
Reviews

The Incredible Shrinking Historian

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Reflections on History and Historians, by Theodore S. Hamerow. *Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. 267 pp. \$30 cloth, \$14.95 paper.*

I can scarcely overstate the importance for the academic humanities of Hamerow's brilliant account of the state of the field of history. Describing the intellectual framework and institutional structure of one humanist field, such as Hamerow accomplishes here, provides a model for how other fields are to be set forth. Analyzing the state of the art, specifying strengths and weaknesses, outlining current issues for serious debate—these processes of self-conscious thought provide the perspective that is needed for any individual to find a productive place in the field. And interpreting what is at stake in a humanistic field, the why's and wherefore's of studying this, rather than that—that labor of interpretation requires the exercise of taste and judgment that transforms learning into wisdom and scholarship into enduring insight. That is why I think everybody should read this remarkable book.

Theodore S. Hamerow, historian at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, accomplishes with such remarkable wit and acuity the description, analysis, and interpretation of the field of history that we in other fields of the academic humanities gain a model and a message for our own thinking about what we do and how and why we do it. Hamerow's program covers both intellectual and political questions, describing the present state of historical learning as profession, not merely hobby; how people become historians; "history as a way of life"; and then, of special interest, "the new history and the old" and "what is the use of history?" He further reports the results of studies of the influence of philanthropic foundations upon historical scholarship and provides an account of the world of nonacademic history. I cannot imagine a more encompassing program of describing and evaluating an

academic field, its history, practice, and future, and, as I said, the result requires superlatives for comprehensive, balanced, and orderly treatment of fundamental questions of humanistic learning.

Hamerow cannot deal with history in isolation from the humanistic world at large. Our graduate students for example come from the same pool of young people: our careers work themselves out in the same academic framework; the issues of one field spill over into the other in the face of challenges common to them both. What is particular to history is a crisis of purpose: "The historical profession in America, after some 30 years of rapid change, growth, and diversification, is today troubled by increasing doubts about its purposes and prospects . . . [historians] stand wondering where the extraordinary boom of the postwar years had led them." The crisis in part is practical; young people are not finding positions.

But in more substantial part it is intellectual: the rise of the social sciences on the scale of academic prestige at the expense of history. Hamerow states matters with his usual clarity: "To our society . . . the methodology of historical scholarship appears inadequate for an understanding of the world in which we live." The new subjects addressed by historians, moreover, such as new regions (Africa, Asia, Latin America), new social and ethnic groups, women's, economic, social, and other kinds of history have only with great difficulty found for themselves a place in the center of academic-historical dis-

course. Moreover, the advance of interest in large-scale social forces, in dealing with vast quantities of data ("cliometrics"), by its nature leaves in a state of acute discomfort the received tradition of historical study as an essentially literary art. The good writers claim not to understand numbers; the good cliometricians do not produce great historical literature, so it is believed.

Not only so, but the state of graduate education gives considerable reason for pause. The length of the doctoral years extends beyond all reason—nine years forming an average!—and the requirements multiply and divide. Employment poses familiar problems. "History as a way of life," in Hamerow's rendition, will not present surprises to scholars in religious studies. Relationships between and among scholars, the politics of departments and faculties, the eighth- and quarter-point movements upward and downward on the stock exchange of reputation and career—these hardly present particular problems to history, or even to humanistic learning. If two traits dominate the historical field, they are sloth and envy. But the same is so in the other humanistic subjects. Most books are written by only a few people; most first books do not lead to second books; most careers are built, by necessity, upon the shifting sands of politics, because they do not rest on secure foundations of achievement. But these facts of historical study characterize our, and, I think, every, academic field. When God distributes talent, energy, imagination, the capacity

to think large thoughts and take great risks and pursue one's own star of curiosity, it is never evenly, and always with a trace of humor, or so I think. Nothing in Hamerow's well-documented and elegantly presented account of "becoming a historian" and "history as a way of life" will leave anyone in other humanistic fields gasping in either envy or horror: things are the same everywhere.

The consensus that once told historians what to do and why what they do is worthwhile has crumbled. The field is governed by envy and sloth because it has lost its purpose. On that account, politicians take over. History as an academic field has entered an age of academic obsolescence, while a variety of fields, the academic study of religion foremost among them, from day to day gain renewed vigor and intellectual purpose. Let me explain by a personal reference. As an undergraduate nearly four decades ago, I majored in history—American history as a matter of fact. After taking the best courses given by my college's best professors, I reached the conclusion that history is a field that is intellectually bankrupt. That is why I turned to the study of religion and, eventually, to the history of religion, which I find, for reasons I shall give in a moment, to be intellectually vigorous and important.

Now, decades later, when I consider the ineffable self-absorption of history departments, which, as in the case of Brown University's second-rate crew, refuse even to "cross-list" courses given in historical subjects but not under the auspices of the Depart-

ment of History; when I contemplate the considerable range of historical fields that now fall outside of the range of "official" historical study, such as, among the new humanities, religion, women's studies, black studies, Judaic studies, and nearly the whole range of social sciences that deal with historical topics and periods, I find that judgment of my youth validated every day. Historians are still debating issues of method that already have come to resolution in a range of academic fields and departments, and they have simply been left behind in the onward movement of learning. That is why Hamerow's "What is the use of history?" strikes me as a mere rehearsal of the evidence that history as practiced in Departments of History is intellectually bankrupt, because the urgent questions and the self-evidently productive methods of the age are asked and pursued elsewhere on the campus. Retreating to a position of snobbery and disdain carries conviction only for those for whom attitude takes the place of argument; opinion, of achievement; and self-satisfaction, of the call to journey onward.

Hamerow admits that historians find awkward any "rigorous philosophical examination of their discipline, assuming that its justification is either self-evident or inexplicable." Hamerow points out, "The institutionalization, bureaucratization, and professionalization of knowledge ha[ve] forced all disciplines to define their scope and technique more rigidly . . . [but history] remains far less rigorous or structured than most

fields of organized study.” As Hamerow further admits, “This deliberate avoidance of theoretical speculation is cheerfully acknowledged by many historians.” Hamerow deplors the facts, which he links to the decline in enrollments in history courses. But the issue is not merely that historians will not tell us what they are doing and why it matters. When they do define what they think is at stake in their work, the definitions prove not entirely compelling.

The most common argument is that history “can teach society to make more rational decisions about actions to be taken or policies to be pursued.” Historians, as Hamerow represents them, make only a perfunctory case for their subject, while claiming to give good counsel about what lies beyond their subject—a considerable contrast to the humanistic study of religion. Historians have claimed to possess “predictive capability,” appealing to constants or repetitions derived from the study of history. But the practical value of historical learning, a position that came to the fore in the eighteenth century with Burke, Jefferson, and Hamilton, and then reached fruition in the nineteenth century’s claim that historical learning formed the most reliable guide to diplomacy and statecraft, today has lost all credence.

The alternative to scientific methodology and positivistic philosophy is conceived to be literary history: the well-written and engaging classic of exposition of this or that. Here too the subject matter gives way to the style: anything well-written, without rhyme

or reason as to the choice of topic, serves quite nicely to validate the historical enterprise. In the recent past, politically conservative historians have appealed to history as literature as a mode of historical thought and writing superior to social-science-history, deemed the preserve of politically liberal and left-wing historians. Neither side, in my view, has entirely proved its case. The famous critique of Bury’s scientism in historiography by George Macaulay Trevelyan defined the issues, which have precipitated only the repetition, even in the most recent past, of the same unpersuasive arguments on both sides.

Fine style is not the monopoly of the right any more than “culture” is, and the left does not own the franchise on first-class analytical thinking; the right-historians, after all, ask the fundamental questions of the theory of society that the left deems settled by Marx.

None of this is very new. The prominence of the field of history throughout the nineteenth and into the earlier twentieth centuries proves anomalous. History as a systematic and generalizing science, not merely as a haphazard chronicle of this and that, hardly sinks deep roots into the intellectual life of the West. Voltaire’s *Pyrrhonism of History* and *Fragment on General History* characterized history as laborious and deceitful: “I had to squeeze five hundred pounds of lies in order to extract one ounce of truth.” “As for history, it is, after all, only gossip. Even the truest is full of falsehoods, and the only merit it can have

is that of style." Voltaire's judgment sounds suspiciously like the defense of history as literature against what people call "cliometrics" or "social-science-history." Curiously, Hamerow's final defense of history shows what is at stake in the demise of the historical field: ". . . now it did not really matter whether history was an art or a science, whether it was subject to law or chance, whether it could prognosticate or merely guess. What mattered was that it satisfied a profound emotional, psychological, and social need, regardless of its factual accuracy." Once historians confronted the parlous condition of the learning that they produced, their incapacity ever to know *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, they were left with an appeal to—of all things—emotions and psychology and social needs. That extraordinary position denies the very defense that the academy has constructed for itself for age succeeding age: to know, to understand, to explain, to generalize—that and not merely to judge from unexamined attitudes and to make up one's mind without the in-

tervention of thought.

Hamerow's description of the position of Oscar Handlin, with whom, as a matter of fact, I wrote my undergraduate honors thesis, seems to me telling: "To Handlin the reason for studying historical experiences is essentially the same as the reason for studying galactic patterns or subatomic particles or the topological properties of geometric configurations: because they are there, because they are part of objective reality, and because the human mind has an innate desire to explore and understand that reality." I cannot imagine any theory of the academic humanities that would treat the purpose of the humanities as so trivial and subjective. Hamerow places us in his debt by portraying the intellectual confusion—I think, bankruptcy—of a field generally taken to define the public condition of the humanities in general. When the barbarians take over, they spare nothing. The Vandals wrote no history, and Genghis Khan, no memoirs. Well-drafted memory is the mark of civilization.