

*Restructuring the discipline of history in American graduate education: a methodical process of the destruction and corruption of historical inquiry...*

## II

# *The History Crisis*

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LAST YEAR, the chair of the Department of English at Duke came to the University of Iowa to interview for the position of Dean of Liberal Arts. Like the other candidates who came to campus to interview, she constantly talked about the "crisis" in American graduate education. Such talk usually refers to the inflating "time to degree" for graduate students, the fact that less than half of Ph.D. candidates finish their dissertations, and that fewer than half of new Ph.D.s actually find academic jobs. The crisis is much deeper, however, involving the core research interests of many professional fields and the general direction of scholarship. History is one of the disciplines most deeply affected by the crisis.

This is particularly true in my chosen field, American history, which has been completely reconstructed since the 1960s. New questions were asked and new methodologies were adopted, a process that had the potential to produce new insights into the nation's past, inspire a new generation of scholars, and

compound the growth of "historical consciousness" that seemed to burgeon in 1960s America. Instead, the whole affair turned ugly and bitter, deadening morale in the history ranks, corrupting a noble enterprise like historical inquiry, and risking the loss of history's formerly broad audience, one of the great advantages it has over other disciplines.

My first year of graduate school happened to correspond with the last year of teaching for Ellis Hawley, probably the most famous historian of American politics and economics in the 1920s and 1930s. But Hawley was sneered at by many graduate students because he practiced the Old History, otherwise known as "rah-rah history." Graduate students I knew openly bragged about their ignorance of the Presidents, a sign that they were true believers in the New Way. When a younger professor from the University of Texas-Austin came to campus to interview for a position, he beamed about the wing of the department which was "doing interesting things" in the New History and derided those who stooped to doing "LBJ history" as old-fashioned and boring (the Johnson Presidential Library is in Austin).

Beginning the 1960s, students of his-

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tory revolted against the old order, believing too much time had been wasted studying the endeavors of powerful white men and not enough attention was being given to groups left out of the typical historical narrative. History needed to include these groups and it needed to be written from the "bottom up," so as not to legitimize the views of the powerful in society. The Old History was a bit stodgy, true enough, but it was not as hopeless as the critics say—it was in many ways inspirational—and the attempt to correct it has become bizarre.

One of the biggest flaps among history graduate students in my years at Iowa involved the choice of a guest speaker, an exercise that quickly exposed the chasm between the Old and the New. The faculty gave the Graduate History Society \$500 to bring in someone the graduate students wanted to hear, resulting in the formation of a committee to establish criteria and narrow the choice of speakers. A few wanted to bring Michael Hogan, author of five books, including one on the Marshall Plan (important during its fiftieth anniversary, I thought), and one on the implications of the end of the cold war, editor of a book on the atomic bombing of Japan (another hot topic in some historical circles), and editor of *Diplomatic History*, the premier journal in his field. Some thought Hogan the practical choice since he was an alumnus of Iowa and would be very understanding about the skimpy allocation we were working with and would be able to talk about how an Iowa person successfully pursued an academic position, in his case at Ohio State University. Hogan was deemed too "provincial" and his kind of history Old, however, and the graduate students decided to invite George Chauncey, whose two books are *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (1994) and *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and*

*Lesbian Past* (1989).

"Mainstream" history, the Marshall Plan, say, is boring, old-fashioned, and a slight to all those excluded from historical fields like diplomatic history. The partisans of the New studies place a greater emphasis on drag queen balls in New York City. Such was the great concern at Iowa the first month of my first year, when a graduate student showed the drag queen documentary, "Paris is Burning." When the Iowa Board of Regents said students should be told of "unexpected materials" in the classroom—like movies about drag queen balls—campus activists quickly denounced the move as fascist, refusing to accept the policy as a matter of decency and respect.

The bizarre and the twisted are much more popular, as best indicated by the fascination with Michel Foucault. From day one of my doctoral training, graduate students and professors constantly talked of the brilliance of Foucault, a French social theorist who wrote about prisons and insane asylums as a way of explaining how elites "socially construct" reality and how all knowledge and language are inescapably connected to power. By critically examining the "archeology" of language, one could unravel the power relationships inherent in it and free those oppressed by it. Not until a seminar in my last month of school did I learn the full story about Foucault when discussing his work and its relation to the notion of the philosophical "crisis" of the West, usually blamed on Nietzsche. Some seminarists doubted whether all the talk of intellectual "crisis" had any effect on "real life" or whether it was all intellectual gamesmanship, high philosophical questions batted around in obscure journals with no effect on the partisans involved.

As it turns out, it did. In *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, James Miller explains Foucault's "unrelenting, deeply ambig-

ous and profoundly problematic preoccupation with death," calling him "one of the representative men—and outstanding thinkers—of the twentieth century." He praises Foucault's philosophy, even though he sees *The Passion* as a "narrative account of one man's struggle to honor Nietzsche's gnomic injunction, 'to become what one is'" and even though he "can find no easy way to rule out the sort of cruel and murderous practices embraced by some of [Nietzsche's] followers," like Foucault.<sup>1</sup>

The son of a rich French surgeon, he was disliked by his fellows as a child—in school he once was found on the floor after having cut up his chest with a razor and another time he was caught chasing other students with a dagger in the middle of the night. He joined the Communist Party in the 1950s, and he supported the Maoist "ultra-left" left in France in the 1970s. He quit the battles of the student left in France in 1968 because he thought *they* were mad.<sup>2</sup> In 1975, when teaching at Berkeley, Foucault found his way into the gay community of San Francisco. Miller's description follows:

Promising a welcome "limbo of nonidentity," the city's countless bathhouses enabled Foucault as never before to grapple with his lifelong fascination with the "overwhelming, the unspeakable, the creepy, the stupefying, the ecstatic," embracing "a pure violence, a wordless gesture." And in the interviews that he had granted in the last years of his life to the gay press, Foucault made no secret of his special interest in "S/M," the consensual form of sado-masochistic eroticism that flourished in a number of San Francisco bathhouses. "I don't think that this movement of sexual practices has anything to do with the disclosure or the uncovering of S/M tendencies deep within our unconscious," he said in 1982: "I think S/M is much more than that; it's the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previ-

ously." "I think that the kind of pleasure I would consider as *the* real pleasure would be so deep, so intense, so overwhelming that I couldn't survive it," Foucault explained in another interview that year: "Complete total pleasure. . .for me, it's related to death."<sup>3</sup>

Foucault's fascination with death continued after the beginning of the AIDS epidemic—and his own infection with the disease: "the baths have never been so popular, and now they're amazing. Before, no one ever said a word; now, everyone talks. Each of us knows exactly why he is there." Foucault's fixation on death and S/M and his willingness to risk infecting himself and others with a deadly disease (and his passion for boys: "To die for the love of boys. What could be more beautiful?") explain his view that people "can and must make of man a negative experience, lived in the form of hate and aggression."<sup>4</sup>

The tawdry details would not matter but, as Miller announces to start his book, "At the time of his death. . .Foucault was perhaps the single most famous intellectual in the world" and another commentator concludes that Foucault maintains an "almost unparalleled position of intellectual dominance over the interpretation of many key aspects of the evolution of Western civilization since the seventeenth century." Miller explains that "Foucault on more than one occasion in the final decade of his life discreetly implied that *all* of his work, for better or worse, had grown out of his personal fascination with experience." Foucault said his books were a "kind of fragment of an autobiography" and to understand his work was to understand his "ethos."<sup>5</sup>

If Foucault's experience explains his scholarship, as he said, then I wonder if intellectuals should be falling all over themselves to praise his work; if to understand his work is to understand his "ethos," then I will never understand.

Foucault's attraction to death and the violent reconstruction of the self puts in mind another student who studied in France in the 1950s and was endeared to communism. Pol Pot, in the news due to his reemergence from the jungle, admired Mao and Stalin and was so endeared with death that he presided over the butchering of nearly two million Cambodians. With eyeglasses and more than a high-school education, Foucault would have been one of the first on Pol Pot's list of victims. The connection between these two radicalisms—the philosophical and the ideological—is seldom made in graduate student circles, however, and so some graduate students still join the Communist Party, read *Das Kapital* in the coffee houses, dress up like Trotsky, and wear Ché Guevara t-shirts, all while bowing to Foucault's eminence.

Part of our social crisis stems from the great fascination with Foucault and the embrace of his brand of nihilism and hopelessness. To be “lost” or “beat” or “alienated” is as popular as ever in intellectual circles. *The New York Times* recently featured a story about a 28-year-old Japanese writer soaking in her angst: “Sitting glumly in a coffee bar, sipping a café au lait, Yu Mi Ri does her best to come across as a complete failure in life, so inept that despite several attempts she hasn't succeeded even in killing herself. A high school dropout and former shoplifter, she says she has few friends and is a total misfit.”<sup>6</sup> Her nine plays are all about suicide.

Consider “Miss Spentyouth,” an Iowa undergraduate. She was taken with the work of Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble* (1993), *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), and *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997). According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Butler “has achieved something approaching cult status outside the academy. In the book *alt.culture*, she gets a separate entry for her work in

queer theory and is called ‘one of the superstars in ‘90s academia.’ In the trendy British magazine *The Face*, she was cited as one of 50 people who have had the biggest influence on culture in the 1990s. This conflation of intellectualism and stardom reached a zenith—or perhaps a nadir—in 1993, with the appearance of a fanzine devoted to Dr. Butler. *Judy!* was eagerly passed around among starstruck graduate students hungry for gossip, even imaginary gossip. The 17-page love letter to Dr. Butler and other ‘theoretical divas,’ put together by an author who called herself Miss Spentyouth, raised professor worship to a new, if not an absurd, level. At one point in her reverie, Miss Spentyouth—actually Andrea Lawlor-Mariano, an undergraduate at the University of Iowa—fantasized about a mud-wrestling match between Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, wearing shiny bikinis, with Dr. Butler as the referee.”<sup>7</sup>

Most of the crisis can be traced to the rise of the New Left in the 1960s, clobbered in politics but whose activists live on as the professors of the next generation of Americans. “The growth of Marxism in numerous fields, especially among younger scholars, has been nothing short of astounding,” the Columbia historian Eric Foner wrote in the early 1980s.<sup>8</sup> As Steven Watts has described it, 1960s “Leftists retrenched in the University,” which “beckoned as a refreshing, comfortable place for exile and discussion. There they could debate questions of ideology and tactics and history, educate their students in reformist principles, and wait for propitious times.” He sees them as “idiots” in the classical Greek sense, “meaning private person, a peculiar and self-possessed individual, the opposite of a public-minded citizen of the republic.” The “institutional context” for their work is “lecturing at prestigious schools offering generous salaries, professional publication in highly

specialized journals, brutally competitive grantsmanship in the great shark hunt for corporate and government funding, backslapping paper exchanges at swanky conference hotels where one will be served drinks at the pool by oppressed groups shortly after one's ringing call for their discursive liberation." Watts chuckles at professorial attempts to engage politics by claiming to be "among the ranks of the oppressed," trampled in a Foucaultian way by society's dominant discourse: "I would like to witness, by the way, a well-heeled university teacher actually make such a case to an impoverished urban dweller, an indebted farmer, or an unemployed steel worker, before ducking for cover at the subsequent reaction."<sup>9</sup>

The crisis also stems from the irrelevance of the New History, an unfortunate turn for the profession. Historians were not always so detached from prominent public issues. The first history seminar in the United States took place at the Johns Hopkins University, where graduate students discussed the making of the American constitution. The seminar helped George Bancroft to publish his *History of the Formation of the Constitution of the United States* (1882). Students were given access to "Bancroft's workshop" and, in the words of Herbert Baxter Adams, one of the founding members of the American Historical Association (AHA), "The feeling was thus engendered that, in some slight ways, the seminar was contributing to the great volume of U.S. history."<sup>10</sup> Such scholarly endeavors inspired graduate students and engaged the public sphere—the suicide rate was low.

The AHA's counterpart that deals specifically with American history is the Organization of American Historians (OAH). The President of the OAH my last year of graduate school was Iowa history professor Linda Kerber. Contrasted to Bancroft's seminar on the constitu-

tion, Kerber's last seminar was on Feminist Theory, with a day set aside to discuss Queer Theory. Last April, when she gave her Presidential Address to the OAH convention at the San Francisco Hilton and Towers (the meeting used to be held in affordable places—taking into consideration graduate students—like Grand Forks, Lincoln, Milwaukee, Oklahoma City, and Tonka Bay [Minnesota]), the program listed well over 200 panels, including papers about "Exoticism and Nationalism in the Circus, 1870-1900," "Women, Trees, Perfume, Grunge: The 'Natural Woman' on TV Commercials and MTV," and "Right on Sappho!: Looking for Lust in Lesbian Feminism."

Unfortunately, it is very hard to criticize this turn in the historical profession. According to Joan Scott, a very prominent women's historian and an admirer of Judith Butler, critics of the New Way want "to neutralize the space of ideological and cultural nonconformity" and "control thought," destroying the academy, a place for "thinking hard about everything." On these terms, to criticize the current state of affairs is to be opposed to "thinking," an anti-intellectual brute, consigned to the ranks of "marginal intellectuals, conservative journalists, and disaffected scholars" who are "hopelessly ill-informed," displaying their "obvious ignorance," the kind of ogre described in Richard Hofstadter's book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963).<sup>11</sup> To begin one of her famous essays, unsurprisingly, Scott quotes Foucault, who favors the "ideological use of history by which one tries to restore to man everything that has unceasingly eluded him for over a hundred years." To criticize or to oppose this "ideological use of history" is to impede the pursuit of truth and social justice for those oppressed by the Old History, goals which have "eluded" us to the present.<sup>12</sup> And to criticize the Foucaultian brand of history would be



“giving the establishment its due.”<sup>13</sup>

Scott says she only wants to protect “difference.” Agreed, but the cultural integrity of the republic also deserves protection. If Americans learn about the miracle of the Constitution—like students of Bancroft—they might take its operation more seriously and have more respect for its institutions. But if they see the beginnings of the American republic as corrupt, racist, elitist, and constructed in a fraudulent language of power, then their cynicism and fatalism deepen even more. The Generation Xers keep sitting in the coffee houses thinking about suicide.

If you are a Foucaultian/New Lefter and hate the entrenched bourgeois order in the United States you are probably pouring the coffee, hoping the attack on “authoritarian structures,” linguistic or otherwise, speeds the revolution. Since the 1960s, as radical-turned-social conservative Christopher Lasch (who also taught history at Iowa in the 1960s) argues, “Marxists in the West took the long view and preached patience: the gradual preparation of a new culture.”<sup>14</sup> Current radicals and Marxists and their New Left predecessors do not have to worry about spreading ideas and attitudes that undermine the social order—they want to hasten social disintegration. And if they come to power it is still not a problem—Foucault’s fellow Parisian in the 1950s, Pol Pot, solved the problem of dissent with the Killing Fields. But those of us who want society to work because we believe in the Constitution that Bancroft so diligently studied, tolerate the dissenters, hoping that the scholars in our great republic display at least a modicum of responsibility and public-spiritedness with their academic freedom.

Although radicals equate criticism with fascism and intolerance, I still think criticism is in order—it matters what a republic’s intellectual class thinks and

chatters about. Influencing and shaping and inspiring the public sphere should be a high priority, especially for historians, conveyers of the republic’s heritage. Circus exoticism will not cut it. And the Marshall Plan, I am not afraid to say, is more important than Gay New York. As Thomas Bender has noted, we need “professional conditions that encourage practical concern with the whole,” not particularism, and not a dwelling on the bizarre. He adds that, “If we are to justify the social resources allocated to history—and cumulatively, for all their inadequacy, they are substantial—we must as individual historians communicate, at least occasionally, directly to the public, offering our interpretations of how our society and nation works.”<sup>15</sup> The “democratic theme,” as Merle Curti called it, needs to be restored as one of the central questions in American historical writing, the theme developed by history greats like Bancroft—who saw democracy as an “achievement,” not as oppression—Henry Adams, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Charles Beard. It may remind some young scholars, who are being trained in the midst of the history crisis, that the founding of the American republic was miraculous and its maintenance perilous. It may inspire them to engage the great questions about the American experience, persuading them, as Whitman said, that “Great are the plunges and throes and triumphs and falls of democracy.”<sup>16</sup>

To someone who grew up on a farm and in a small town in South Dakota and attended St. Thomas Aquinas Grade School and the Catholic Church, the turn in history is particularly hard to understand. To be Catholic is to believe in catholicism, or universality, the common, shared human experience. “Standpoint epistemologies” of the New History, on the other hand, maintain that only members of an oppressed group can really understand the history and

the culture of that group. Those who believe in the "imperial-humanist myth of our shared human attributes" are seen as fools.<sup>17</sup> To be Midwestern is to be largely uninterested in the founder of the lesbian magazine *On Our Backs* and author of *Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World* whose views were informed by her "early Bolshevik training" and "by folks who had been either socialists, or profoundly influenced by the New Left and Marxism"—the feature of a recent *In These Times* article. But to be uninterested in such matters, according to the devotees of the New Way, is to be "long a victim of Midwesternization."<sup>18</sup>

My teachers at St. Thomas made learning an adventure, sparking my craving for knowledge about the historical past. I can remember reading about the first European explorers of North America and the American revolution. But since it was a Catholic school, it was not mere triumphalism. Time was taken to understand the plight of the poor—a key component of my Catholic education—and since it was South Dakota a large amount of time was spent talking about Native Americans. When the New History revolution came, I figured Catholics—another group typically left out of Old interpretation—would have become a core research category. But despite constituting a quarter of the population, the history of Catholics, as one historian commented, will "always be marginal to the profession."<sup>19</sup>

The Catholic Church is seen as oppressive and so it is ignored, like political institutions. Steven Gillon, who is doing what he can to push politics back into American history (he wrote a great book on Mondale and the Democrats, for example), notes that "Ironically, while professional historians are abandoning 'old-fashioned' political history, the public is embracing it. The remarkable popularity of documentaries such as *The Eyes on the Prize*, *The American Experience*

and *The Civil War*, the brilliant success of the Holocaust Museum, and the proliferation of state and local historical societies across the country are testaments to the public thirst for history. A few years ago the Arts and Entertainment Network launched the History Channel which, as of 1996, claimed over 12 million viewers."<sup>20</sup> The History Channel is not even available in Iowa City.

History should, as Richard Hofstadter used to say, have "something to say that might help us."<sup>21</sup> It is an important goal, especially when we've reached the absurd moment when a President of the Organization of American Historians in the 1980s had to plead with his colleagues to acknowledge "The Pertinence of Political History." Another historian recently begged his colleagues to concede that "political economy still matters," hoping to redress what some historians call the "massive attempts by social historians to deflect attention to the bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens of each one's favorite victims." Those responding to such criticism argue that "in most university towns nowadays people. . . [are] concerned with women now, with lifestyles, and why everyone's so unhappy." Graduate students at Princeton were organizing a conference for October of 1997 entitled "Casualties of History: Losers, the Lost, and the Problem of Defeat."<sup>22</sup> This focus of academic history is linked to our democratic "crisis," our lack of attention to public matters like the "palpable despair and cynicism and violence" in the republic and the "contemporary incapacity of American politics," what Christopher Lasch, just before his death, called "The Democratic Malaise."<sup>23</sup>

Some historians have not been overtaken by the New Way, and see fit to fire off a book or article or dissertation into the void. But the work has little to connect with, next to no opportunity to trigger an important historiographic dis-

cussion, a lonely protest that floats away without comment. The adherents of the various aspects of the New History receive the attention and drive discus-

sions among historians at present. Those who are skeptical should say so, contribute what they can, and hope for better days.

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