[Social History as Lived and Written]: Reply

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Reply:

The comments offered by Darrett B. Rutman and Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., raise three issues. The first concerns the historian’s approach to the discipline: the conceptual paradigm. The second problem relates to the philosophical stance or ideology of the author—his or her comprehension of the social world and of human nature. Finally, there is the question of method, the techniques of research and rhetoric that constitute the craft of the historian. In each instance, I find myself more in agreement with the arguments advanced by Berkhofer than the views expressed by Rutman.

Is social history only “history with the politics left out,” as Professor Rutman suggests? I do not think so and find considerable support for my position in Professor Berkhofer’s astute analysis of the paradigm implicit in the work of the “new” social historians. As Berkhofer indicates, many younger scholars repudiate “consensus” history because of their dissatisfaction with its poorly formulated idealist epistemology. Instead, they assume the “priority of material existence” and utilize a conceptual framework that relates “politics, economics, diplomacy, and intellectual trends” to “nexus in specific social systems.” The resulting social interpretation of history does not omit politics but assigns political activity a subordinate position. Historians writing from this perspective assume that political decisions affect social existence, but they emphasize the degree to which the social system shapes the character of political institutions. In this formulation society and politics remain inextricably intertwined; good social history must also be good political history.

Yet the primacy given in the social interpretation of history to the “overall social system” represents a new conceptual paradigm and, as Professor Berkhofer discerns, differentiates it from both traditional political history and the “consensus” and Progressive approaches to the American past. This “historiographic revolution” (assuming it has or will occur) eliminates neither the “cane” and poor scholarship that Professor Rutman attacks nor the “anarchy” that he celebrates; these continue to exist, but within the intellectual framework of the new social approach. In scholarship as in society, revolutions rarely stop the flow of life or the flux of existence, but they often transform their meaning.

This sweeping generalization as to the nature of revolutionary change raises the second issue, the historian’s comprehension of the world. Professor Rutman avers that most research “is done in the absence of any philosophical consideration at all.” I must disagree. As my article indicates, all historians take philosophical positions—implicitly if not explicitly—with respect to the
ontological status of the evidence, the relationship between social reality and individual consciousness, and the potential of human nature. Simply to affirm a “commitment to empiricism” does not eliminate these philosophical choices for Rutman or for any other historian. The “facts” have to be explained not in terms of grand metaphysical schemes but in intellectually precise and coherent formulations. Commitment to one or another of the philosophical positions suggested by Professor Berkhofer (social-materialist, critical, liberal, and so forth) cannot be avoided by the historian in his or her daily professional life, but it can be ignored—’s Rutman himself seems determined to do. My own view is that the philosophically self-conscious author or teacher offers a more accurate and more informed interpretation of history.

What stance should a historian take? And what positions are inherent to the social interpretation of history? I cannot agree with all of Professor Berkhofer’s observations. Many of the new social historians do not embrace “materialism”—as the intense interest in the scholarship of symbolic anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz clearly indicates. Community studies are not flawed by a presumption of the universality of their substantive findings, for their chief contribution has been the explication of social process. There is an important difference between the historian’s professional responsibility to comment critically on the power relations and cultural hegemony in past societies and the citizen’s obligation in the contemporary world, but Berkhofer confuses the two. Finally, I cannot fulfill his request to “embrace” or to reconcile all of the varieties of social history, for some are mutually exclusive. My article explains why some philosophical positions and analytic strategies satisfy me more than others. I ask only that we as historians acknowledge the existence of these options and, like Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Williams, “wrestle” with their implications. In so doing, we contribute not only to the more coherent comprehension of the past but also to the intellectual history of our own time.

This brings us, finally, to the question of method—as Professor Berkhofer puts it: “the problem of expository viewpoint and form demanded by modern consciousness.” Should historians emulate those twentieth-century novelists who abandon the “omniscient observer’s viewpoint for a pluralistic perspective” and a “fragmented focus”? This appealing suggestion is compatible with the phenomenological approach and the action model advocated in my essay. The “total” history of an event can easily take the form of a montage composed of individual life-histories. There is no inherent contradiction between the modern literary consciousness and the phenomenological method; indeed, they are closely related in origin and in technique.

The paradigmatic episode raises more serious methodological issues, as Professor Berkhofer perceptively observes. These episodes are chosen and controlled by the historian and, therefore, embody some of the conceptual assumptions of “old fashioned universal history” with its omniscient narrator. Moreover, this approach neglects important problems of focus and comprehension. It “freezes” time (rather than space, as in the community study, or
pattern as in the *thèse* of the *Annalistes*), thereby avoiding "the ultimate complexity of causal relationships across long periods of time." These points are well taken and suggest some of the very real limitations of *histoire problème*. Nevertheless, this method succeeds in many instances and resolves more technical and interpretive problems than the three-tiered program of research advocated by Professor Rutman. Should we assign Ph.D. candidates the task of digging out the facts on mortality in the early Chesapeake, then pass on the data to tenure-conscious assistant professors for cautious articles connecting life expectancy and family structure, while reserving to the grand masters of the profession the awesome task of relating these developments to the American Revolution? Is this "cumulation and cooperation" or elitism? In my view the historian should work simultaneously on all three of Rutman's levels, uncovering new empirical data (which can then be used by other investigators) and using it to address an important problem of social process or historical interpretation. Will this scholarship be "idiosyncratic and subjective" or prey to easy generalization? Perhaps, but a naive empiricism poses greater dangers because it diminishes the historian's responsibility to make a considered judgment not just on the validity of the "facts" but on their social meaning and moral significance. "Values," E. P. Thompson has argued, "are not 'imponderables' which the historian may safely dismiss with the reflection that, since they are not amenable to measurement, anyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's. They are, on the contrary, those questions of human satisfaction, and of the direction of social change, which the historian ought to ponder if history is to claim a position among the significant humanities."¹

**Most discussions of intellectual paradigms, philosophical or ideological positions, and historical methods reflect the experience or the aspiration of their authors. They may transcend their origin by articulating widely held but inchoate assumptions or by stimulating fresh thought and vigorous debate. I feel challenged by Darrett Rutman's comments and enlightened by those of Robert Berkhofer; I thank them both.**

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