

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

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FROM: RHN

DATE: July 31, 1959

TO:

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COMMENTS:

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SUBJECT:

A HUMANITIES THEORY OF HISTORICAL RELATIVITY
or
NOLTE'S OUTLINE OF HISTORY

The relativity of history to the general purposes of the RF has long been taken for granted, but that we have not yet spelled out the how and why of this relationship with any precision has become abundantly apparent. The following comments may, in the words of the Poet,

"Untie the Cord of Uncertainty
And open the Casket of Doubt
Leaving the Gold of Assurance
For the suppliant Hands held out."

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In a preliminary application to the problem it may be useful to deal with the historical equation and its factors. Briefly, they are:

- (a) the reader or readership for whom the hypothetical historical work is intended;
- (b) the subject matter or raw material of history dealt with;
- (c) the historian and the historical work; and
- (d) the RF Humanities division.

A close parallel to these categories has been noted in the field of economics where you have

- (a) the market;
- (b) the raw materials;
- (c) the designer or producer and his product; and
- (d) the entrepreneur, financier, or tycoon.

The Humanities as Entrepreneur or Catalyst

It is necessary to be self-conscious in approaching the problem of history. Like the financier who is moved presumably by a desire to make profits, we have objectives to serve. It is necessary to be clear about these, about our motivations and values. During our discussions it was apparent that the distinction between the H officer as entrepreneur, and as reader or consumer (or even as historian) was not always maintained ("what do I want to read" as opposed to "what do I want X to read").

It is necessary to be aware of the distinction. This discussion will proceed from the point of view of the H officer as entrepreneur and catalyst.

The general purpose of the RF is to promote the well-being of mankind throughout the world. This implies both the physical and mental well-being of mankind. The emphasis in other parts of the RF is properly on physical well-being, whereas the Humanities are concerned primarily with mental "well-being," a far less tangible thing, far more difficult to assess and measure. Under this rather awkward rubric are subsumed the whole catalogue of human hopes, values, motivations, and desires, everything to do with ideas, creativity, esthetic appreciation, intelligent choice -- all, in short, that man does not live by bread alone without.

CBF has summed up H purposes in this regard as "the cultivation of aspirations," which he further defines as a concern for the "continuing health and vigor of the goal-determining, the value-judging and beauty-creating functions in the individual and society." Stated otherwise, our general objective is to stimulate and support the creation, dissemination and appreciation of original things of beauty and useful knowledge. If Truth and Beauty are synonymous, as the Poet says, the statement can be even more compressed.

In the field of history we ought to be concerned, to the extent that they are not otherwise stimulated and made available, with those historical efforts which promise to satisfy the human urge to beauty, to understanding, or to both. In a sense, history deserves consideration as an art as well as a useful tool. The human passion for order, illumination, and understanding that great histories can satisfy is not easily distinguishable from the aesthetic gratification derived from great music or painting, or from poetry and other forms of literature (great history, after all, is also great literature). This is a highly subjective and individual business, however, and leads us directly to a consideration of the object of our concern, the reader of history.

The Reader

The individual with the humane dimensions of whom we are concerned is, in the aggregate, mankind. In lesser aggregates he constitutes societies, or classes, races, age groups, factions, sects, tribes, and so on right down to very small entities indeed. That there are widely differing assumptions, values, goals, tastes, and backgrounds among the divisions of mankind goes without saying. Certainly historians themselves recognize differences. Father Bruckberger, for example, in his recent Image of America

felt it necessary to eliminate two chapters contained in the French edition from the English language translation, substituting a new one. The material of the two chapters, essential for a French audience, would appear so self-evident to Americans as to be redundant and boring. Far wider than the gap between France and America are those between Western societies and those of the East. A history of the Arabs for Americans must take these differences into account if it is to be effective; to be equally effective for an Arab audience, it would have to be significantly different.

This is not, however, to say there cannot be histories of universal appeal and value. To the extent that human nature, problems and experience, both individual and social, are common to all mankind, there is a basis for such works. Presumably, our view in considering a particular historical work would be: the larger the potential audience the better. The size of audience principle might be stated as the Humanities' First Law of Historical Utility:

The greatest benefit of the greatest number,

where benefit is defined in terms of general humanities objectives (aesthetic gratification and useful understanding) or the more specific objectives suggested by CBF's categories of philosophical, inspirational, operational, and pedagogical utility.

In this formulation, are all individuals or groups equal? The First Law as presently stated assumes they are. As far as the private benefit of each individual is concerned, I believe the assumption holds, although I am not sure everyone would accord the same importance as a consumer of history to a baker in outer New Jersey as to the Chief of USIA or a congressman or an Arab professor in Cairo University. But it is with individuals in the aggregate that we are mainly concerned, specific markets for history.

Other things being equal, ought we to be more concerned with the English language reading public than the French, or Arabic, or Chinese? Perhaps a rule of parsimony ought to operate: where a language group or any other large category of literate people is poorly supplied with first-rate history (which presumably is relatively less true of the English language group), we ought to have an added concern. The Arabs, as a case in point, have little in the way of first-rate history as we understand the term, excepting the Mugaddima of Ibn Khaldun (14th Century), and translations of a few Western works. To be sure, there are numerous histories by Arabs. But they are mainly propagandistic and fanciful and do not measure up to our conception of good history, the kind of history we think the Arabs ought most usefully to be reading (here we intrude our own values, and we need not be ashamed of it). In the Arab and similar situations where the supply of history is inadequate and the need appears to be great, translations of histories of general appeal, and encouragement and training of native historians to measure up to the highest canons of historical writing as we conceive them ought perhaps to be given greater weight.

All this suggests a Second Law of Historical Utility for Humanities:
All readers of history are equal, but some groups are more equal than others.
In any event, we must in considering support for a particular historical effort keep in mind the potential audience to be served.

The Raw Material of History

As CBF suggests, history from our point of view should certainly not confine itself to the written record. All the remains of the human past from mythology to potsherds are within the provenance of history. Archeology is buried history; anthropology, linguistics, folklore, might be called living history, or arrested, or suspended history. The regularities of

societal behavior are no less a part of history, and the social sciences which seek to abstract these regularities from a long historical continuum are themselves selective or limited histories from which much is arbitrarily excluded. It is impossible to conceive of a science of economics, for example, save as the product of a long social experience in which economic phenomena have been selected for study. But in the search for regularities, such as economic laws for example, much has to be excluded. For this reason, postulations of laws of economic or political behavior must be prefaced, "other things being equal." They rarely are equal, however, and this is a major limitation of the social sciences qua sciences. Only history in the round, that takes all available data into account, can aspire notwithstanding its very much greater complexity and the great difficulty in finding regularities and patterns, to be a science of society in the full sense of the term. This suggests a Third Law of Historical Utility:

Limited coverage means limited value.

So far, lack of sufficient information that is relevant, imperfect awareness of what is relevant, and the enormous mass and complexity of what is known, whether it is important or not, has so far prevented history as a discipline from being much more than an art. As an art, however, history can be an effective approach to truth. Modern computers may in future solve the problem of complexity, but they will bring all the more clearly into focus the problem of selectivity, of recognizing what is relevant.

The Historian and His Product

Like the designer or producer in industry, the historian is the key figure in the historical equation and his book is the chief vehicle of communication between himself and the reading public. He must be able

to turn out a product that will "sell," i.e., be widely read, in the particular market for which it is designed, and that at the same time will serve the humanistic purposes espoused by the RF. To be effective, the book has to be read and, despite the possible existence of a captive audience such as the author's wife or a graduate student slugging away at a thesis, the public tends to read what it chooses to read.

One prerequisite is readability, clarity, everything that constitutes good style. Effective writing does not necessarily make a history great or assure a reading public, but both possibilities are excluded by its absence.

A second requirement is of course a thoroughgoing scholarly competence on the part of the historian, who must have a full grasp of his subject, rigor in his method, familiarity with the tools and resources of his craft, objectivity and balance, etc., etc. This is necessary in order that his history may closely approximate the truth, else, as Hinton observes it is only romance. It is no longer history.

From an RF point of view, competent historians may be divided into two sorts: pack rats and poets, or brickmakers and architects. The former are those who patiently and meticulously collect facts, filling in gaps in the historical record, shedding light in obscure corners, providing building blocks for others to arrange. Most historians, including the bulk of the AHA, seem to fall into the brickmaking category, and their labors have resulted in a swelling host of monographs, small-scale histories, handbooks and textbooks. Perhaps most of them would be excluded from RF consideration by application of the First Law, i.e., on grounds of limited appeal. But where the shortage of bricks is such as to make construction of more important history difficult and unlikely, RF interest may be justified. For example, a history of the centuries-long conflict between Europe and "The Grande Turk" would have to rely on a variety of lesser histories,

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more detailed and more limited, such as a hypothetical study of the boyars under Ottoman rule, the conquest of Constantinople, artillery and siegecraft in the Middle Ages, the military history of the Janissaries, Islam and Christianity in the Balkans, Crimea under the Tatars, etc. A glance at Runciman's bibliography shows how heavily one must rely on the work of others in writing history of the grand sweep and scope of his History of the Crusades. There are a total of nineteen close-packed pages for the first (and slimmest) volume alone. Most of the necessary brickmaking may have been done as far as Europe and America are concerned, but this is far from being true elsewhere in the world. In such situations, under the Expanded Program, RF support for "brickmaking" may well be justified.

But the First Law suggests that our primary concern should be with the second category of historian: the poet, or architect. These are the historians who write for more than the historian; who are ~~are~~ more concerned with interpretation than with chronicle, with continuity than with particularity; who view history, like Toynbee, as a "search for historical light on the nature and destiny of man;" who bring vision, imagination, and insight to play in "selecting and arranging demonstrable facts in a significant pattern" (Hinton); who consider history at its best as being at once an artistic creation and a useful guide to action both private and public. In addition to an ability to communicate effectively, their broad appeal resides in an imaginative perception of significant patterns and relationships. In contrast to the brickmakers, these are the men, in short, drawing on all the raw materials of history, who are the architects of historical edifices, the castles of historical design.*

*Queried about exorbitant costs in building a home for Charles R. Crane, the philanthropist, Louis Sullivan, the Chicago architect, retorted: "Young fella, what in hell are millionaires for but to permit us architects to experiment?"

A Fourth Law of Historical Utility might therefore be:

Architects are more important than brickmakers, unless there aren't any bricks.

But what constitutes Hinton's "significant pattern"? Again the problem of selectivity arises. What are the criteria by which the creative historian determines what is important and what is not? The answer is suggested by asking why do people read history? CBF has suggested that entertainment, inspiration, operating information, pedagogical accomplishment, and philosophical insight are among the objectives sought. Satisfaction of curiosity or aesthetic pleasure might also be included. Any or all of these things are of concern to the individual reader: he reads because the particular history has relevance to his own motivations, needs, problems and concerns. When these latter are widely shared, when the issues, conflicts, values, passions and choices confronting individuals and society are of universal and enduring or recurring concern, they provide a basis for significant history of wide appeal. In this sense, all significant history is contemporary history, and the great historians of the past are recognized as great because they dealt suggestively on whatever scale and however long ago with issues and problems similar to those of present-day concern. We are vitally concerned these days with the Cold War conflict, with the problem of incorporating proletariats into the political process, with the issues of personal liberty versus public order, with the waning away of religious sanctions, and with the clash and interpenetration of different cultures. Mankind has had to deal with these and similar problems time and time again; and in the experience of the past lie lessons and guidance and understanding for the present.

What is true for society at large is also true on the scale of the individual. Human nature is a constant, and history that deals with the contradictions, problems, errors, passions and problems of moral choice that individuals still must deal with is potentially of universal value and appeal. This suggests that biography as history in this sense can have as wide an appeal as the history of nations, or the conflict of empires, or the rise and fall of civilizations. A final and Fifth Law of Historical Utility might accordingly be:

Ancient or modern, biographical or synoptic,
the best history is contemporary.

And so there are these rules of thumb as a guide to our consideration of particular projects in history:

- 1) The greatest benefit of the greatest number
- 2) All readers are equal, but some groups are more equal than others
- 3) Limited coverage means limited value
- 4) Architects are more important than brickmakers, unless there aren't any bricks
- 5) Ancient or modern, biographical or synoptic, the best history is contemporary.

In the end, the judgement and the choice still have to be made, but the foregoing may provide, as the Poet says,

"Flexible Tentpoles for the Cloth of Thought" and a
"Path to the Gate of Decision."