The Ends of History

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“Who killed Clio?”

This question is one that a small but vocal number of critics of recent trends in the discipline of history have been determined to pose. Was it the feminists, in the classroom, with the blunt instrument of political correctness? Or Dr. Derrida, in the archive, with a postmodern poison? Did the rise of identity politics bring about the muse’s downfall? Or was it a longing to be thought “professional” and “scientific”? All of these accusations (and others) have been made about history’s death in this strange and now long-running academic variation on the board game Clue. (Some even say that a Butler—Judith—did it.) But even after two decades of culture wars, who done it—and indeed *if* history’s been done in—remains far from clear.

One thing that has made this Case of the Murdered Muse so hard to crack is that those described at one point as the victim’s best friends sometimes are decried at others as having turned out to be her worst enemies. Back in 1990, for example, Canadian social historian Bryan Palmer wrote a book, *Descent into Discourse,* which insisted that Clio was alive and well when in the arms of Class Analysis, but then French theorists came along and did her in. *The New Criterion* suggests in its April 2001 issue, on the other hand, that the main threat to the muse is posed by Class Analysis itself, personified as a nefarious cabal made up of followers of both Karl Marx and Michel Foucault. And a similar tale is told in Australian conservative Keith Windschuttle’s *The Killing of History,* first published in 1994 and since reprinted twice. Adding to the confusion, some of those who agree with Windschuttle’s main points think his title overstates the issue. We are dealing here not with homicide, they argue, just attempted murder, thanks to some brave new protectors stepping up to guard the muse.

This, at least, is how I read three recent essays contributed to the *Times*

Literary Supplement (London), beginning with one by Victorian specialist and conservative commentator Gertrude Himmelfarb that appeared in the fall of 2000. In her review of the first issue of the new *Journal of the Historical Society,* Himmelfarb celebrated the fact that a last minute infusion of good old-fashioned empiricism had been delivered to the discipline. In her eyes, the Historical Society, a group founded in the late 1990s as an alternative to the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, is now Clio's best friend. Presumably because its members are determined to do all they can to guard the muse from the slings and arrows of outrageous fads. Contributors to its new journal, Himmelfarb claims, unlike those writing for the flagship periodicals of the two more established American professional societies, are worried by the extent that the study of "religion . . . politics, diplomacy and ideas" have become "casualties of the 'new' (no longer so new) history" of the 1960s-1980s. The *Journal of the Historical Society* is refreshing, in her view, since it pays "serious attention" to "serious subjects," such as the links between economic practices and democratic virtues in city-states and republics.

Also in the Clio-isn't-dead-but-has-been-endangered category is "All Quiet on the Postmodern Front," a winter 2001 *TLS* commentary by historian Arthur Marwick of London's Open University. Marwick makes points similar to Himmelfarb about the muse's renewed vitality, after a time of deathbed throes. But the Knights in Shining Armor who came to Clio's rescue, in his account, were not the American founders of the Historical Society but rather scholars based in London (Mark Mazower and Orlando Figes) and much more surprisingly Paris (Yves-Marie Berce). These heroes, he says, have bucked the trends of the day and dared to write in unfashionable ways about unfashionable things. Too many historians of recent generations, according to Marwick, have been obsessed with theory and with abstractions such as discourse analysis. This is thankfully, he claims, not the case with some of the new stars of the discipline such as Mazower (who has written extensively on European wars of the twentieth century) and Figes (author of a narrative history of the Russian Revolution). These two, and others like them, have been bold enough to turn their attention to the things that good history writing should always be about: how "events are experienced, the outcomes of those experiences, and the place of events in complex chains of causation."

The third *TLS* essay that I have in mind is a review by C. Bradley Thompson that appeared in the summer of 2001 and is likely to be of particular interest to readers of *Common-place,* since it focuses on the historiography of the American Revolution. "Over the past thirty years," Bradley laments, "narrative historians of the Revolution have been fighting a losing battle against those who would turn history into a social science" and who "scoff at the idea that one can study the motives, ideas and actions of autonomous moral beings." It is unclear, from his account, whether Bradley thinks that we have learned anything much of value from the "monographs of ordinary people doing ordinary things" that have proliferated in recent times. "Midwives, witches and wenches" (favored topics for new historians), though, seem of at best only cursory

interest to Bradley, and he has little time as well for general theories that look for grand patterns and thus ignore the "contingency and drama" of a year like 1776. When Clio is in good shape, he suggests, historians concentrate on Great Men doing Great Deeds. He thus welcomes the resurgence, in studies of the American Revolution, of biography-driven works such as Joseph Ellis's *Founding Brothers* (New York, 2001), Bernard Weisberger's *America Afire* (New York, 2000), and John Ferling's *Setting the World Ablaze* (New York, 2000)—the three specific books he reviews. Nothing is better for a muse made anemic by a diet of social scientific pap, Bradley suggests, than spending time with authors unafraid to focus on the "riveting history of the great political events" for which Adams, Jefferson, and Washington (not "deep-lying and slowly moving social structures") were responsible.

The case—at least to those who feel, as I do, that Clio is not just alive but in fairly good shape right now—has just grown curioser and curioser over the years. And recently, New York University Professor Tony Judt, a well-known scholar of modern European intellectual and political life, has taken his readers completely through the looking glass via a tellingly titled essay, "The End of History," which appeared in the *New Republic* last May. This article is worth a close look. After all, as a regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books* and other general interest publications, Judt is an unusually influential conveyor of ideas about the state of the discipline to the public at large.

The essay in question, which was not Judt's first to complain about the direction the profession has taken, was cleverly disguised as a review of Kathleen Burk's *Troublemaker: The Life and History of A. J. P. Taylor*. One of Judt's main claims is simple: Taylor would have little chance of getting tenure these days—if he was "fortunate enough to find employment" in the first place. Why? Because "the people whose words and actions" interested that great historian of modern Europe were "elderly white Christian men." Moreover, Taylor's publications were jargon free and "too frequently to be found in accessible media outside the guild"; he was more interested in nationalists than in theories of nationalism; and he did not allow his concern with detail to keep him from venturing "broad claims." History since Taylor, Judt implies, was attacked from many directions and everything from obfuscation (in the realm of terminology) to democratization (in the realm of historical actors deemed worthy of study) took their toll on the discipline. Indeed, Judt gives us a complex vision of the death of Clio that is reminiscent of the denouement to Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express:* the revelation that somany blows were struck renders it pointless to try to figure out who exactly did in the victim.

How Judt's essay strikes a reader is likely to depend heavily on her or his position. It has doubtless evoked more than a few hearty calls of "Here, here" from professional historians who share his gloomy vision of the state of the field. And it has surely made gripping reading for some people fascinated with the past who work outside of the academy and are curious about what has been

happening in history departments on American campuses. But professional historians who do not think of the discipline as dead, dying, or even very sick—a large group in which I count myself—are likely to be annoyed by essays such as his and Himmelfarb's. This is in part because of our sense that seeing such articles will leave members of that second category of readers just described with an erroneous impression of the state of history writing and history teaching today. To many of us, Clio seems, at worst, to be experiencing more than her fair share of growing pains just now. If she feels worn out, this is due to trying to stretch in new directions, attempting to cover more topics and peer into more corners of the world than ever before. To portray this inquisitive and adventurous muse as incapacitated seems to us peculiar to say the least.

This does not mean that we feel historians should be complacent. My own sense at least is that history, like many other academic disciplines, faces important challenges right now. One reason for this is that shifts are taking place in the economic and technological aspects of scholarly publishing that are leading in directions no one can predict. The very existence and form of *Common-place* is reflective of this confusing situation. On the one hand, new ways to communicate about the past have become possible (in cyberspace, for example), but on the other hand there is deep concern about the difficulty of finding ways to get certain kinds of ideas into print (due to cutbacks at university presses among other factors).

In addition, significant questions have been raised lately in many quarters over whether there has been too much emphasis put on specialized knowledge and too little attention paid to synthesis in recent decades. This is linked to ongoing debates among historians about what is gained and what is lost when more or less attention is placed on storytelling techniques as opposed to other methods of communicating information about the past.

On top of all this, there is now concern, as there should be, with making historical scholarship speak to the issues of a new epoch in which the rapid flow of people, products, ideas, and violence across borders is challenging familiar concepts of the shape of the world. In the United States, there are also many specific political trends and debates—touching on everything from multiculturalism to feminism to the legacy of slavery—that present historians with new challenges. Never before, perhaps, has history been brought into so many different sorts of contemporary arguments in so many different ways. Some look to history as a remedy to past injustices (as is the case with many discussions of reparations). Others turn to it as a provider of analogies to help make sense of unprecedented events (as was the case in the aftermath of September 11 with the repeated use of references to Pearl Harbor). How exactly professional historians can make their work relevant to these enterprises remains an open question, as is that of whether the discipline has become too politicized or too far removed from political engagement in the past few decades.

Then there is the recurring need for historians to strive to connect their scholarship to the interests of people outside of the academy. Here, as in many other cases, one can see a glass that is half full: for example, my sense is that more and more of my colleagues have been putting their expertise to work in recent years as consultants for documentary film projects, museum exhibitions, and the like. Or one can see a glass that is half empty: for example, reward structures at major research universities may seem to go too far in valuing publications intended only for specialists over those designed to reach and engage broader audiences of readers.

To speak of challenges that need to be faced is very different, however, than to speak of a discipline that is dying or dead.

It is important to note one factor that makes it particular easy for the public to be led astray about Clio's health: those who think in terms of disciplinary challenges as opposed to fiendish plots generally do not write about the issue in general interest periodicals. Conspiracy theorists might see something suspicious in this. They might imagine we keep a low profile so that outsiders will be less aware of how much we have benefited from recent trends. Or they might interpret this as proof that we really do only care about writing things that will interest one another as opposed to nonspecialists (even though some of us do write about other matters for newspapers and popular magazines). There are, however, more mundane reasons for our comparative silence on this issue. Saying Clio is alive and well, just doing more things and fraternizing with a more eclectic bunch of disciplines than she used to, does not seem newsworthy. Moreover, many of us would rather go about our regular work than write polemics. And this "regular work," incidentally, even among historians influenced by theories that have their roots in Paris, often involves trying to make sense of historical events.

My own case may be instructive. Most of my graduate training took place in the 1980s at Berkeley, then a hotbed of interdisciplinary experimentation and the birthplace of the cultural studies journal *Representations.* Hence, it is no surprise that my dissertation on Chinese social movements included references to literary and cultural theorists and had a lot to say about symbols and discourse. It also, however, contained chapters that reconstructed what happened and why at key moments in the Chinese Revolution. From that eclectic starting point, I have gone on to publish essays (occasionally in nonacademic as opposed to academic periodicals) that could be categorized as contributions to everything from the study of popular culture to the history of a Great Idea (human rights). In addition, I have just coedited (with an anthropologist) a volume called *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities* that brings together work by historians and scholars in other disciplines who share an interest in gender. This eclecticism is, I think, not unusual. It reflects a career that has taken shape during a period when no particular trend has been dominant. Many of the things I have just said about myself could be adapted, in general ways, to describe the publishing careers, for example, of early Americanists who were part of my Berkeley graduate school cohort, such as Nina Silber,

Stephen Aron, and Elizabeth Reis (a past contributor to *Common-Place*)

I would also argue that eclecticism is the best word for what has been appearing in the pages of some of the discipline's leading journals of late, including the Organization of American Historians' *Journal of American History* and the American Historical Association's *American Historical Review*. That, at least, is my sense after having had the good fortune to be closely affiliated with the latter journal from 1997 through the middle of 2001. (I served first as the associate editor and then, for a year, as the acting editor, while the regular editor, Michael Grossberg, took a sabbatical.)

What exactly have the critics claimed about the *AHR* in the pieces alluded to above? *The New Criterion* says it has swung too far to the left—citing as particularly telling its recent publication of radical historian Eric Foner's AHA presidential address, "American Freedom in a Global Age." Himmelfarb, without specifically naming it, clearly sees it as one of the "establishment" periodicals that has been ignoring major topics such as American Protestantism and the nature of citizenship. And Judt presents it as part of a system of "self-censorship" that discourages young historians not just from working on A. J. P. Taylor's favorite topics but also from writing about them clearly.

From my (admittedly biased) perspective as a participant in the editorial process, it seems that what the *AHR* has actually been doing lately has simply been publishing work that ranges very widely in terms of subject matter and methodology. There has also been a good deal of variation when it comes to the ideological content of the articles and presidential addresses it has run. It is hard to imagine, for example, how Robert Darnton's 2000 presidential address on the circulation of news in France around the time of the French Revolution could be construed as a Marxist interpretation of the past. Even harder to interpret as radical would be a 1997 *AHR* article by William Roger Louis, a specialist in the history of the British Empire who would several years later be elected AHA president. This essay explored (in a fashion A. J. P. Taylor would have found very familiar) the diplomatic status of Hong Kong in the wake of World War II.

There is no question that, due to its eclecticism, the *AHR* has often showcased work on topics that Himmelfarb might consider marginal and that have nothing to say about the Great Men of such concern to C. Bradley Thompson. It has not, though, ignored diplomacy (as the Louis article just mentioned indicates), American religion (a 1999 essay by Susan Juster on evangelical activities in the early Republic comes to mind), or the dynamics of citizenship (a 2000 essay by Mary Ryan on U.S. city halls addressed this). It is not even the case that the *AHR* has had nothing to say lately about the Founding Fathers: a review essay by Peter Onuf and Jan Lewis appeared in 1997 that assessed the strengths and weaknesses of various works on Jefferson.

Finally, Judt's arguments notwithstanding, the *AHR* has gone to considerable lengths to make sure it regularly publishes work by people who care about the

quality of their prose—something that is also true of the *Journal of American History.* One indication of the *AHR's* concern with this (and with exploring issues associated with narrative) was the commissioning of a 1998 forum on historical fiction. The lead piece was by novelist Margaret Atwood (who had recently published *Alias Grace,* a work based on an actual trial) and responses to it came from three professional historians: Jonathan Spence, Lynn Hunt, and John Demos. All of the respondents were asked to write in part because of their reputations as stylists, something that they had earned in part by writing essays or books intended for popular as opposed to specialist audiences.

In the end, however, it is neither as a writer of history nor a onetime editor of a particular historical journal that the debate on the Murdered Muse leaves me most perplexed—but as a reader. It would be easy, but wrong, to assume that someone like me must admire works on the past very different from those that impress scholars such as Marwick, Himmelfarb, and Judt. After all, my work has appeared in venues with such (to them) suspicious sounding titles as *Theory and Society* and the *New Left Review.* And yet, if I were to compile a list of the books on the past that I have read and appreciated in the last half dozen years, I suspect that more than a few works on it would be ones that historians of the Clio-is-dead-or-endangered school would also deem admirable.

Some books on my list might not please them. Gail Hershatter's *Dangerous Pleasures,* a study of prostitution in Old Shanghai, would probably be too focused on discourse for Marwick's taste. And the emphasis on imperialist exploitation in Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence*, a book comparing economic trends in China and the West between the 1600s and 1800s, might rub Himmelfarb the wrong way. Other works on my list, though, would be likely to strike a more positive chord with these two critics and with Judt. Surely, for example, Marwick would like, as I do, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*—after all, it is by Mark Mazower, one of the new generation of historians he credits with helping to defeat postmodern threats to Clio. Himmelfarb could not object to the inclusion on my list of Mary Ann Glendon's *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* After all, this fluidly written study pays close attention to religion, politics, a big idea, and a famous person. And wouldn't Judt admire, as I do, Stephen Aron's *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay?* The prose is clear and forceful, the main protagonists Christian men.

Finally, I would like to think that, if they came across Keith Schoppa's *Blood Road,* one of the most interesting recent works on the part of the world I happen to study, they would all join me in admiring it. This is a carefully researched biography of Shen Dingyi, a Chinese politician, poet, and educator who died in mysterious circumstances. And in addition to all it has to tell us about the life, times, and ideas of an intriguing historical figure, it has the attraction of reading in parts like a good whodunit. The fondness that many historians have for this genre is well known, and I am definitely among those whose favorite works to take to the beach tend to be mysteries. I do have

certain strong preferences though: one is that, when I read a tale of detection, I like the victim to be a person, not a muse.

Further Reading: *Assessments of the State of the Discipline* The following essays and books critical of recent trends have been cited above: Gertrude Himmelfarb, untitled review of the *Journal of the History Society,* in the "Learned Journals" section, *Times Literary Supplement* (London), November 10, 2000: 30-31; Arthur Marwick, "All Quiet on the Postmodern Front," *Times Literary Supplement* (London), February 23, 2001: 13-14; Tony Judt, "The End of History," *The New Republic,* May 14, 2001: 36-42; C. Bradley Thompson, "The Return of the Great Men*," Times Literary Supplement* (London), August 10, 2001: 26-27; "Notes and Comments," *The New Criterion,* April 2001: no pagination (accessed online at www.criterion.com); Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990); and Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (reprint edition, New York, 2000). For an extended discussion of the state of history writing today that is much more optimistic in tone, though cognizant of challenges facing professional historians, see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1995). *Other works cited above* William Roger Louis, "Hong Kong: The Critical Phase, 1945-1949," *American Historical Review,* vol. 102, no. 4 (October 1997): 1052-85; "Histories and Historical Fictions: An AHR Forum," *American Historical Review,* vol. 103, no. 5 (December 1998): 1502-29; Susan Juster, "Demagogues or Mystagogues? Gender and the Language of Prophecy in the Age of Democratic Revolutions," *American Historical Review,* vol. 104, no. 5 (December 1999): 1560-81; Robert Darnton, "An Early Information Society: News and Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris*," American Historical Review,* vol. 105, no. 1 (February 2000): 1-35; Mary P. Ryan, "'A Laudable Pride in the Whole of Us': City Halls and Civic Materialism," *American Historical Review,* vol. 105, no. 4 (October 2000): 1131-70; Eric Foner, "American Freedom in a Global Age," *American Historical Review,*vol. 106, no. 1 (February 2001): 1-16; Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-century Shanghai* (Berkeley, 1997); Mark Mazower*, Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London, 1999); R. Keith Schoppa*, Blood Road : The Mystery of Shen Dingyi in Revolutionary China* (Berkeley, 1995); Stephen Aron, *How the West was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore, 1996); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, 2000); and Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York, 2001).

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