographic fixation on a relatively small "lag" itself demands a story. The fixation probably arises from the pride of first place, à la Lombardi. Some in Britain still worry about loss of empire (though the historical economists have shown it to be unprofitable) and take a perverse pleasure in describing a powerful industrial nation of over 55 million people as "a small island." The common man feels less important without an empress of India at Buckingham Palace, and the intellectual laments his lost vocation for instructing lesser breeds without the law. Many American intellectuals for some reason have fallen in with the sad British tale. Perhaps they sense the parallel and have their own worries about finishing in second place. In laughing at this lugubrious Anglo-Saxon attitude, no one has improved upon the last sentence in *1066 and All That*: after the Great War, "America became Top Nation and history came to a."

Notice that my point here is *not* that Landes, Wiener, Lazonick, and Elbaum are unscientific, because they use metaphors and stories, and I, the true *scienziato*, do not. On the contrary, we all use metaphors and stories, because that is how human beings persuade each other. I am merely urging us to bring the persuasive devices out into the open, so that we can watch them and argue about them candidly.

Nor is technical economics free from metaphors and stories, as I try to show in detail in a book called *The Rhetoric of Economics* (McCloskey 1985) and in another called *If You're So Smart* (McCloskey 1990). *Of course* economics uses fact and logic, too. But like every science I can think of, it uses the full "rhetorical tetrad," that is, fact, logic, metaphor, and story. The idea of "human capital," so fruitful in historical work, is as good an example as any.

And of course narrative history involves implicitly some of the facts and logic (and metaphors and stories) we call economic theory. I suppose you can think of the first 20 years or so of my wild career as being devoted to that job, of showing the implicit science in otherwise narrative history.

It's all so obvious I am embarrassed to say it. Let others say it for me:

At the end of his splendid new history of the Civil War era,

James M. McPherson (1988: 858), for example, says that "this phenomenon of contingency can best be presented in a narrative format." What he means is that *models* (or metaphors) of Southern failure in the war do not entirely satisfy. Models that claim Northern victory was inevitable because the North had more men or more iron don't seem to work, because so often, as at Round Top, near Gettysburg, on 2 July 1863, it could have gone the other way. McPherson is right that contingency is best illustrated in narrative form, but I'm sure he would agree that the history is not always so precariously balanced—so nonlinear in its reactions to small disturbances, as they put it nowadays in chaos theory—that narrative is *always* the best history.

Again, in a recent book review, the French historian Jacques Le Goff (1989) quotes another French historian, Bernard Guenée, in praise of biography, which "enables one to take a first look at the overwhelming complexity of things. What is more, the study of structures seemed to give too much prominence to necessity. . . . A biography makes it possible to pay more attention to chance." Le Goff asks, "Can the historian not return, better equipped both scientifically and mentally, to those inevitable subjects of history—to the 'event,' to politics and to the individual, including the 'great man'?" And remarks in answer: "What distresses me about the current proliferation of historical biographies is that so many of them are purely and simply a return to traditional biography. . . . Like the *émigrés* who returned to France after 1815, their authors seem 'to have learned nothing and forgotten nothing.'"

It is madness, simply madness, then, to separate model using and storytelling. I've always liked the remark of the English economic historian T. S. Ashton (1971 [1946]): "The debate whether we should use quantity or quality to argue in history is juvenile. It is like arguing whether one should hop on the left leg or the right. People with two legs find they make better progress if they walk on both." And even Ashton participates in the modern illusion that the humanistic and scientific legs are separate in the first place.⁸

The argument I'm making can be viewed as deeply conservative: Return to the spirit of unity (as against the dissociation of sensibilities) we had in 1600, without abandoning a single one of the gains since then. But it is of course quite radical, too, because it says that the science/nonscience distinction is *not* one of the

gains. I propose that, at least in our conversations here in the Social Science History Association, the science/nonscience distinction as understood in English be abandoned. The distinction reduces our shared rationality by cutting us off from each other and by ignoring some of the arguments—narrative, for example—that in fact persuade.

Maybe if we do throw this tired notion of science overboard, we will have to change the name of our association—to the Social Inquiry History Association, perhaps. I don't know. I only know that to do scientific history in Collingwood's sense, we have to walk on both legs.

NOTES

- 1 As a literary theory, Eliot's notion, after an initial vogue, did not fare well. See, for example, Kermode 1957: ch. 8. Kermode argues that dissociation can be found in any age and that attaching it to the early seventeenth century was merely a ploy in the politics of twentieth-century symbolist poetics. But he does not seem to deny the worth of a unified sensibility (his essay ends with an appeal for it), or even that "with more thoughtful chroniclers there is usually much emphasis on the dissociative force of science, and on the un-dissociated condition of pre-Baconian and pre-Cartesian philosophy and theology" (*ibid.*: 142).
- 2 This view of Russell is that of Booth (1974).
- 3 The modern hostility to science, after the dissociation, is apparent in Yeats's (1989) malicious little poem "Statistics," which reads in its entirety: "Those Platonists are a curse," he said, / 'God's fire upon the wane, / A diagram hung there instead, / More women born than men.'" The crack "more women born than men" reminds us that the line of New Scientists from the seventeenth century to the present has been male.
- 4 See White 1973, a book which it is inadvisable to reject without reading, and McCloskey 1990.
- 5 A self-conscious treatment of the theme is Kornai 1983.
- 6 The link between internal failure and external trade is made explicitly by Elbaum and Lazonick (1986: 9): "Serious losses [of trade share] . . . were interlinked with the failure of British industry to match the productivity advances achieved abroad." The other pessimists make the same point, though none has provided evidence that the link existed.
- 7 See also the articles by Edelstein, David, Harley, Lindert, Trace, McCloskey, and Floud in McCloskey 1971.
- 8 The title *Econometric History* was insisted on as the title of a pamphlet I did for the Economic History Society (McCloskey 1987). It makes historical economics seem specialized, something separate from *histoire totale*.

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