

The Problems of the Past:
Examining the Role of History in Contemporary Political Life
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After falling out of favor during the heyday of quantitative political science, recent years have seen historical analysis returned to reputability within the field. Across the sub-disciplines it is almost universally recognized that our ability to interpret and understand our present is improved by paying attention to the past. Indeed, so frequent has the analysis of the past become in the study of American politics that a new genre of political science has been named: American Political Development or APD. Welcome as this renewed interest in history must be, it is troubling to note that it is seldom ever explained how and why we think historical investigation offers us insight into our present condition. The power and virtue of history are all too often simply assumed. In this paper, I will try to flesh out and probe some of these assumptions.

Taking Rogers Smith's *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* as a starting point, I will try to make explicit just what it is that most practitioners of APD think the type of historical analysis they offer accomplishes for us in the present.¹ At its core, I contend, APD as currently practiced rests on the assumption that we can come to know what happened in the past *and* why it happened with a degree of certainty that equips those of us in the present with the ability to control or even master the previously untamed forces that shape our political and social reality. This understanding of the role of knowledge of the past rests, in turn, on a particular understanding of the nature of social and political life, as well as a particularly strong faith in the epistemological status of historical interpretations.

Yet, once we are more explicit about what we expect of our knowledge of the past, an immediate problem is raised. For the assumptions that ground the proposed contemporary

¹ Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*, [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997].

political function of historical knowledge are extremely controversial. Indeed, even a brief perusal of the work of contemporary historiographers and philosophers of history indicates that the faith APD places in historical interpretations may be misplaced. In short, APD places a burden on history that it simply cannot bear. Because of this, both the power and importance of the type of work done by APD scholars is called into doubt.

However, to abandon history at this point, I contend, would be too hasty. I suggest, rather, that we need not give up history, but rather, readjust our expectations of it. Instead of asking history to explain the present in a way that gives us mastery over the forces that structure it, it is better to understand the turn to history itself as a political act that is fundamental to establishing in the present an understanding of ourselves as free and self-sovereign individuals. Beyond this, history, even as practiced today, offers us not a descriptive vision of ourselves as we are, but a normative vision of who we want to be. Realizing this makes history not just useful, but perhaps indispensable.

I. Why Do We Care About History?

Among the many virtues of Rogers Smith's monumental work *Civic Ideals* is the relative clarity with which it speaks about the contemporary political function or use of historically focused analyses. Rather than simply assuming the virtues of a historical perspective, Smith takes steps to show his readers how and why his investigation relates to specific contemporary concerns. In doing so, he allows us to ask and potentially answer questions about why we, as actors in the present, should care about what happened in our past. How are we served now by possessing the most honest and exacting understanding of our political history we can obtain?

Smith tells us at the outset of his work that the research which ultimately led to *Civic Ideals* began “with concerns about modern America’s political direction.”² Rather than demonstrating the characteristics of a society that has gradually but steadily progressed towards expanding inclusion into the life and habits of the polity, American citizenship practices have been marked in recent years by increasing stratification and strife. Race, ethnicity and gender, precisely those differences which the liberal theory of citizenship tells us should be ignored, have reasserted themselves as marks of exclusion. What is particularly disconcerting, not just to Smith but to any individual committed to the basic principles of egalitarianism and inclusion, is that “liberal democratic traditions as practiced in the United States and as articulated by the best contemporary thinkers remain in some way ill-equipped to combat the politically potent illiberal strains in American civic life and in political life generally.”³

Smith situates his work squarely within the context of this contemporary dilemma. For contemporary scholars, relevance of his work is its ability to help us to respond to current concerns and needs felt within our polity. It is interesting, then, that he chooses to address these issues by means of historical inquiry. The most obvious path for addressing oneself to contemporary concerns would seem to be straightforward normative argument. After all, if the United States has failed to realize the principles it explicitly endorses in its current laws and culture, the clear response is to reassert those principles and highlight the tension between our modern political condition and the vision our tenets embody. History, it might plausibly be said, has nothing to do with it.

The obvious flaw in this argument is that if realizing our liberal aspirations were as simple as asserting them strenuously enough, America would long ago have succeeded in

² Smith, 1997, p. 9.

³ Smith, 1997, p. 10.

becoming a truly and fully liberal society. There has never been any shortage of brilliant and forceful thinkers or political actors to remind Americans that they are dedicated to an inclusive, egalitarian civil society. Nor is there an unusual shortage of them now. Yet, somehow, something went, and continues to go, wrong. The present futility of liberal arguments and ideas that Smith identifies points to an unexplained feature of American civic life, one that operates to prevent liberal ideas from flowering into liberal practice. This insight encourages those who, like Smith, are committed to the realization of liberal ideals to turn to history in order to understand how and why their intentions have been so consistently thwarted.

In essence, the fact that contemporary liberals are ‘ill-equipped’ to bring about liberal practice demonstrates that our contemporary condition is not fully self-determined. Rather, our present is somehow shaped by a complex interplay of forces and beliefs whose nature and scope are not completely, or even primarily, defined by contemporary conscious or unconscious activity. Explaining (and hopefully responding to) our consistent failure thus requires a careful examination of the history of American political practice. Such an examination seeks to identify the operation of persistent features of American life that militate against the realization of liberal ideals. It seems logical to think that if we can identify those aspects of our political culture that historically have worked and that continue to work against liberalism, we might be able to respond in a way that either eliminates or attenuates the outbreak of illiberal political practices.

The interest and relevance of the past to the contemporary political landscape is, therefore, rooted in the belief that a better understanding of our history can equip us with unique tools that allow us to further a particular political project in the present. This point may seem so obvious that it is unsurprising that it is regularly overlooked in the American Political Development literature. What is not so obvious, however, is how exactly history does this.

What are those tools that historical understanding equips us with? How is it that history's potential contemporary political relevance gets cashed out?

A careful reading of the normative conclusions Smith draws from his descriptive and explanatory historical narrative suggests two closely related weapons history provides the contemporary political actor.⁴ The first of these is the predictive power of careful, nuanced and, above all, truthful historical narratives.⁵ Particularly in an institutional setting, such as that structuring U.S. citizenship practices, Smith believes that identifying historical trends allows us to predict the shape of future developments. Smith is explicit that the knowledge about the forces that condition American citizenship gained in the course of researching and writing *Civic Ideals* gave him unique insight into unseen dangers lurking in America's contemporary political situation.

I began arguing in the late 1980s that we should expect new intellectual as well as political defenses of racial, ethnic, and gender inequalities to resurge in our own time in reaction to the liberalizing changes of the 1960s, just as occurred in reaction to Reconstruction during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Those claims, which again initially met with skepticism, have been all too abundantly born out ...⁶

The benefit of even a rough glimpse of the shape of future political discourse is clear. By allowing liberal theorists to anticipate in advance the occurrence of future illiberal claims, history provides a strategic advantage. Arguments can be framed and resources deployed that aim to undermine illiberal claims before they can gain traction as politically potent ideologies.

Beyond this tactical advantage, however, Smith suggests that the merit of the predictive component of careful political history really lies in its ability to suggest ways in which the forces that give rise to illiberal arguments and practices may be channeled in directions that minimize

⁴ See Smith, 1997, pp. 9 and 470 for his explicit statements about his move from descriptive and explanatory analysis to normative prescriptions.

⁵ Smith routinely emphasizes the virtue of truthfulness when it comes to our past. Indeed it is his primary complaint against the continuing use of the Hartz/Tocqueville thesis. See, for example, Smith, 1997, pp. 504-5.

⁶ Smith, 1997, p. 5. See also his discussion of those new defenses of inequality at 487-8.

or even eliminate the emergence of those illiberal tendencies in the first place. In other words, by offering us a fuller understanding of the ways certain forces in political thought and practice cause illiberalism to emerge, historical knowledge offers us an opportunity to overcome or transcend the illiberal aspects of American political life. This is what one might call the therapeutic use of history. On this view, once we have a deep and honest understanding of why we, as a people, are attracted to illiberal ideals, we can go about answering those needs in a way that is in greater accord with liberal principles. The idea is precisely that of Freudian psychoanalysis: by uncovering the hidden traumas in his patients' pasts, Freud claimed to be able to help alleviate current compulsions and hysterias.⁷ Neurotics, be they nations or individuals, can work through and overcome their destructive or otherwise undesirable habits or tendencies by coming to understanding the historical reasons for their actions. Uncovering the source in the past of the practice in the present gives us power to control or eliminate it in the future.

Clearly, just such a therapeutic function is among the chief merits Smith thinks his historical narrative offers. The core normative conclusion Smith draws from his research centers on readjusting the focus of American liberalism to respond in effective ways to the needs that liberalism has historically left unmet. For he contends that it is liberalism's ongoing inability to respond to certain key political needs that allows illiberal arguments and practices to gain adherents. The most pressing need that liberalism historically and contemporarily fails to meet is that of community or peoplehood.

Careful study of the past, he claims, shows that liberals "have refused to recognize the pressures that leaders of any enduring political community recurrently face to foster a sense in all or most of its members that they are indeed a properly separate 'people.'⁸ Because liberal

⁷ See Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

⁸ Smith, 1997, 474.

egalitarianism so consistently fails on this count, “it is not surprising that many U.S. citizens remain unpersuaded that conforming more fully with egalitarian liberal democratic ideals, instead of adhering to other long-held values, is good or right.”⁹ The reason Smith thinks that many Americans have been and continue to be attracted to conceptions of citizenship that foster exclusion along racial, ethnic or gendered lines is that those conceptions respond to our need for a sense of distinct peoplehood far more satisfactorily than do standard formulations of liberal citizenship. Thus, in order to exorcise the demons of exclusion and inequality from American citizenship practices, “Americans who espouse liberal democratic principles must consider how these ideas can be blended with arguments for the distinctive worth of U.S. citizenship, without justifying the subjugating forms of ascriptive inequality that have been so deeply rooted in their national life.”¹⁰ Indeed, so significant and promising is this insight that Smith’s 2003 book, *Stories of Peoplehood*, is addressed to developing in detail a “theory of people-making” that may serve as the basis for understanding how we might advance liberal citizenship ideals in a way sensitive to the underlying need for political community.¹¹

Throughout *Civic Ideals*, Smith presumes that careful and truthful historical analysis not only provides the ability to predict future outbreaks of illiberalism that might be more effectively combated through their anticipation, but actually offers liberals the knowledge necessary to take the fight to their enemies. Instead of simply responding to America’s illiberal tendencies, historical analysis demonstrates how the liberal instead might work to eradicate the persistent tendency towards illiberalism. We can, he holds, come to understand our current susceptibility to these arguments and practices by uncovering why we have held to them in the past. This in

⁹ Smith, 1997, 10.

¹⁰ Smith, 1997, 489.

¹¹ Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership*, [Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003], p. 15. See also p. xi.

turn allows us to return to the present, as it were, armed with insights that empower us to respond to the primary cause of our reoccurring bouts of illiberal practices: in this case, our unmet need for a distinctive political identity. Once we know the cause, it seems plausible to believe that we can tailor our arguments and deploy our political resources in a way that allows us to minimize or even eliminate American's willingness to engage in exclusionary and inegalitarian political practices.

For Smith, then, it is clear that the function of careful historical analysis is to equip present political actors with a knowledge of themselves and their constituents that offers them both the tactical advantage of foresight and ultimately the power to overcome or transcend undesirable political habits by responding more adequately to the polity's fundamental needs. In short, the fuller and more truthful our knowledge of our history is, the better we will be able to guide ourselves towards our goals, whatever they may be. History gives us the power to shape our political future by giving us knowledge, and potentially mastery, of those forces that structure our political and social reality.

In many ways, this seems utterly unsurprising. While there is certainly nothing wrong with history for its own sake or history that simply satisfies curiosity and gives intellectual pleasure, the tremendous outlay of energies towards historical studies that almost all modern peoples have undertaken seems to indicate that history is of primary political import. And it is similarly unsurprising that in the United States, where political self-direction and autonomy are so important, we should have become so fascinated with history recently. After all, until recently, we did not have a history to speak of. After more than two centuries, however, we have begun to feel the power of the past, subtly yet definitively influencing our political and cultural conditions.

It is only natural, then, that some students of American politics should, like Smith, turn to history for the specific purpose of discovering those causal factors that reveal themselves over time to shape and define our political reality. Indeed, it seems to be precisely this project that grounds much work that falls under the aegis of American Political Development. The rapidly burgeoning APD literature contains innumerable studies designed to provide insight into the central factors that have historically conditioned the outcome of political practices and actions so that we might exert some level control over these factors in the future. This can be seen in works of wide and ambitious scope, like Smith's, as well as more narrowly focused works that examine the operations of particular practices, laws, or institutions over limited time-frames.¹² Thus, the import and the attraction of the type of analyses grouped under the title "American Political Development" rests on the claim that careful and true history is able to disclose the causal forces and processes that combine to create what we experience as political reality.

II. What Do We Ask of History?

Without question, if history is able to fulfill the function assigned to it by Smith and other APD practitioners, then historical knowledge is invaluable. Yet, before allowing ourselves to unqualifiedly embrace this approach to history, it is important to reflect on its underlying presuppositions about the nature of the relationship between past and present, as well as our ability to know it. For the notion that our political reality is fundamentally structured by forces that manifest themselves equally in our past, present, and presumably future rests on key

¹² The length of this paper could be more than doubled without beginning to exhaust examples of this type. A very short list, drawn simply from materials at hand: Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: the G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation*, [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005] and "Unfinished Work: American Democratization, Citizenship, and Processes of Political Change," draft presented to UVA Politics Department workshop, February, 18, 2006, Milkis and Mileur, eds., *The Great Society and the High Tide of Liberalism* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005], Theda R. Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003], and James W. Ceaser, *Nature and History in American Political Development*, [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006].

unarticulated assumptions about the nature of human society and the effects of human activity. Further, even should we decide to endorse these assumptions, the promise of APD depends upon a particular understanding of the nature of historical investigations as such. Should either of these assumptions prove suspect, it will be necessary to re-evaluate what, exactly, can historically based studies accomplish for us as contemporary political actors.

The most obvious assumption fields like APD rest upon is the view that human social and political life is structured in a fundamental way by forces that operate in a regular causal manner. Or, perhaps more carefully, that our social and political lives can be interpreted consistently as operating *as if* they were structured in this way. In short, just as Freud had to presuppose that the human psyche operated as a deterministic system, in which regular causes yielded predictable effects, so to we must assume that our political and social milieu is in some significant sense a deterministic system. For only such an assumption can ground the belief that those forces that are shown to have politically significant political effects in the past currently structure our political processes and actions and will continue to do so in the future. In essence, political and social life must be seen as being on par with, if not actually part of, the natural order of things.

The validity of this assumption, of course, is at the core of a great many of the central questions, both substantive and methodological, within the social sciences generally and in political science specifically. In essence, it is this assumption that allows us to say that there could be such a thing as social or political *science*. While addressing this question fully, let alone answering it, is far to large a task to be undertaken here, it is important to note that the idea that history can give political actors in the present either predictive power or greater control over political outcomes, the idea that we have seen unquestionably grounds the work of Smith and

likely many others in APD or related fields, implicitly assumes that human political or social reality is fundamentally, if not ultimately, structured by generally determinate causal forces.

Yet, even if one is ready to endorse this presupposition, or at least grant it for the sake of argument, one still has to confront the further question of how (and how well) we can come to understand or know those forces. The mere knowledge that our political reality is structured by causal forces does us no good unless we can discover what those forces are, how they relate to each other, and how they work to generate a particular set of practices and institutions. For it is only this knowledge that will allow us to reclaim some level of political autonomy, to exercise some level of control over our fate, by allowing us to either accommodate ourselves to or manipulate those forces.¹³

Here, it is clear that APD rests on the belief that historical investigations can offer us precisely this type of knowledge. It must be stressed that this is a heavy burden for historical studies to bear. For the past (just as much as the present) confronts us as undifferentiated facts and experiences. That undifferentiated mass must be sorted somehow, must be given shape and meaning. Practitioners of APD must hold that the careful and scrupulous historian can wade into the accumulated detritus of the past, not just that found in dusty archives but also those less-tangible traces etched into the form and substance of institutions, structures, beliefs and practices, be they legal, economic, cultural, etc., through their constant use and disuse, their making, destruction and remaking and *explain* them. On this view, the task of anyone who seeks to understand and explain the past, regardless of their departmental affiliation, is to disclose the hidden order or pattern that structured events and actions in the past. Importantly, the careful historian must reveal to the best of her ability not just *a* pattern but *the* singular, true pattern (or

¹³ Ceaser is instructive on this point: “Political science, as I understand it, is a practical discipline whose aim is to develop knowledge that can help political actors...in their ongoing and future activities. Without general categories [drawn from historical investigation], this kind of political science is impossible.” Ceaser, 2006, p. 174.

at least part of it) and know that she is doing so. The interpretation provided cannot be simply interesting or effective but, in some significant sense, correct. It must tell us what actually happened and why. Or in the words of Ranke, the historian must be able to show “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*.”¹⁴ This is essential if the lessons of history are to serve as the basis for political action in the present.

For, the degree of influence or power (and hence the political import) that historical scholarship gives us over direction and effect of the forces that fundamentally structure political reality is dependent on the comprehensiveness and detail of our knowledge of how those forces operate. The quality of our historical explanations, how closely they approximate the truth, their ability, in other words, to tell us with as much accuracy as possible *what really happened and why* determines the usefulness of that narrative in the present. It is this that determines the level of knowledge about how our political and social lives in the present are fundamentally structured. And it is this, in turn, which gives us greater or lesser amounts of control over the course of the future. The effectiveness of our historical knowledge in bringing those forces disclosed by history under our present control depends upon those forces *really* shaping our political and social reality.

Given this extraordinary burden, it will be worthwhile if we, as political scientists, pause for a few moments before venturing out into past, to consider what professional historians think about this task and its possibility for success. After all, they staked out this terrain long before the relatively recent emergence of APD. It is simply professional courtesy to get their thoughts on our proposed project.

III. Can History Deliver?

¹⁴ “How it really was.” Leopold Ranke, cited in Fulbrook, *Historical Theory*, [London and New York: Routledge, 2002], p. 13.

Unfortunately, even a brief review of contemporary discussions in the field of historiography suggests that APD's prospects of success are not good. For there seems strong consensus within the discipline of history that the tools of that trade are simply inadequate to the task of uncovering *the* truth about the past in the way required for projects like Smith's to seem plausible. The vast majority of practicing historians agree that the epistemological status of their work is simply not sufficient to allow it to claim to be anything other than particular interpretations. If the historian's arguments are compelling, then the ability of historical studies to illuminate our present in a way that allows for prediction, and hence control or even mastery over our present condition is cast into fundamental doubt.

At the outset, it is worth making a preliminary distinction between facts or data and historical narratives or interpretations. We can call facts those raw, uninterpreted bits of data that tells us in the most literal sense what happened in the past. So, it is a fact that the Magna Carta was signed in 1215, that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776 and that the former took place 561 years before the later. While there has been interesting work done on the epistemological status of such bits of knowledge, it is safe to say that if we know anything about the past (and it seems certain we do), we know facts of this type.¹⁵

Historical interpretations or narratives, by contrast, are constructed by relating such facts to each other in some particular way.¹⁶ Rather than simply telling us what happened, historical narratives, even in their most basic form, endeavor to tell the reader something about why or how a given series of facts is related. A very simple example might be: "The Magna Carta was signed

¹⁵ But cf. Stephen Neale, *Facing Facts*, [Oxford and New York: Clarendon, 2001].

¹⁶ The distinction between a historical interpretation, a historical narrative and a historical explanation is significant but, for our purposes, negligible. Within the discipline of political science historical accounts are seldom, if ever, simple narrative descriptions. In order to make them politically relevant in the present, such narratives as are offered attempt to explain what is described. To avoid monotony, the terms historical interpretation, historical narrative and historical explanation will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

in 1215. The principles of limited government embodied therein contributed to a philosophical and political tradition that inspired British colonists in America to draft and sign the Declaration of Independence 561 years later.” Historical narratives (at least as offered in APD) almost always suggest some sort of causal connection between the facts recounted.¹⁷ This is the case even where the narrative does not make explicit the links between facts presented. By choosing to present one set of facts instead of another, the author implies that those facts are somehow related. Choosing to tell us that the Declaration of Independence, instead of one of the innumerable other documents that came into existence between 1215 and 1776, came after the Magna Carta, suggests that there must be a connection between the two, even in the absence of further comment.

It is in examining precisely this point, the move from raw historical fact to explanatory narrative, that both philosophers of history and practicing historians have begun to question whether those in the present can actually tell “how it really was” in the past. Reflecting on the products of their field, historians have, for the most part, turned away from any claims to objective truth. To borrow Peter Novick’s phrase, itself borrowed from Charles Beard, the idea of an objectively true historical account is “a noble dream,” but it is one that we as yet very far from being able to realize.¹⁸

Before going any further, it must be stressed that the claims made here should be understood as strictly concerning the level of knowledge we can have about why and how events happened in the past and that knowledge’s degree of certainty. It is not about the nature of social and political life. In the philosopher’s parlance, it is an epistemological claim, not an ontological

¹⁷ I do not mean to imply by the phrase “causal connection” that there is the implication that one is the only, or even primary, efficient cause. Rather, it simply suggests that the first thing somehow contributed to the occurrence of the second.

¹⁸ Novick, Peter, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, [Cambridgeshire, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988].

one. Every position articulated here is consistent the claim that human life is and always has been conditioned by the interaction of stable and persistent forces as well as with the view that there are no determinate ordering forces (or some combination of these views.) It is simply a claim about the whether or not we can ever say with any confidence whether or not we have given the correct explanation of the past. It is an analysis of the epistemology of historical knowledge, not an argument that there is no such thing as “truth.”

One of the most controversial and, perhaps not coincidentally, best known arguments in this area is that of Hayden White’s *Metahistory*.¹⁹ White’s thesis is that all historical writing is equivalent to the writing of fiction. As he puts it in a related essay, “The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact,” historical narratives are “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.”²⁰ Noting that the historian works with a set of raw facts about the past that are not *a priori* endowed with meaning or significance, White suggests that “historical sequences [of facts] can be emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings.”²¹ It is the historian who gives shape and meaning to our understanding of history. There can be no talk of the facts “speaking for themselves.” Our explanations and interpretations of the past are invented. On this view, *any* given historical narrative cannot claim to be any more or less true than a work of fiction.

Noël Carroll, in a rejoinder to White’s essay, completely rejects the idea that historical narratives are fiction. In doing so, however, he accepts the position that the historian provides

¹⁹Hayden White, *Metahistory : The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975].

²⁰ Hayden White, “The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact” in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, Fay, Pomper, and Vann, eds., [Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998], p. 16, emphasis in original.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 18.

the meaning or significance of a particular set of historical facts; it is not found in facts. Carroll acknowledges that “the same event can be part of different courses of events, and, therefore, can be represented in different stories.”²² What White and Carroll agree on is that the historian plays the definitive role in *constructing* a historical interpretation. What data seem relevant and important to one historian will seem less so to another, and this change of emphasis will alter the content of the explanation. The same facts can be placed into different narrative contexts, thereby endowing those facts with different significance. Carroll is emphatic about this point: “[n]o one, in short, believes that historical texts are unmediated.”²³ One must always remember that a given historical narrative inevitably bears the marks of its creator. If this is right, then it seems to suggest that it might be difficult to say that a certain narrative is definitively true. For there will always be another possible interpretation of the data, one that may exist in tension with, or even outright contradict, the other.

Theoretically, in fact, there are as many possible interpretations as there are historians. In practice, of course, many, if not most, historians will tend to coalesce around a few specific narratives. Nevertheless, it will always be *possible* to reconfigure data into a substantially different interpretation. The implication of this observation for the epistemological status of historical interpretations, their ability to claim truth, will depend upon the relationships that can be established between those various interpretations inevitably available to the historian or analyst.

The notion of an objectively true historical narrative hinges on our ability to articulate independent criteria that allow historians to judge between the various interpretations in available. Put another way, we must find a way to privilege one perspective (or group of

²² Carroll, “Interpretation, History, and Narrative” in Fay et. al. *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, p. 42.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 48.

complementary perspectives) over others. Doing so will allow us to claim that the interpretation constructed from that perspective is epistemologically superior, that it is correct or more correct, than those constructed from other perspectives. Here Carroll is again helpful. For he offers just such a criterion in his efforts to articulate a standard of truth that is compatible with the points he concedes White. Carroll's position is that we can make sense of a given narrative's claim to truth by applying a coherence or comprehensiveness criterion to the field of available interpretations. The issue of multiple mediated narratives is not problematic for the idea of objective truth because "the selections and deletions of a historical narrative are subject to objective standards.. Such standards may be considered our best means for discovering the truth."²⁴ Chief among these standards, Carroll contends, is comprehensiveness.

White is not clear just what he takes "comprehensiveness" to be. But the idea and the appeal of this criterion seem clear. The chief insight must be that narratives and interpretations that explain more of the facts, that illuminate more of the past, are better than those that explain less. The goal of comprehensiveness is the goal of providing the most *coherent* interpretation of *all* our known data.²⁵ Another way of putting this might be that the more explanatory power the interpretation has, the closer to the truth it is. For, the singularly true historical interpretation of the facts, the real explanation of the past, must be capable of explaining all the relevant data.²⁶ Using this condition as the ideal of objective truth, we can evaluate and rank the various narratives we are confronted with, mediated though they may be, in terms of their ability to approximate the ideal condition of total explanation. The narrative that is able to explain the

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 52.

²⁵ Though Carroll does not mention this, it seems obvious that coherence is indispensable if comprehensiveness is to be useful at all. A comprehensive interpretation that has no coherence, one that does not hang together in a way that gives us any insight into how or why things occurred, is useless. It would be a strange thing indeed if the truth were useless for us. So, I will assume that what Carroll actually meant to suggest as an objectivity approaching standard was comprehensive and coherence.

²⁶ Let us note, but ignore, the fact that relevance will inevitably be a criterion drawn from somewhere else as well. For fact do not announce themselves as relevant.

greatest number facts known about the past in the most coherent way is the narrative that is “most true.” In this way, we can recover some of the confidence in our historical interpretations necessary for us to privilege and, should one so desire, act upon that interpretation.

Indeed, it is worth noting that Smith makes recourse to the idea of coherence and comprehensiveness in arguing for the priority of his analysis over those offered by the likes of Louis Hartz and Gunnar Myrdal. After reflecting on the numerous objections to the traditional liberal interpretations of US history posed by those focusing on traditionally excluded groups, Smith suggests “we need an alternative account that gives full weight to America’s pervasive ideologies of ascriptive inequality, as well as to liberalism and democratic republicanism, and *explains* why each has been *centrally constitutive* of American life.”²⁷ Smith’s claim is that the Hartz/Myrdal perspective on America’s past does not fully explain what we know about our history. For, it is undeniably a fact (or, rather, a collections of facts) that we have routinely and reoccurring excluded significant portions of the American public from participation in the polity. The failure of traditional liberal histories to comprehensively and coherently explain the historical data suggests that this interpretation is inadequate. Smith suggests a new interpretation, one that he contends will better explain the facts and, in virtue of this, be more truthful.²⁸ It can thus offer all the benefits careful historical scholarship is capable of providing us with. For, “[a]nalysts lose both explanatory and predictive power when they try to view all such disputes as wars between liberalism and democratic republicanism. The story of American

²⁷ Smith, 1997, p. 30. Emphasis added.

²⁸ Throughout *Civic Ideals* Smith addresses the effect of citizenship laws on traditionally ignored perspectives. Thus, most chapters deal explicitly with women, African-Americans and Native Americans. It is clear that he is trying to explain as much of our history as possible.

civic development is in some ways more disturbing, but also more *comprehensible*, when our vision encompasses America's illiberal, undemocratic traditions as well.²⁹

Attractive as this idea seems, however, when examined carefully it becomes clear that the idea of attaining ever-more comprehensive and coherent interpretations commits one to an enterprise that is notoriously problematic, particularly from an epistemological perspective. To see the problems that follow from the coherence and comprehensiveness definition of objective historical truth suggested by Carroll, consider what such a view implies, not just in the context of particular interpretations of particular events and actions in particular times and places, but in the context of the broader historical project.³⁰

We may start by judging a single narrative interpretation of, say, the American Revolution as more coherent, as having greater explanatory power, all things considered, than those other narratives available to us. Yet, because history is not naturally broken into discrete time frames, a rigorous application of the coherence criterion requires that we move from the American Revolution to the Colonial and Post-Revolutionary periods. We must see how our interpretation squares with the facts we know about these time frames. Are the most coherent, comprehensive explanations for events in those periods compatible with the analysis offered in our preferred Revolutionary interpretation? If not, which mode of interpretation (which perspective) does a better job of explaining all three periods? Further, restricting our attention to the Revolutionary context once again, if our interpretation focuses on political and military

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39, emphasis added.

³⁰ One of the aspects of *Civic Ideals* that makes it so thought provoking is its attempt to do exactly this. Each chapter of Smith's substantive analysis reads almost like a detailed abstract for a book-length treatise on a specific period of American history. One need only peruse the subtitles of chapters ("The Confederation Era, 1776-1789," "The Age of Jackson, 1829-1856," and so forth) to see this. *Civic Ideals* is an attempt to translate a particular mode of historical analysis, one focusing on how social attitudes and needs translate themselves into specific legal and political citizenship practices, into a long-term coherent picture American history. It is the coherence of this overall picture, as much as anything, that justifies the presumption that the causal mechanisms detected in the past are and will continue to be relevant.

events, does it also help us explain contemporary social or economic facts? Or do our best interpretations of those facts offer a better job of coherently explaining political events?

It seems clear that maintaining the coherence or comprehensiveness understanding of truth will inevitably force us consider ever expanding sets of facts. For if truth is the capacity to coherently interpret more data, our interests in the truth (and the promise of APD suggests we are keenly interested) is best served by attempting to subsume as many facts as possible from as many times and as many areas of human life as possible under a single explanatory perspective. Ultimately, the notion of objective truth presupposed by the coherence and comprehensiveness criteria is the idea of an interpretation or narrative that explains *all of history*; it is the notion that we will have achieved truth when we are able to explain *every historical fact known or knowable*. Even if one contends that we will never be able to actually obtain such a degree of knowledge, this is the regulative ideal towards which everyone who articulates coherence and comprehensiveness as a standard for obtaining or approaching historical objectivity strives.

This idea should sound both familiar and uncomfortable to most of us. For the idea of a “total history,” a “Grand Narrative,” which explains definitively and truthfully the entire course of human history is a well-established aim of many of Western society’s best-known historians and philosophers.³¹ Unfortunately, it is an ideal that has time and again failed to be successfully realized in practice. Each attempt, no matter how grand and sophisticated has met with

³¹ The terms are Fernand Braudel’s and Allan Megill’s, respectively. Much of the analysis offered in this part of the paper is deeply indebted to Megill’s compelling and (dare I say it?) coherent discussions of recent trends in historiography set forth in “Coherence and Incoherence in Historical Studies: From the *Annals* School to the New Cultural History,” *New Literary History* 35 (2004): 207-31, and “ ‘Grand Narrative’ and the Discipline of History,” in Ankersmit and Kellner, eds., *A New Philosophy of History* [Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995], pp. 151-73, 263-71. See also chapters 10 and 9, of Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming (February 2007)]. A few examples of this type of work come readily to mind. One thinks obviously of the projects of Hegel, who saw history as the realization of *Geist* in the world (and went so far as to claim the project, and thus history, completed) and Marx, who read all of human history as the dialectical unfolding of economic relationships. Similarly, Ranke seemed dedicated to this project. Braudel and the other members of the *Annals* school were so explicitly.

resistance and ultimately rejection by all but a few core adherents. What makes a comprehensive history of this type so difficult to articulate, and what casts serious epistemological doubt on any narrative claiming to be true or truth-approximating on the grounds that is coherent and comprehensive, is that claims to total history, whether explicit, as in Marxist economic history, or implicit, as it is whenever one makes recourse to coherence and comprehensiveness as a standard of historical objectivity, are claims about the ultimate foundation of human life. They presuppose strong ontological claims; and claims of this type are notoriously difficult to evaluate epistemologically.³²

This is clear in the cases like Hegel and Marx.³³ As Marx put it in the so-called 1859 Preface, “the sum total of relations of productions constitutes the economic structure of society, *the real foundation*, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.”³⁴ It is a familiar critique of both Marxist histories and Marxism as such that the belief in the economic foundation of reality is as more an article of faith than it is a verifiable proposition. Obviously, the validity of the coherent master narrative offered by Marxist historians depends upon the validity of the assertion that economic relations are the real foundation of the human world. The persistent inability to justify this founding ontological principle of the whole Marxist project has the effect of undermining Marxist historiography’s claim to disclose or approximate the truth about the past as a whole. For the coherence gained by adopting its perspective comes only when one imposes on the past and on the world an ordering principle and then interprets the facts in light of it. The coherence given by this type of analysis is no more given by the facts themselves than is the overall narrative

³² Indeed, in many ways, it is our foundational ontology that establishes the meaning of truth and falsehood.

³³ This is as it should be. After all, the two are very closely related.

³⁴ Karl Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition, Tucker, ed., [New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1978], p. 4, emphasis added.

structure. Thus, “insofar as there is any coherence at all, it has to be coherence *that is offered by historians*—not by ‘historical reality.’³⁵

Of course, historical projects based on larger theoretical endeavors such as Marx and Hegel’s are often explicit regarding their founding ontological claims. However, for most areas of historiography, the root assumptions about ontology frequently go unarticulated. Take, for example, the New Cultural History, a still-thriving approach to history. At first blush, it seems to have no underlying assumption about the nature of reality. After all, cultural historians have produced studies on projects as wide ranging as cat massacres to religious heresy to legal procedure to marriage practices.³⁶ Yet, as the name suggests, these studies are all united by their focus on culture, however one chooses to define that term.

This focus on culture is not without serious implication. As Richard Biernacki shows, despite their professed non-foundational tendencies, the new cultural historians “followed the social historian in building explanations that rest on appeals to a ‘real’ and irreducible ground of history.”³⁷ He contends that new cultural historians, despite claims to be disclosing the ways in which “discourse” brings meaning into the world, “are in practice the realists of substance, who proceed as if theirs is a worthy method of inquiry by virtue of its derivation straight from an ultimate ground of human life.”³⁸

Elaborating on Biernacki’s claims, Allan Megill points out that since “Biernacki shows that the new cultural historians’ claim to have discovered the ‘grounding reality’ of society and history

³⁵ Megill, “Coherence and Incoherence in Historical Studies,” p. 226, emphasis in original.

³⁶ See Robert Danton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, [New York, Vintage, 1985], Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of A Sixteenth Century Miller*, [New York: Penguin, 1982], Douglas Hay “Property, Authority and the Criminal Law” in *Albion’s Fatal Tree*, [London: Allen Lane, 1975], and Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1983]. See Lynn Hunt and Victoria Bonnell’s introduction to the edited collection *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, eds. Hunt and Bonnell, [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], for a useful review of progress in this field.

³⁷ Biernacki, “Method and Metaphor after the New Cultural History,” in Hunt and Bonnell, p. 63.

³⁸ Biernacki, p. 70.

is without justification. the writing of the new cultural history (as of the old social history) is carried out on the basis of what is essentially a choice.³⁹ So the overall coherence offered by focusing on culture as *the* foundation of historical explanation is a coherence that is imposed by the historian on the facts rather than discovered in those facts. It is the choice to view culture as an underlying ordering principle of society that allows the new cultural historians to give a coherent and comprehensive explanation of history; just as it was the choice to view economic relations as structuring human reality that gave Marxist historians their explanatory power.

It is important to note that these difficulties become all the more acute in the context of APD; for its attempt to make history useful in the present requires that the strong foundational commitments that allow for coherent explanations be maintained in the present. Where history is implicated in making the type of claims APD requires, it cannot be contended that such history simply offers us one interesting way to understand ourselves. By the contemporary nature of their project, practitioners of APD are committed to the idea that the underlying structuring principles they discern in the past continue to shape the present.

We seem forced to the conclusion that the idea of coherence and comprehensiveness as way to recover objective truth is doomed from the start. For, coherence stems from the ontological commitments of the historian, and there are now (and probably will always be) many possible views about what the underlying nature of the world is. It does not seem likely that we will be able to discover universally convincing arguments about the irreducible ground of human existence. Absent those arguments, there will be many possible views about what constitutes the “really real,” if anything. And none of those views will be able to claim priority over the others. They will remain what they are now: choices. Those choices are revealed not just in how we choose to explain our history but also in what we choose to explain. For, even our definition of

³⁹ Megill, “Coherence and Incoherence in Historical Studies,” pp. 222,223.

coherence and comprehensiveness will depend upon what facts we take to be relevant to our analysis. And this will depend on the perspective of the historian and the audience.

So, there will be as many coherent and comprehensive stories about the world as there are posed ontological foundations (and combinations of ontological foundations). These underlying commitments will manifest themselves in the shape and content of the narratives they generate. Coherence will, therefore, not allow us to collapse multiple perspectives into one preferred perspective. For even where there is only one narrative articulated for a given set of facts, we are guaranteed the theoretical possibility of an equally coherent and comprehensive counter narrative based on another ontological creed.

Indeed, more generally, it seems that any proposed criterion of truth or truth approximation will have to grapple with the issue of multiple perspectives brought out by White and Carroll above. The criterion proposed must offer us some reason to prefer one narrative perspective to the others without implicating that we ought to preference that perspectives particular, contestable foundational claims, ontological, normative or otherwise. In order for a narrative to claim objective truth status, the standards we use to privilege its interpretive perspective must be independent of deep beliefs about the way the world really is or should be and what that implies about what we should explain of it and how in order for it to claim objective truth status. I will take no stance on the quite difficult issue of whether or not any such independent truth standard is theoretically possible. Suffice it to say, one has not yet been articulated and does not seem forthcoming in the near future. Similarly, I remain agnostic about the related possibility of one day discovering the ultimate ground of human existence or even whether or not one exists, as well as on the issue of whether or not we could ever prove that ground. I simply observe that we currently have a number of compelling candidate views vying

for adherents, and there does not seem any definitive reasons in favor of any of them.⁴⁰ Under these conditions, where the list of viable foundations is greater than one (and it seems to be growing, not shrinking) and where we have had a great difficulties articulating standards of truth and right independent some foundational view, the burden of proof must be on the historian claiming for their interpretation the strong truth status that necessary for causal claims to grant her predictive and therapeutic powers. She must show that her interpretation has a claim to truth that is not ultimately based on undefended presuppositions.

The discussion thus far has been exceedingly abstract. It may help to offer a brief example. Take the competing explanations offered by Smith and political scientist Catherine Holland of the same phenomenon, citizenship, in the same period, Reconstruction. Each confronts the fact that the reaffirmation of liberal commitments nominally indicated by the Reconstruction Amendments ultimately failed to engender full liberal citizenship, particularly with respect to women, whose calls for equal status were roundly rebutted by the courts. Smith interprets these facts in light of the ‘multiple traditions’ thesis expounded throughout his work. As social and political anxieties worked their way through the courts, Smith contends “the intellectual and political climate permitted judges to treat naturalist and religious doctrines of inherent gender differences as legal truths.”⁴¹ The commitment to liberal principles that led to the full enfranchisement of male African-Americans was prevented from running its logical course by forces external to liberalism.⁴² Because many political actors, particularly at the state level found the implication that the liberal principles that ruled out slavery also implied full rights for women

⁴⁰ Examples of ontological foundations include culture (however defined), institutional structures, religion, economics relationships, power (or power-knowledge), and geography (recently seen Jared Diamond’s work). The list could be expanded greatly by noting the numerous foundational normative positions that also serve as contestable perspectives on the past.

⁴¹ Smith, 1997, p. 341.

⁴² See Smith, 1997, pp. 293-5, for an overview of these arguments.

(and, for that matter, full substantive inclusion of male African-Americans) “too threatening,” they ‘invoked state-centered republican and ascriptive arguments to rationalize their rejection’ of these claims.⁴³ Specifically, they invoked scientific and religious arguments to the effect that women were fundamentally inferior to men. A fully inclusive republic was seen as too destabilizing to prominent notions of community, so politicians and judges took up hierarchical arguments order to defend illiberal practices.

Holland, by contrast, sees the exclusion of women from citizenship as built into the very language of the Reconstruction Amendments—Amendments supposedly articulating our deepest liberal principles. In direct contrast to Smith, Holland sees ‘liberalism’ itself as implicit in Reconstruction’s exclusion of women.⁴⁴ Or, rather, it ratified into constitutional law a dramatically new understanding of liberal citizenship and inclusion that was articulating itself in American culture. The 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments represented “a revolution in citizenship by enunciating what had long been present but unspeakable. The Amendments made the body visible, and they recast its meaning: once a figure of the suppressed past of political life, the raced and gendered body became a symbol of its future. . [T]he body became the sign of a citizen’s qualification to participate in the public order and the mark of political interest.”⁴⁵ In essence, the explicit mention of racial and gender specific attributes in the Reconstruction Amendments defined those attributes a politically relevant. This shift, in turn, is explained with reference to shifting attitudes in public (not merely political) culture. Specifically, “public friendship was refashioned and the structure of public desire was transformed as a distinctive

⁴³ Smith, 1997, p. 339.

⁴⁴ Holland is explicit in here rejection of Smith’s notion of distinct multiple traditions. See *The Body Politic*, [London: Routledge, 2001], p. xvi.

⁴⁵ Holland, pp. 99, 101

form of public heterosexuality.⁴⁶ The raced and gendered understanding of citizenship that emerged out of Reconstruction finds its source in the transformation of American public culture from homosocial to heterosexual. The fact of the exclusion from women into the polity after Reconstruction is not the result of the adoption of ascriptive arguments which endeavored to short-circuit a “too threatening” liberal wave, which in turn led to a new conception of citizenship, but rather, a result of a fundamental change in the meaning of what it was to be capable of public (and hence political) action. *Pace* Smith, according to Holland political and institutional changes did not combine to articulate a new understanding of citizenship that changed our implementation of the law, undermining the promise of the Reconstruction amendments; rather, changes in public culture led to a new, sexualized understanding of citizenship that was then expressed in constitutional law.

Holland and Smith disagree, then, about the root cause of the same political outcomes. For Smith, citizenship was recast as a result of changes in the intellectual and political climate of America. These high-level social features led to the blending of republican and ascriptive understandings of citizenship into the liberal practices enshrined in the Reconstruction amendments. Smith holds here, as he does throughout *Civic Ideals*, that institutional citizenship practices are shaped by those ideologies that best respond to political needs. Holland, by contrast, sees those amendments themselves, as well as the political and intellectual movements that constrained litigation over the meaning of them, as expressing changes in the erotics of public culture. For her, the shape of citizenship, indeed of politics as such, is explained by the way culture endows our ideas and practices with specific meanings. Those meanings are merely expressed in the political arena. We have, then, two divergent interpretations of the same phenomena. One

⁴⁶ Holland, p. 123.

locates the prime cause in political needs and ideological responses; the other makes recourse to a broader public culture to explain political thought and practice.

To be sure, someone might cleverly combine these specific perspectives on the primary cause of citizenship practices in the Reconstruction era. Or one might contend that one or the other fails to adequately explain other known facts that it should, by its own logic, be able to explain and thereby claim priority for the other. Nevertheless, the particularities of Smith and Holland's accounts aside, it seems clear that it is possible to give equally coherent, equally powerful accounts of Reconstruction which do not square with each other simply by changing what one interprets as the ultimate explanatory ground of social and political life. Smith, for example, acknowledges the power of the Marxist analysis of Reconstruction given by Du Bois.⁴⁷ What we are left with is the guarantee of some number, greater than one, of actual or possible historical explanations of the exact same historical phenomena. The most that we can say about each of these narratives is that it is either wrong or not wrong. That is, it either explains in a coherent, comprehensive and consistent manner the available facts or it does not. We cannot take any further steps, however, towards saying that one is better, more probable, or more truthful than any other. At least, we cannot do so on the basis of any prior, neutral criterion.

This basic issue cannot be resolved by more history or better history. It is quite simply the case each narrative represents a particular perspective on what foundation or combination of foundations constitutes the prime cause(s) of social and political outcomes. This perspective may be offered explicitly, as with Marxist history or, more frequently, implicitly through the inclusion of particular facts and the interpretation of them in light of particular normative or foundational commitments. By selecting and explaining component parts of the raw data of the past in a careful and scrupulous manner, following the core methodological dictates of historical

⁴⁷ See Smith, 1997, pp. 287 and 346.

practice such as avoiding anachronism and contextualization, scholars can demonstrate immensely interesting, compelling and comprehensive interpretations of the past. Yet, at no point can their interpretations rise to the level of objective historical Truth.

This point has emerged time and again in the work of practicing historians. To take just one example, Constantin Fasolt describes how his grand endeavor “to write a bigger and better history,” one that brought the truth of the past into plain view utterly failed. Reflecting on this failure, Fasolt remarks that “expecting history to reach the reality of the past is to allow oneself to be seduced by a mirage.”⁴⁸ Indeed, Fasolt summarizes the problems posed to the idea of a singularly true history so well, I can do little better than quote him at some length.

Each time a historian makes statements about the past, some piece of knowledge about the past is conveyed by means of a locution. The meaning of that locution depends on the illocutionary act performed by the historian. That act cannot be limited to the intention of conveying knowledge of the past. It amounts to taking a definite position in the world and excluding others on grounds that are directly related to the conditions of the historian’s own time and place. It cannot be collapsed into historical reality.⁴⁹

What Fasolt shows is that the very content of the historian’s narrative is from the outset a statement by the historian about what matters, how it matters, and why. The expression of such commitments, antithetical to the idea of a history that allows that past to “speak for itself,” that shows us “what actually happened,” is an inevitable part of the historian’s enterprise.

Reviewing briefly: we began with the rather extreme claim that historical narratives were fictive. We chipped away at this claim as best we could. While we rejected the fictionalization postulate, we were unable to reject the basic insight that historical narratives are created from a particular perspective and that there are multiple perspectives available to us in the present. Further, we have no way to judge between these multiple perspectives that does not implicate us in contestable judgments about the basic values and foundations of social and political life.

⁴⁸ Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History*, [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004], p. 40.

⁴⁹ Fasolt, p. 222.

Therefore, we are unable to judge between the competing interpretations they supply. Thus, no narrative can claim to reveal the singular, irreducible truth about the past. For simply by redefining what is relevant or by shifting explanation to one foundation to another, one will be able to produce a competing historical explanation that is just as valid from a methodological point of view. Only if we can find a way to develop our analysis of foundational ontologies in directions that allow us to prioritize them, will we be able to make any progress towards prioritizing historical interpretations. As it stands, our evaluations of interpretations of the past cannot transcend the basic epistemological binary of wrong or not wrong.

III. Reconsidering the Role of History

We obviously need to re-evaluate why we are interested in history and how we propose to use it. Before doing this, however, we should pause to reconsider the terrain just covered. Recall that we began by locating the appeal of historical analysis for scholars of American Political Development in its supposed ability to offer deep insight into our contemporary political and social condition. History, it was contended, defines who we are now. Understanding the forces that sculpted our present offered the possibility of a profoundly useful type of knowledge. We could predict, to some degree, the outcome of ongoing political processes and potentially transcend those features of our political life we found undesirable.

We also saw that accruing these benefits required our historical interpretations to be demonstrated as, in a significant sense, *the* truth about the past. Unfortunately, the analysis above indicates in no uncertain terms that this is a burden that no historical analysis is capable of bearing. Our preference for one historical narrative over another is just that: a preference. By casting doubt onto the historical interpretations offered by contemporary political scientists, we also cast into doubt their normative conclusions. If Smith's (or any other scholar's) interpretations

of why we ended up in our present condition cannot claim to reveal in any significant sense what actually happened in our past, then the normative proscriptions that follow from this analysis are suspect. At the very least, they must be treated as exactly the same as any other normative prescription. They have no special authority in virtue of their being based on historical analysis.

An overly hasty conclusion would condemn historical scholarship as a waste of precious time and energy. It might be said that if history give us no privileged insight into who we are as individuals and as a people, then attempting to ground normative projects in historical analysis is pointless. Yet, we ought to be reticent to reach such a conclusion. For, history has long been of utmost interest to societies. It is certainly of interest to us today, though we may not fully understand why. Both the vitality of APD as a field and a quick glance at the non-fiction best-seller lists indicates that both academics and the general public find in history something meaningful for their present lives. It would be strange if this fascination with history were an idle waste.

In fact, abandoning the historical project because of the partiality and particularity of historical narratives is to abandon it at precisely the point it reveals its real promise for contemporary political life. For it is the particularity of a historical narrative, its being rooted in a particular perspective about how society works, what is important to explain, and why it is important, that offers us a tremendous amount of information about ourselves in the present. Not because it show us how we came to be in our present condition but, rather, because the perspectives from which we write historical narratives tells us a great deal about our present needs and anxieties.

To understand the promise historical narratives offer us in the here and now, we must first have a better understanding of how our present is related to our past. Throughout the APD

project, and, indeed, any project that seeks to explain our present in terms of our past, there is the lingering specter of determinism. If our past is significantly determined by the operation of causal forces, and if those forces extend into the present, then our action in the present will be constrained to responding to or, perhaps given sufficient knowledge, manipulating those forces. There is, then, some room for autonomous control, but it is circumscribed.

Our understanding of ourselves as autonomous agents in the present is greatly expanded, however, when we take notice that the very notion of the present, a time period distinguished from the past, must be invented. Fasolt remarks, “no one that I have heard of has ever found a line between the present and the past. And a moment’s reflection shows that none is likely ever to be found.”⁵⁰ It is, then, precisely the function of history, as a discipline, indeed as a way of thinking about the world, to draw that line between past and present. To make the distinction between what was and what is a political act. Thus, “history is constitutive of modern politics, constitutive of the kind of modern state that claims sovereignty for itself and the autonomy of individuals subject to nothing except their conscience and the laws of the physical universe.”⁵¹

The historical consciousness, the belief that we as individuals and as a society have a past that is distinct from our present, presupposed by the very act of writing history establishes at the outset that we live now as free and independent agents. Before one even reaches the content of any particular historical interpretation and regardless of its truth-status, a powerful (and controversial) proposition has been set forth: we in the present are fundamentally free from the past. The essential division between past and present that is the foundation of any type of history is “an act of self-determination.”⁵² Once we understand that history is in this way a fundamentally political act, our persistent recurrence to it seems not only explicable but extraordinarily

⁵⁰ Fasolt, p. 10.

⁵¹ Fasolt, p. 13.

⁵² Fasolt, p. 14.

desirable. Each historical inquiry is first a statement of our independence from the past. It establish us as free and self-determining agents, capable of shaping our present and future in ways that are not limited by historical patterns or norms.

This is by no means an insignificant role for history to play. In and of itself, it suggests that the type of scholarship APD engages in is important for the establishment and maintenance of freedom. Of course, it may also suggest that the type of normative claims APD engages in might need to be downplayed. For arguments designed to uncover the necessary causal forces that structure our lives clearly exist in an uneasy tension with the type of freedom history seems to offer us. That said, it seems that establishing some sort of relationship between the past and present is essential to maintaining the freedom history establishes by drawing a line between the past and present as an enabling freedom, rather than a disorienting arbitrariness.

After all, the rapid and seemingly happenstance pace of life in democratic societies led Tocqueville to fret about the onset of an isolating individualism. He worried that where citizens were confronted with a present that seemed to proceed of its own accord men would retreat into solitude in a effort to reclaim control over some portion of their lives, however small. This retreat, he foresaw, led to an enervated citizenry that was ripe for tyranny. The famed Tocquevillian soft despotism is made possible where democratic freedom and autonomy spirals out of control.⁵³ Here again, history has a role to play, offering citizens and societies a way to understand themselves in the present that sets them specific tasks and urges them towards concrete action.

It is at this point that the particularity of historical interpretations becomes a distinct benefit. The fact that each historical narrative is written from a particular perspective, that its shape and content is derived from the historian's prior commitments regarding what needs to be

⁵³ See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. II.

explained and how to explain it, means that each historical narrative can be seen as a proposal, not about the truth of the past, but about our present condition. The perspectives that generate historical narratives are not arbitrarily given. They are, rather, the perspectives of individuals living at particular times in particular places. As such, they are influenced by the same forces that operate in contemporary political culture as a whole. The narratives and interpretations that are produced can therefore tell us something about the needs and anxieties operating in the time and place that generates them. Each interpretation is an effort to address those pressing contemporary issues that interest the historian and to articulate those responses that seem most promising in light of her normative or foundational commitments. That scholars interpret the history of one feature of our social or political life and not another, or that they address it with attention to one perhaps previously ignored set of facts, indicates what it is that they find vexing, enlightening, or lacking in the world in which they live.

In the context of American Political Development, the content and nature of the analyses of American history offered thus gives us insight into the concerns or problems that a particular scholar finds most pressing in American society today. That Smith and Holland both choose to emphasize the persistent exclusion of women from full citizenship in their interpretations of Reconstruction indicates that they find the status of women in America's *present* political culture troubling. By presenting contemporary readers with an interpretation of the past that attempts to explain the current role of gender on citizenship and inclusion into political life, Holland and Smith suggest that citizenship status may still be troublingly differentiated along gendered lines. Their different explanations of the source of historic exclusions, by contrast, reflect their different views about the best way to address those issues in the present and future. Each possible explanatory perspective on the past demonstrates a distinctive normative understanding

of the present state of affairs, as well as a position about what specific steps we ought to take to realize that change our present.

Further, the way a particular interpretation is received by its broader audience gives an indication of the degree to which political society as a whole shares in the hopes, concerns or commitments that shape and animate a particular interpretation. That some scholars of American politics have shifted away from a interpretation of America's history as one of progressively increasing liberalism towards more nuanced analyses that focus on exclusions and inequalities demonstrates that our confidence in our present abilities to realize a fully equal, inclusive republic has waned, perhaps because our understanding of inclusion has changed.⁵⁴ That interpretations suggesting alternatives to a simple liberal progression thesis are found compelling to contemporary readers demonstrates that many analysts of American political culture sympathize with the emerging concerns over the *present* level of inclusiveness in society that generated these new historical accounts. The degree to which we find the specific explanatory content of this type of historical narrative persuasive, similarly suggest the degree to which we, as individuals and as a polity, share the analyst's beliefs about the best means to address these concerns in the present, in order to create for ourselves the future that we desire.

Historical understanding does, therefore, give us profound insight into who we are as a people. Not, however, in the sense suggested by the vast majority of currently writing political scientists. It does not explain who we are by explaining how we came to be. Instead, historical interpretations operate as proposals about our contemporary condition, proposals whose persuasiveness and general level of acceptance can be used to gauge our present level of anxiety over the particular concerns that animate them. In short, the histories we generate are suggested

⁵⁴ Put another way: we choose now to tell a different story about our past because our normative perspective has changed.

diagnoses of our political condition, which will either resonate or not with their larger readership. The self-understandings offered by history can therefore serve as means by which we may orient ourselves in the potentially enervating condition of freedom and autonomy created by the assumption of a historical perspective in the first place. They allow us to coalesce around those particular foundational and normative visions of our contemporary condition that we find most plausible and persuasive. These visions give us direction in the present, suggesting to us ways we might put our freedom to use.

So, historically based analyses of the type offered by APD are useful for two reasons, neither of them generally recognized in that literature. First, the very act of assuming a historical perspective establishes the present as a time of autonomous self-sovereignty. It breaks us out of the deterministic flow of causal time by presupposing that there is a meaningful distinction between what was and what is. Second, historical interpretations equip us to respond to this condition of freedom in a productive manner by suggesting particular understandings of our ongoing projects and commitments that can structure our use of that freedom. Both of these uses are quite different from the predictive and therapeutic understandings of the role of history suggested by so much contemporary work in political science. Each, however, is sensitive to the epistemological limits of historical interpretations in ways that traditional work in the field is not. In the end, APD and related fields can and should go on more-or-less as before. However, what we expect from history should change. Rather than demanding that the history show us ‘how it really was’ in the past, we must recognize that it can only suggest how it is and the present and how it might be in the future.