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# ON THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF RANKE AND THE ORIGINS OF THE HISTORICAL PROFESSION IN AMERICA

DOROTHY ROSS

**S**TUDIES OF THE ORIGINS of the historical profession in America generally assume that the first generation to professionalize history understood it, much as we do today, as a specialized, independent discipline, and that these historians misunderstood Ranke. I would like to amend both those accepted truths. Georg Iggers showed twenty-five years ago that most American historians emphasized Ranke's methodology apart from his idealist philosophical premises and hence used him as support for their own nominalistic positivism.<sup>1</sup> But that was not true for the founders of the historical profession in the Gilded Age. They were not nominalistic positivists, nor did they interpret Ranke in that way. Moreover, these founders regarded history not as a separate field of study, but as part of a joint field we might call "historico-politics." If the reign of historico-politics was brief, dissolving by the turn of the century into history and political science, it nonetheless illuminates the mentality of the founders as well as of those who moved beyond them and set out new programs. The uses to which Ranke was put serves as a red thread through this maze and provides one clue, among others, to the long-observed origins of the historical profession in America.

One of the chief sources of misunderstanding, upon which Iggers and most subsequent historians have relied, is W. Stull Holt's 1940 essay, "The Idea of Scientific History in America." Holt claimed that American historians in the last quarter of the nineteenth century could be divided clearly into two camps: those, like Henry and Charles Francis Adams, who were influenced by natural science and believed the task of the historian was to formulate "historical laws or generalizations" (the synthetic positivists); and everyone else, who, with Ranke as a model, believed that "scientific history consisted of a search for facts alone, with no laws or generalizations and with a renunciation of all philosophy" (the nominalistic positivists).<sup>2</sup> Holt's categories ran roughshod over the complex historical scene of the Gilded Age, when history began to organize as an academic and professional pursuit. In these formative decades, many historians regarded the Rankean search for facts and the construction of philosophical or lawlike generalizations as indissolubly linked.

To recover this original context we need first to abandon our firm sense of the specialized profession which history has become in the twentieth cen-

1. G. G. Iggers, "The Image of Ranke in American and German Historical Thought," *History and Theory* 2 (1962): 17-40. "Unable to understand the philosophic context of Ranke's historical thought, American historians detached Ranke's critical analysis of documents, which they understood and which suited their need to give to history scientific respectability, from his idealistic philosophy, which was alien to them. . . . they believed that a Rankean or scientific approach to history consisted in a search for facts with little or no attempts at generalization and a rigorous renunciation of all philosophy" (*ibid.*, 18, 21).

2. W. S. Holt, "The Idea of Scientific History in America," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1 (June 1940): 352-62, particularly 356-57. Following Holt, Iggers classified Andrew Dickson White with the synthetic positivists and Herbert Baxter Adams and Charles Kendall Adams with the nominalistic ones (Iggers, "Image of Ranke," 19-21). This classification still lies below the surface of the rich and subtle analysis in John Higham's *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 98-101.

tury. For most of the nineteenth century, the study and the writing of history in America were heterogeneous domains, with diverse and changing affiliations. In largest part, history was understood as a genre of belles lettres and practiced as such by local patriots and gentry writers. The great romantic historians Parkman, Prescott, Motley, and Bancroft stood at the head of this large group, some organized in local and state historical societies. The few chairs in history at American colleges, like the McLean Professorship of Ancient and Modern History at Harvard College, were mostly occupied by members of this belletristic tradition. For the most part, however, before 1870 history was seldom considered worthy of extensive study or independent instruction in the colleges. In the categories of moral philosophy, history was not “a distinct science, but . . . handmaid to them all.” Most often in American colleges it was joined to the study of American political institutions.<sup>3</sup>

One independent professorship of history, awarded to Andrew Dickson White at the University of Michigan in 1857, reflected the close tie between historical and political instruction. White was first drawn to history by his interest in politics and the accelerating conflict over slavery. His conception of history was shaped in part by his work as an undergraduate and master’s student at Yale under Theodore Dwight Woolsey. Woolsey was a fervid disciple of Francis Lieber, Professor of History and Political Science at Columbia College in New York and author of a seminal text, *On Civil Liberty and Self-Government*. White was thus exposed to Lieber’s conception of the close connection between history and politics, reflected in his joint chair and in the method and content of his historico-political writings. White was also inspired by Thomas Arnold, Regius Professor of History at Oxford. Arnold’s critical historiographical method and sophisticated understanding of institutions, as well as his Teutonism, his belief that nations develop according to historical laws, and his presentist aim to bring historical understanding to bear on contemporary political problems all formed common ground with Lieber’s conception of political science and provided a platform on which American historians could link their studies to his. White claimed his primary purpose in teaching history was to promote “better training in thought regarding our great national problems.” After an interlude in active politics, he became president of Cornell University in 1867 and promptly announced, on paper at least, a “School of Political Science” which embraced history, politics, law, and economics, as well as lectures on “social science” as the scientific study of what were called the dependent, delinquent, and defective classes. Political science, in other words, was the generic term for all the historical and social sciences. In reality, the largest component of White’s “School of Political Science” was history.<sup>4</sup>

**A**S IT TURNED OUT, the central figures in the movement to institutionalize and professionalize history in the reformed universities in the 1870s and 1880s were advocates of this activist and political conception of history. Herbert Baxter Adams, John W. Burgess, Charles Kendall Adams, Albert Bushnell Hart, and White himself were the moving figures behind the organization of the American Historical Association (AHA) and the leaders of the first major professional university departments in history. Papers on contemporary politics were frequently given

3. David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America, 1607-1884* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); George H. Callcott, *History in the United States, 1800-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970); Robert L. Church, “The Development of the Social Sciences as Academic Disciplines at Harvard University, 1869-1900,” Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1965; Norman Fiering, “President Samuel Johnson and the Circle of Knowledge,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 28 (April 1971): 217; Anna Haddow, *Political Science in American Colleges and Universities, 1636-1900* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1939).

4. A. D. White, “How I Was Educated,” *Forum* 2 (February 1887): 572-73; idem, *The Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White*, 2 vols. (New York: Century, 1905), 1:256-62; 2:384; T. D. Woolsey, “Introduction to the Third Edition,” in F. Lieber, *On Civil Liberty and Self-Government*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1877), 5-6; White to Daniel Coit Gilman, 2 February and 5 March 1883, Gilman Papers, The Johns Hopkins University; Haddow, *Political Science in American Colleges, 189-92*; T. Arnold, *Introductory Lectures on Modern History* (New York: D. Appleton, 1845); Duncan Forbes, *The Liberal Anglican Idea of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952). On Lieber: “On History and Political Economy as Necessary Branches of Superior Education in Free States,” in *The Miscellaneous Writings of Francis Lieber*, ed. D. C. Gilman, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1880), 1:179-203, and “History and Political Science Necessary Studies in Free Countries,” in *Writings of Lieber*, 2:329-68; Frank Friedel, *Francis Lieber: Nineteenth Century Liberal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947).

at the AHA, and White and Herbert Adams referred to the association repeatedly in the early years as an organization dedicated to the study of history and politics. The governmental Washington tie that Adams worked so assiduously to maintain for the AHA was a product of that joint vision. Nor was it mere accident or economy that the departments they organized, like the publication series they began, were jointly in history and political science. To these men, history and political science were two aspects of the same large field, and it was the joint field which they intended to establish.<sup>5</sup>

Charles Kendall Adams, White's student, carried on his conception and presided over the establishment of a School of Political Science at Michigan in 1881. By that date, John W. Burgess had given "the political sciences" an added prominence. Burgess too was drawn toward politics by his Civil War experience. Then, as a student of Julius Seelye at Amherst College, he read Lieber and upon graduation enrolled in Columbia Law School to study with him. Forced to withdraw because of illness, he decided instead to read law in a private office and then to study history and the *Staatswissenschaften* in Germany. In 1877 he went to Columbia, where a group of trustees and faculty allied to Samuel Ruggles, a wealthy New York cosmopolitan interested in modernizing the college, recognized Burgess as a fitting successor to Lieber. By 1880 he and the liberal trustees had launched a School of Political Science. Cast along the inclusive lines White had conceived, Burgess's larger permanent staff and ambitious graduate program immediately set a new standard for the field.<sup>6</sup>

Herbert Baxter Adams was moving in a similar direction. Adams too had read Lieber under Seelye at Amherst and studied both political science and history in Germany. His major professor was Johann Bluntschli at Heidelberg, himself an admirer of Lieber, who joined the idealist and historical branches of *Staatswissenschaft* into a single theory of the State. Applying for a position at The Johns Hopkins University, Adams said he wanted "to pursue historical researches and to contribute something to Political Science." With President Daniel Coit Gilman, another Lieber disciple, he began a graduate seminar and then a publication series in "History and Political Science." Spurred on by Burgess's success at Columbia, he hoped for more money to construct "a great school of History and Politics," one that would "command for her graduates the Washington situation," so that "when experts are needed. . . they will be taken from this university," but Gilman did not have the money to provide.<sup>7</sup>

Adams held on, however, to his vision of the joint field. When his coveted professorship was offered in 1890, he was chagrined to learn that it was to be in "American and Institutional History." The term "American history," he told Gilman, conveyed neither the cosmopolitan scope of his teaching nor his aim.

*What I really represent in this University is the practical union of History and Politics. That combination is the main strength of my department. The spirit of my work and of our University Studies in History and Politics has been commended in this country and in Germany because it illustrates precisely that intimate blending of historical and political science which Bluntschli and Lieber, Arnold and Freeman regarded as inseparable. The term "Institutional History" or "Histori-*

5. *Papers of the American Historical Association* 1, no. 1 (1885): 6, 8, 14–15; no. 6 (1885): 463–64; vol. 2, no. 1 (1886): 196–97. D. Van Tassel, "From Learned Society to Professional Organization: The American Historical Association, 1884–1900," *American Historical Review* (AHR) 89 (October 1984): 929–56, pointed out a connection between history and political science in the founding generation of professional historians, as has Marvin E. Gettleman, ed., *The Johns Hopkins University Seminary of History and Politics, 1877–1912* (New York: Garland, 1987), Introduction. Church discussed the activist impulse of the dominant group in the profession in "Development of the Social Sciences."

6. C. K. Adams, *The Relations of Political Science to National Prosperity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1881); Haddow, *Political Science in American Colleges*, 205–8; J. W. Burgess, *Reminiscences of an American Scholar* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934); Albion Small, "Fifty Years of Sociology in the United States (1865–1915)," *American Journal of Sociology* 21 (May 1916), 728n; J. W. Burgess, "The Study of the Political Sciences in Columbia College," *International Review* 12 (April 1882): 346–51; R. Gordon Hoxie et al., *A History of the Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955); D. G. Brinton Thompson, *Ruggles of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946).

7. H. B. Adams, "New Methods of Study in History," *Journal of Social Science* 18 (1884): 227–29, 262–63; idem, "Is History Past Politics?" *Johns Hopkins University Studies in History and Political Science* (JHUSHPS), ser. 13, no. 4 (1895): 78–80; D. C. Gilman, "Introductory Note," in F. Lieber, *On Civil Liberty and Self-Government*, 4th ed., ed. T. D. Woolsey (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1901); John Martin Vincent, "Herbert Baxter Adams," in *American Masters of Social Science*, ed. H. Odum (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), 99–130; Richard T. Ely, "A Sketch of the Life and Services of

*cal Politics*” fairly expresses the spirit of the motto printed upon our University Studies and Seminary wall. . . .

—the motto adopted from Freeman (Arnold’s successor in the Regius chair and a fulsome Teutonist): “History is past politics, and politics are present history.” While later generations of social historians attacked Adams’s conception of the close tie between history and politics as exclusive and narrowing, Adams in fact regarded historico-politics as opening out to the other social sciences. His category of the “political” was Aristotle’s, he claimed, and included anything that “affects the common life of the society.” He encouraged his students to pursue anthropological and socioeconomic topics. Politics was the defining context for Adams and his colleagues because they believed that politics was the most fundamental and inclusive element in the progress of civilization.<sup>8</sup>

**W**HAT TIED THE FIELDS of history and politics together was that both subjects were understood to be engaged in the same task: the discovery of fundamental historical principles upon which to base current political action. For Americans, these historical principles were not difficult to find. As Lieber stated it, the most important principle to be learned from historical study was that of “Teutonic individual independence, especially developed in Anglican liberty and self-government.” These Anglican principles, as he called them, were “the leading subject of Western history and the characteristic stamp and feature of our race, our age, our own country and its calling.”<sup>9</sup> Though originally a German emigré, Lieber had quickly tuned himself to the American voice, blending his Kantian liberalism into the principles of American exceptionalism which pervaded American politics and culture. The task of historico-politics was to verify, strengthen, and preach those principles of civil liberty which Americans believed themselves to have inherited from their Teutonic ancestors and established forever in their own republican institutions. It was a task which manifestly required a concern for both fact and generalization.

If we look at the historical causes behind the reform of the colleges and the rapid expansion of advanced studies in the 1870s and 1880s, it is clear why those historians who understood their field as directly relevant to political action were the ones who took the professional lead. Historico-politics, like other loosely constructed fields of humane learning in America, was galvanized into self-consciousness by a profound cultural and social crisis which gathered force through the Gilded Age. On one level, the crisis was one of intellectual authority, as science increasingly discredited the apologetic stance and naive resort to Divine Providence of the established voices in American culture. On another level, the crisis was broadly social and political, as civil war, reconstruction, and then rapid industrialization appeared to test whether America could sustain the principles which defined its place in history.

To this crisis the leaders in historico-politics had a ready answer. More activist than their belletristic colleagues, but like them as members of a respectable, educated class which feared popular democracy, they offered to reformulate American principles on the firm ground of science and to train a leadership class which would use the lessons of history to guide America

Herbert Baxter Adams,” *Herbert Baxter Adams. Tributes of Friends*, *JHUSHPS*, ser. 20, extra no. (1902); H. B. Adams to D. C. Gilman, 21 May 1876, quoted in W. Stull Holt, “Historical Scholarship in the United States, 1876–1901: As Revealed in the Correspondence of Herbert Baxter Adams,” *JHUSHPS*, ser. 54, no. 4 (1938): 32; H. B. Adams to D. C. Gilman, 4 March 1887, Herbert Baxter Adams Papers, The Johns Hopkins University; H. B. Adams to D. C. Gilman, 13 December 1890, Gilman Papers.

8. H. B. Adams to D. C. Gilman, 19 December 1890, Adams Papers. Note that this letter, as well as the letter urging his connection with political science above, was omitted from the Holt collection. The Hopkins seminar on history and political science was formed specifically to “take cognizance of other than historical questions and embrace among its members other than historical students.” H. B. Adams, “Records of the Historical and Political Science Association and of the Seminary of History and Politics,” 19 December 1877, Special Collections, The Johns Hopkins University. For Adams’s inclusive interests, see *ibid.*, 11 October, 19 December 1878; 15 February, 25 April, 14 November 1884; 23 October, 4 December 1885; 5 November 1886; 13 January 1888.

9. Lieber, *On Civil Liberty and Self-Government*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1877), 21.



into the future. Their new departments of history and political science would be used, according to White, “for the checking of popular unreason, and for the spreading of right reason.” As Herbert Adams said, “In the improvement of the existing social order, what the world needs is historical enlightenment and political and social progress along existing institutional lines. We must preserve the continuity of our past life in the State. . . .” As Burgess feared, “unless a sounder political wisdom and a better political practice be attained, the republican system may become but a form, and republican institutions but a deception.” The task of historico-politics was to preserve American republican principles in the midst of crisis.<sup>10</sup>

When the American students of historico-politics went abroad, they confirmed their native fears and the broad lines of their solution. Moderate German liberals like Bluntschli were also concerned with the threat of class conflict and mass democratic politics and were also developing a historical political science that could withstand those threats. As Mommsen shows, the neo-Rankean historians of Imperial Germany formed a particularly close parallel to the Americans. They too responded to the socioeconomic threats of industrialization by affirming “the great continuities” of German and European history. In France, too, Burgess found at the *Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques* a like-minded bourgeois elite intent upon strengthening its leadership role through historical, scientific education. The establishment of historico-politics in America was part of the wider effort of Western-educated classes to defend a precarious patrimony and class position by reinvigorating their cultural power.<sup>11</sup>

Adherents of historico-politics, then, were at the center of professional organization during the 1870s and 1880s, but other kinds of historians who did not fully share their views also joined their labors and moved into university chairs in history. Moses Coit Tyler, for example, whose background was in *belles lettres* and whose interest was the history of American literature and culture, was appointed at Cornell in 1881. Other young institutional historians, like Ephraim Emerton at Harvard, were skeptical of political activism.<sup>12</sup> But there was at first little conflict generated by these divergent historical tendencies. The substantive agreement among all historians on the importance of those “Anglican principles of self-government” aided in forming a common identity. Whether appearing in the aging rhetoric of Bancroft’s *magnum opus*, or in Emerton’s subtle analysis of the institutional growth of Anglo-Saxon legal principles, or in Burgess’s laws of historico-politics, these substantive principles created a family resemblance through the joint field of history and political science in the Gilded Age.

**I**F THE UNION of history and politics was well suited to the early decades of professionalization, so too were the epistemological premises that allowed these founders to claim knowledge of historical principles. They worked from forms of idealism or common-sense realism that made it possible for them to believe in the discovery of both fact and principle. Rankean method, usually placed on the sides of both fact and general truth, was fitted into their inherited philosophical premises.

When we turn from their sociocultural purposes to their epistemological foundations, however, we enter on more obscure terrain. They were not

10. A. D. White, *Education in Political Science* (Baltimore: John Murphy, 1879), especially 34–35; H. B. Adams, “Is History Past Politics?” 80–81; Burgess, “The Study of the Political Sciences,” 346. Also C. K. Adams, *Relations of Political Science*, 11–15; idem, *A Manual of Historical Literature* (New York: Harpers, 1882), 16–24.

11. James J. Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 19–21, 87–89, 106, 114, 150, 156; Wilhelm Mommsen, “Ranke and the Neo-Rankean School in Imperial Germany: State-Oriented Historiography as a Stabilizing Force in the Post-Revolutionary Nation State,” in *The Shape of History: Essays on the Centennial of the Death of Leopold von Ranke*, ed. G. Iggers and J. Powell (submitted for publication, Syracuse University Press); Thomas R. Osborne, *A “Grande Ecole” for the “Grands Corps”* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 1983), chaps. 7 and 12.

12. Michael Kammen, “Moses Coit Tyler: The First Professor of American History in the United States,” *The History Teacher* 17 (November 1983): 61–85; Church, “Development of the Social Sciences,” chap. 4.

philosophically naive; indeed, having studied in the antebellum college, where philosophy stood at the apex of the curriculum, and then having studied in Germany, where every subject offered epistemological credentials, they were philosophically more concerned than the younger historians and political scientists whom they imperfectly educated in their specialized new programs in the United States. But they were not philosophically sophisticated either and did not write much about their underlying premises, just as they did not teach much about them. Although they did not believe that science precluded all philosophy, it did seem to them to rule out that kind of philosophy which had religious or metaphysical intentions. Probably they wished to avoid that contested ground altogether and at the same time escape the orthodox scrutiny which still watched over the colleges in the Gilded Age.

Burgess was the most outspoken about his philosophical assumptions, and he was unmistakably a Hegelian idealist. Julius Seelye, his teacher at Amherst, was a partial disciple of Laurens Hickok, an early American idealist, and Burgess claimed Seelye's inspiration for his belief in "a universal reason as the real substance of all things, of which each individual man is the microcosm." After his German studies, he followed Hegel. Reason, he believed, was progressively revealed in history, and "the product of the progressive revelation of human reason through history" was the State.<sup>13</sup> The task of political science was first to arrange "the facts of history in the forms and conclusions of science," but then to discern in those facts "political ideals not yet realized. Thrown into the form of propositions, these ideals become principles of political science, then articles of political creeds, and at last, laws and institutions." The process of "philosophical speculation" was thus to Burgess "the most important element in political science, because it lights the way of progress."<sup>14</sup> Burgess stands at one end of the spectrum of this group of historico-political scientists: he was the most deeply rooted in philosophical idealism and the most concerned with the principles of politics as against the particulars of history. In time, he was willing to divide the labor of his joint field, with historians given the preliminary work of discerning and arranging the facts for the higher tasks of political scientists. But still, Burgess's political enterprise remained rooted in history, and he wrote works of history as well as politics. His chief inspiration, he always claimed, and the person to whom his major work was dedicated, was Gustav Droysen. Given Burgess's idealist ambitions, it is not surprising that he went to Droysen for historical method and that he praised Ranke for having a "far-reaching, all-embracing philosophic outlook."<sup>15</sup>

Hart stands one step over from Burgess. The only record he left of his philosophy was in his presidential address to the AHA in 1909, and there he presented himself as half an idealist, of a peculiarly American sort. History is, in part, Hart said, like science, not only in its critical methods and dispassionate attitudes, but in its use of the empirical method of Darwin, the method of accumulating and sifting evidence until "by its own weight it seeks the only outlet. . . . data fall together in harmonious wholes; the mind is led to the discovery of laws; and the explorer into scientific truth is at last able to formulate some of those unsuspected generalizations which explain the whole framework of the universe." Yet, Hart went on, history is not like science because it deals ultimately with mind. In recognizing human motives, in selecting the facts, and in exercising that "dramatic instinct" which dis-

13. Burgess, *Reminiscences*, 52-54, 126-31; idem, *Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law*, 2 vols. (Boston: Ginn, 1890), 1: 67.

14. Burgess, "Political Science and History," *AHR* 2 (April 1897): 407-8.

15. Burgess, *Reminiscences*, 126-31, 373; idem, *Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law*, 1: Dedication. Burgess seems to have been influenced by Droysen's view of the historian as participant in the moral realm of human goals which was the moving force of history. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 187-92.

16. A. B. Hart, "Imagination in History," *AHR* 15 (January 1910): 227–51, especially 233, 237, 248; Samuel Eliot Morison, "Albert Bushnell Hart," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, supp. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941–45), 335–38.

17. A. B. Hart, *National Ideals, Historically Traced* (New York: Harper, 1907), xiv.

18. Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), chap. 2; James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 62–63, 94–109.

19. Hart, "Imagination in History," 245–46. One exception among the younger historians was James T. Shotwell, who went out of his way to inform his colleagues that despite the surface contrast between Ranke's focus on the science of the past and Hegel's theoretical program, Ranke's historiography was premised on idealism and Hegel "but emphasized the Idea which Ranke implicitly accepted" ("The Interpretation of History," *AHR* 18 [July 1913]: 702–3. Cf. Iggers, "Image of Ranke," 23–24).

cerns "whither a people is tending" and what "has carried forward civilization," the historian must use the imagination, which Hart defined as "that high quality of the mind which makes us see things as they are." Here Hart's quotations are to Emerson, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Blake. Hart said he was led to study history by work at Harvard College with the aesthete Charles Eliot Norton in the history of art.<sup>16</sup>

What is striking, of course, is Hart's combining scientific empiricism and romantic idealism without any sense of disjunction. He seemed to accept both the scientists' claim that their empirical generalizations could "explain the whole framework of the universe" and the romantic's claim that imagination "makes us see things as they are." In his study of national ideals, a subject presumably requiring an idealist insight, he honored Darwin, "the great historical master of our age," and asserted that "human institutions also follow a law of natural selection."<sup>17</sup> The best explanation for Hart's mixed epistemology—beyond philosophical incapacity—is the apologetic, syncretistic philosophical impulse which long dominated American culture. Most American colleges taught, as did the Harvard that Hart attended, a form of common-sense realism in which rational reflection upon the data of sense experience and upon the intuitions of mind and conscience was thought to yield true knowledge of both nature and God. In this view, the truths of matter and spirit were understood to be congruent, and science and religion, mutually reinforcing. While a few American romantic idealists (Norton among them) escaped this harmonizing tradition, the tendency of most Americans was to paper over the cracks that appeared between mind and nature. On one level, Hart was aware of differences, but on another, he could not help thinking that Darwinian empiricism and romantic imagination alike revealed the true nature of things and alike created a single harmonious body of truths.<sup>18</sup>

Hart's vision, then, was fundamentally American. His studies in Germany appear to have been primarily with von Holst at Freiburg on American history. In a presidential address crowded with references, hardly a German name appeared. Ranke did appear briefly as an example of positivism, as against Hart's own idealism. It was all very well for Ranke to say "I will simply tell you how it was," Hart chided, but he really told us "'how it was' as seen through the mind of Ranke." In his distance from German sources, Hart picked up here what had become by 1909 the common view of Ranke, a view put forward primarily by the younger generation of historians who were themselves more nominalistic and positivistic than Hart and the older founders.<sup>19</sup>

**H**ERBERT ADAMS stood more squarely within the American tradition of common-sense realism. Like Burgess, he studied first with Seelye at Amherst, but he seems to have been less influenced by Seelye's idealism. In the one defense Adams made of his view of history as past politics, he did not, like Burgess, claim that the State was the highest realization of reason, but rather relied on empirical historical traditions going back to Aristotle's civic humanism. I have found only one statement of his philosophy, among his unpublished papers; it appears to be a letter or fragment of a lecture, which could date from 1880 or 1894.



*Any Science is to be defined as Truth. By Science I mean closely related [organized, classified] knowledge. Truth alone can be known, even about a lie. History is a Science, ie History is Truth. History is Truth about the Conditions and Causes under which and because of which any person, institution, custom, or what-you-please originated, developed, attained maturity, decayed. . . . Ranke's admonition "Write the Truth" is superogatory [sic], no man can do other and write History; Droysen's "self-knowledge" is but a fragment of History, unless the interdependence of all knowledge be granted; Freeman's "Unity of History" is but the Unity of Truth. Philosophy touches all science on the side of abstract thought, History is Philosophy concretized and vocalized. History is the All-comprehensive Science.*

Adams's capitalized "Truth" and his statement, "Truth alone can be known," seem to express his fundamental realism. At this level, Ranke's methodological injunction is transcended. Adams's *common-sense* realism is expressed in his rejection of Droysen's idealism (history as "self-knowledge") in favor of "the interdependence of all knowledge." History was an empirical science of causes and conditions which, as common-sense thinkers claimed, yielded truths consonant with the rational truths of philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

Adams never publicly stated this philosophy, but he did stress a conception of historical methodology consistent with common-sense realism, one which gave equal weight to both empirical science and synthetic truths. Adams was always talking of "the continuity of human history" and urging his students to choose special topics that would lead out to "universal history." Ranke was, for Adams, one of the great masters who combined both aspects of historical methodology. In Adams's essay on Ranke at the AHA in 1887 and in his later writings and comments to students, he presented Ranke partly as the master of a new scientific method which deals critically with sources and eschews the moralistic and religious commentary of older historians. It was to refute this older practice of moralizing that Adams praised Ranke for always giving "the facts." But Ranke was at the same time held up as the master of universal history, a "*Weltgeist*, discerning vast unities where other men had seen only infinite particulars." Ranke understood, said Adams, that "History is in its very nature universal." All his studies of the particular were really studies in universal history, for he saw individual countries "as illustrations of world-historic ideas of religion, freedom, law, and government, expressed or realized by individual European states." Adams was willing to accept Ranke's world historic ideas, along with the principles of Lieber and Bluntschli, Arnold and Freeman, as examples of the universal truths embedded in history and discoverable by empirical investigation.<sup>21</sup>

If Burgess was a Hegelian idealist and Hart and Adams adherents of eclectic versions of common-sense realism, White was influenced by positivism. In his first academic appointment teaching history at Michigan between 1857 and 1862, White started reading Buckle, Lecky, and the American positivist, William Draper, just as Darwin and Spencer began to break upon American consciousness. This led him, he remembered, to think of history as "less and less a matter of annals, and more and more a record of the unfolding of humanity."<sup>22</sup> The result was a view of history in fact very similar to that of Adams, for synthetic positivism as well as idealism could be absorbed into the eclectic

20. H. B. Adams, "Is History Past Politics?" 69. The unpublished fragment is typed, titled "History," and undated in the Adams Papers.

21. H. B. Adams, "Leopold von Ranke," *Papers of the AHA* 3 (1888): 101-20; idem, "Records," 22 February, 3 October, and 14 November 1884; 6 March 1885; 22 October 1886; 5 March 1897.

22. White, *Autobiography*, 1:42.

23. A. D. White, "On Studies in General History and the History of Civilization," *Papers of the AHA* 1, no. 2 (1885): 25.

24. *Ibid.*, 6–27.

25. C. K. Adams, "On Methods of Teaching History," in *Methods of Teaching History*, 2d ed., ed. G. S. Hall (Boston: Ginn, 1885), 203–4.

26. C. K. Adams, *Manual*, 25–30, 199, 303, 460.

27. C. K. Adams, "Recent Historical Work in the Colleges and Universities in Europe and America," *Papers of the AHA* 4, no. 1 (1889): 19–42, especially 30.

tic native philosophy. White advocated for historians the "union of close scientific analysis with a large philosophic synthesis."<sup>23</sup>

White's presidential address to the opening meeting of the AHA in 1884 was titled "On Studies in General History and the History of Civilization," and his purpose was to urge the new profession to move onto that large terrain. Using Buckle's authority, he claimed that empirical scientific method began with observation, moved to discovery, and then ended in a philosophical method of synthesis. Here White was pushing inductive science into the realm of synthetic philosophy even further than Buckle himself occasionally seemed to do. Underlying this strategy must have been the American belief that empirical generalizations and rational truths formed a single body of truth. White listed as exemplars of the mutually nurturant relationship between special studies and synthetic history Voltaire, Guizot, Gibbon, Lecky, Bancroft, Draper minus his analogy between individual and national development, Vico, Lazarus, the world histories of Leo and Ranke, and finally, the special studies of Ranke, Mommsen, and Droysen, which were written in the same world historical spirit. Clearly the "laws of development" and of "relations" which White hoped to get from history were not understood in an exclusively positivistic manner. He criticized Spencer for trying to limit historians to material causes and statistical study, because the observation of thought, character, and institutions was far more revealing of the broad principles of history. "Moral proof," by which White seemed to mean historians' understanding of the motives of their subjects, was, he said, far superior to statistics in getting at "truth." If White's conception of history was grounded in positivism, he was not confined by it.<sup>24</sup>

White's student, Charles Adams, seems to have had little in the way of philosophical training, and it is clear from his sizable *Manual of Historical Literature* (1882) that he had no firsthand knowledge of the German idealists. He may well have accepted White's eclectic and synthetic positivism, for he always echoed the call to study facts in their larger relations, urging that without a correct idea of "the whole" to begin with there was no way to reach an understanding of the parts.<sup>25</sup> Like Herbert Adams and White, he praised both the empirical and the synthetic Ranke. In his *Manual*, he said that Ranke's greatness lay in his "masterly generalizations," in the "deep insight with which he penetrates to the very bottom of affairs, and brings the causes and the springs of action into the light," and in his ability to show "the real influence and significance of events."<sup>26</sup> By 1889, in an address to the AHA about the progress of historical work in Europe and America, it was Ranke's historical seminary, with its new rules of evidence and investigation from original sources, that he featured. Still, he made clear in that speech, by his praise of John Seeley's program in historico-politics at Cambridge, that he still adhered to a view of history like that of his mentor.<sup>27</sup>

**S**UCH WERE THE VARIED but related grounds on which these five men sought to found the joint field of historico-politics in America. They hoped to produce historical writing that was empirical and synthetic; that was impartial, naturalistic, and scientific in its discovery and statement of facts, but philosophic in its discernment of fundamental historical principles. For four of the five mem-

bers of this group, Ranke was understood as a model for both aspects of their enterprise.

Why then did their students not follow in their footsteps? The historians who succeeded these founders—George Burton Adams, Charles McLean Andrews, Herbert Levi Osgood, John Franklin Jameson, Frederick Jackson Turner, James Harvey Robinson, Edward P. Cheyney—were, to begin with, moved even more strongly than their elders by the desire to attain the modern authority of science.<sup>28</sup> For the older group, it was enough to forswear supernatural knowledge and to add the new empirical methods onto their older philosophical conceptions. But the standards of science were tightening during the late nineteenth century. Whereas earlier science had been understood as “organized knowledge,” loosely connected to empirical observation, scientists now demanded that generalizations reflect only the observed natural facts. By the newer standards of critical positivism, the synthetic generalizations of the earlier positivists and idealists looked like metaphysical constructs.<sup>29</sup> For Americans it was easy to fall back on a nominalistic empiricism as the proper ground for an authentic science. Baconian empiricism, based on common-sense realism, had early become the dominant method of inquiry in America. For the heirs of this tradition, induction from observed facts and skepticism regarding preformed generalizations seemed the high-road to science.

The second wave of professional historians were also more strongly influenced by historicism than their elders were. The modern, historicist conception of history as a self-contained and continuous process of qualitative change did not have much impact in America until the closing decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> American recognition of the difference between past and future had been blocked by a millennial conception of the American republic in which the past appeared as prologue and the future as fulfillment of America’s republican destiny. It was still this early-modern conception of history which inspired the elders of historico-politics in their search for historical principles that would guide political practice into the future. The newer, more critically scientific historians rejected the millennial framework of American history and self-consciously asserted the difference of past and future. They broke the Teutonic chain and the republican cycles on which the principles of American civil liberty had been based, and showed that historians must understand all things in the context of their own time and place.

It is easy to see how these more empiricist and contextual commitments could converge and lead these younger historians to criticize the work and attitudes of their elders. This is the intellectual background behind the professional “revolt” of the 1890s which David Van Tassel discovered in the AHA.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the joint field of historico-politics was also splitting apart. Indeed, in calling these younger scholars “historians,” I am recognizing that the second wave of scholars in this joint field had self-consciously identified with either history or political science. The political counterparts of Andrews, Jameson, and Turner were Frank Goodnow, Woodrow Wilson, and Westel W. Willoughby, and in 1904 they broke off from the AHA and formed their own American Political Science Association.

On one level, the split was a product of diverging interests compounded by rising professionalism. While political scientists were centrally concerned

28. For the characterization of this generation I rely on my *Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

29. Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 10–20.

30. D. Ross, “Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth Century America,” *AHR* 89 (October 1984), 909–28.

31. Van Tassel, “From Learned Society.”

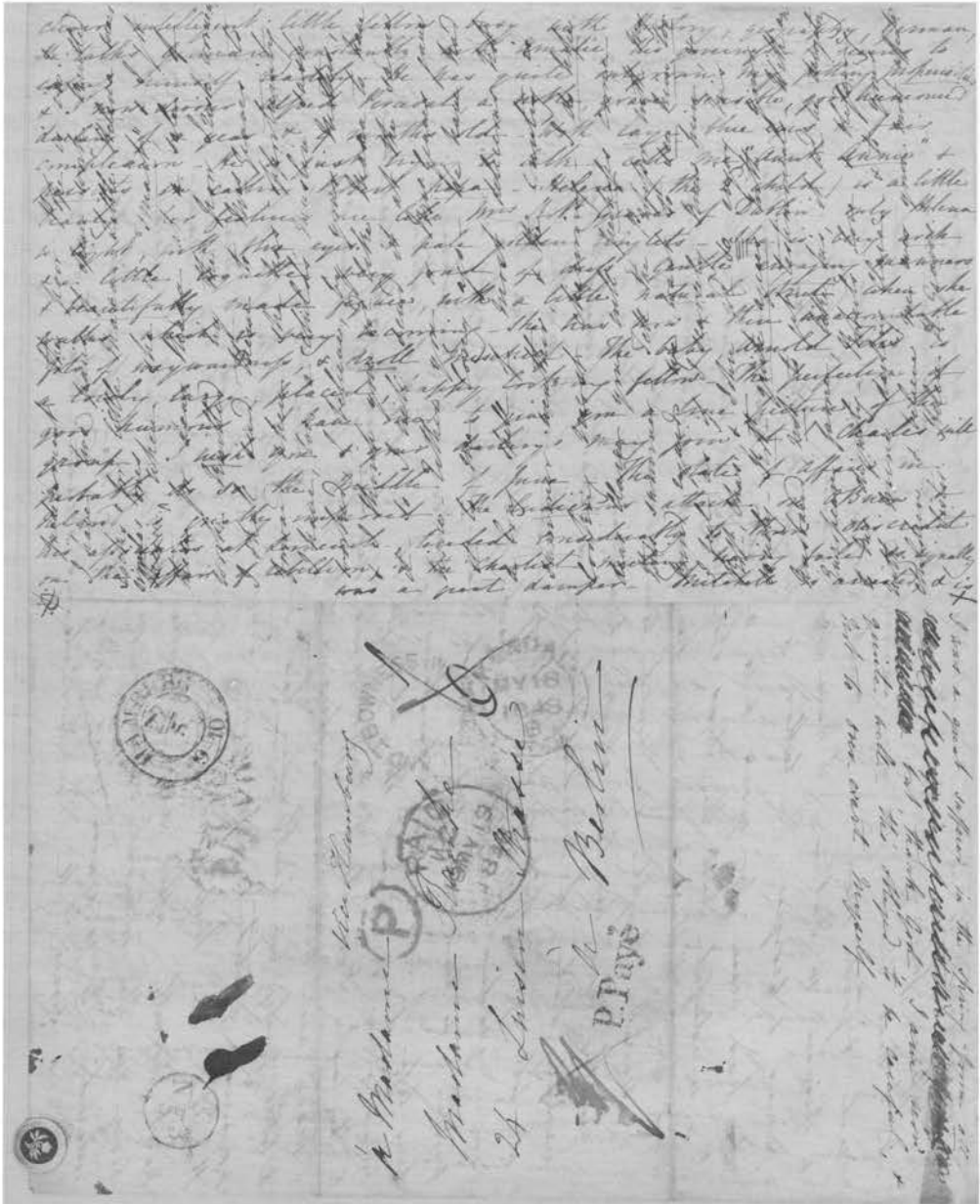
with contemporary politics, most historians, whether descended from the belletristic tradition or simply engrossed in the demands of the Rankean reconstruction of the past, were not. In the rapidly enlarging and decentralized university system, specialization was relatively easy to effect and carried the status rewards of institutional and disciplinary independence. But beneath these professional concerns were the divergent uses to which historians and political scientists put their new historicism and positivism.

The line of fissure appeared along the widening gap between past and future. As the acceptance and understanding of historicism deepened, those scholars most interested in recovering the past increasingly recognized the difficulty of their task. Mindful as well of the empirical demands of science, they opted for the close, detailed contextual reconstruction of the past. To those students of historico-politics who wanted above all to guide present and future political practice, however, historicism suggested that past experience, being different, was not of much use. Politics must be studied in the context of the present. More than that, if firm principles were to be developed to guide action, they could no more rest on present history than past, for the future would be different again. Thus the political scientists, anxious for usefulness and practical power, sought a model of natural process within or beneath history on which to ground their principles. While historians learned to historicize the principles of American civil liberty and to accept the guidance they could provide in that more limited and insecure form, the political scientists sought grounds in nature for the norms of American political practice.

Historico-politics was thus a transitional moment in the professionalization of both history and political science in the United States. Recognizing this fact allows us to clarify the understanding of Ranke and the dynamics of professionalization, but its implications extend further, beyond the limits of this paper. The milieu of historico-politics allows us to see how centrally the American historical profession was tied to the national ideology of American exceptionalism. It also alerts us to the fact that the presentism, the synthetic aim, and the sympathy with the social sciences that we associate with the "New History" of the Progressive period were central to the profession at its origin in the Gilded Age. As historians well know, new origins will require altering many features of the development which followed.

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Letter to Clara Graves Ranke from her mother, dated 18 May 1848.  
The "crisscross writing" was for economy of paper.

