

Searching for Synthesis: The Fragmentation of Early American History and the Prospects for Reunification—A Review Essay

by Todd Estes

A Restless Past: History and the American Public. By Joyce Appleby. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. Pp. vii, 191. \$27.95 cloth.)

The Genuine Article: A Historian Looks at Early America. By Edmund S. Morgan. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004. Pp. xi, 299. \$26.95 cloth; \$15.95 paper.)

Whither the Early Republic: A Forum on the Future of the Field. Edited by John Lauritz Larson and Michael A. Morrison. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. Pp. vii, 199. \$19.95 paper.)

Early American historians find themselves in a curious dilemma that is neither new nor unique to them. In many respects, the subfield is as healthy as ever. New and established scholars produce articles and books that move the field in dozens of new directions. Each passing year brings more dissertations that signal the entry of still newer voices to the field and promise more articles and monographs to follow. As they produce this new scholarship, historians shed fresh light on old topics and open new, previously unexplored ones. The explosion of scholarship—there is little other way to describe it—continues to make vast contributions to our knowledge.

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But these unquestionable gains have come at a price, and hence the dilemma. Whereas early American historians at one time shared a common framework for understanding the period, as well as a core reading list and a strong sense of the state of the field, the burgeoning scholarship, while illuminating so much else, has frustrated attempts to create a clear synthesis. In fact, the ongoing scholarly outpouring, which shows no sign of abating, might render any hope of synthesis null and void. One is now faced with a series of interrelated questions: given the acknowledged and growing fragmentation of the field, is a synthesis (or perhaps several syntheses) of early American history possible? Is it necessary? Is the lack of a synthesis harmful? Would a premature move to synthesize do more harm than good? Should early American historians be troubled by the disunity of the field? Or is it simply the inevitable by-product of specialization, something we should consider to be as unproblematic as it is unavoidable?

The three books reviewed here at least implicitly raise these questions. Each book demonstrates, intentionally or not, just how fragmented early American history has become and how challenging the prospects are for reunification and synthesis. Collectively, they provide an opening to think about the past, present, and future state of the field. This essay uses these books as a springboard for a larger discussion of the state of early American history. It argues that, despite fragmentation of the field, a synthesis remains both desirable and possible. Indeed, the works under review, along with several other recent books, suggest ways that a variety of syntheses might be achieved.

For at least the past quarter century, historians have been sounding alarms about the growing fragmentation of the field. In 1982, Harvard University historian Bernard Bailyn commented that the current state of historiography "seems to be in a stage of enormous elaboration. Historical inquiries are ramifying in a hundred directions at once, and there is no coordination among them. . . . Fields and problems that were once discrete and rather easily controllable merge, lose definition, reveal depths below depths. Early American history, once a neatly delimited field of study, seems now boundless." Bailyn further noted that early American history was no longer seen in

isolation from European or African history and that many of its practitioners used geography, economics, and anthropology to interpret the past. Their contributions were significant for historians: "We learn from them, they learn from us; paths cross and identities merge, and historiography grows ever broader—and, one would have thought, deeper and more meaningful." But Bailyn also interjected a note of concern and complaint about the collective product of this cross-pollination, writing that "depth of understanding is a function, at the least, of coherence, and the one thing above all else that this outpouring of historical writing lacks is coherence."¹

A few years later, New York University historian Thomas Bender issued an explicit call for synthesis in a series of articles and roundtables. In a 1986 essay he titled "Wholes and Parts," Bender argued that the intensive scholarship on various groups in American history had obscured the relational understanding of groups to each other and to the nation in general. "What we have gotten are the parts," Bender wrote, "all richly described. But since they are somehow assumed to be autonomous, we get no image of the whole, and no suggestions about how the parts might go together, or even whether they are intended to go together."² Other leading historians who joined the debate in the 1980s included Edward Pessen and Gordon S. Wood, who

¹ Bernard Bailyn, "The Challenge of Modern Historiography," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 1-24 (quotes pp. 2, 3) (hereafter *AHR*). Bailyn was not merely describing a trend, but was clearly calling for its reversal. At the end of the essay, he wrote of what he called "the ultimate purpose of all historical scholarship, comprehensive narration. . . . In the end, however, historians must be, not analysts of isolated technical problems abstracted from the past, but narrators of worlds in motion—worlds as complex, unpredictable, and transient as our own." *Ibid.*, 23-24. See also the discussion in Bailyn, *On the Teaching and Writing of History: Responses to a Series of Questions*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (Hanover, N.H., 1994).

² Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73 (1986): 120-36 (quote p. 127) (hereafter *JAH*). Bender's article generated a range of responses—some favorable, some critical—in a roundtable: "Synthesis in American History," *ibid.*, 74 (1987): 107-30, which included Bender's own response, "Wholes and Parts: Continuing the Conversation," 123-30. See also Eric H. Monkkenon, "The Dangers of Synthesis," *AHR* 91 (1986): 1146-57, which was critical of Bender's position. Bender later revisited these issues in "'Venturesome and Cautious': American History in the 1990s," *JAH* 81 (1994): 992-1003. In this essay (p. 995), Bender credited Herbert Gutman with "the first call for a synthetic narrative in 1981," citing Gutman, "The Missing Synthesis: Whatever Happened to History?" *The Nation*, November 21, 1981, 521, 553-54.

used their presidential addresses to the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic (SHEAR) to call for an end to narrow periodization and to encourage early Americanists to think broadly in order to grasp the significance of the era.³ These discussions took place against the backdrop of another overlapping and closely related historiographical debate over the perceived decline of narrative history.⁴ The prospects for a return to synthesis as well as to narrative, however, were complicated by the continuing rise of microhistory, which seemed to undermine narrative and synthesis even further.⁵

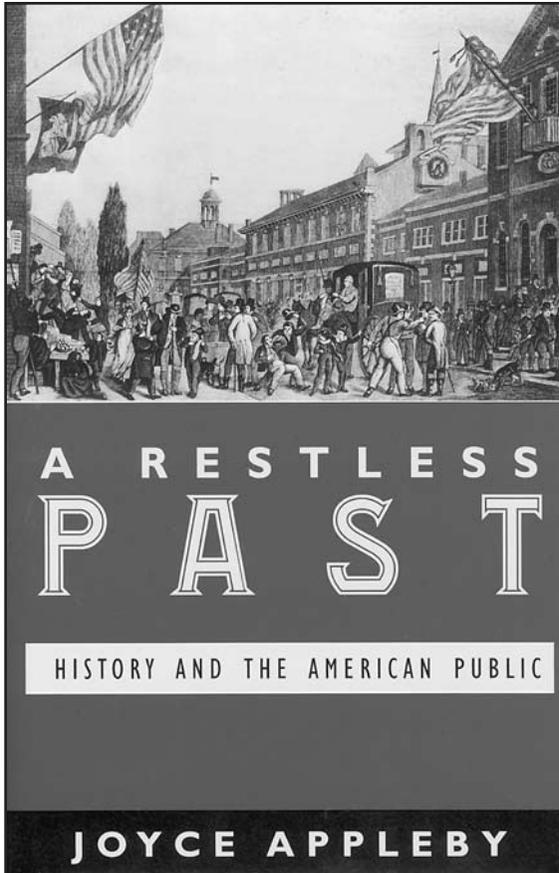
Tension between practitioners of social history and political history created another challenge to the prospects for synthesis and reunification. If political history once had primacy of place in the writing of American history, that hegemony has been beaten back by the rise of social history since the 1960s. Social history transformed and reshaped the field in dozens of ways, many of them long overdue. For instance, if traditional political history had always privileged elites and the powerful (the few, in other words), social history provided a way of uncovering the history of the many.

But for all the benefits to a fuller understanding of the past and a broader contextualization of what scholars thought they already knew, the rapid growth of social history undermined synthesis in at least two ways. First, the sheer wealth of scholarship generated by social historians overwhelmed the traditional synthetic understandings produced by political historians. It did

³ See Edward Pessen, "We Are All Jeffersonians, We Are All Jacksonians: Or A Pox on Stultifying Periodizations," *Journal of the Early Republic* 1 (1980): 1-26 (address delivered July 1980); Gordon S. Wood, "The Significance of the Early Republic," *ibid.*, 8 (1988): 1-20 (address delivered July 1987).

⁴ The literature is voluminous, but for starters, see Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present* 85 (1979): 3-24; James West Davidson, "The New Narrative History: How New? How Narrative?" *Reviews in American History* 12 (1984): 322-34; William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *JAH* 78 (1992): 1347-76; James Goodman, "For the Love of Stories," *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998): 255-74.

⁵ See Richard D. Brown, "Microhistory and the Post-Modern Challenge," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23 (2003): 1-20; Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *JAH* 88 (2001): 129-44; Matti Peltonen, "Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research," *History and Theory* 40 (2001): 347-59.



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so without creating new frameworks to replace or complement those it challenged. Thus, social history contributed mightily to what Bailyn termed the “shapelessness” of early American history.⁶ Second, the rise of social history created often bitter professional tensions between social historians and political historians, a divide that left some departments and scholarly organizations deeply split. These tensions played out in hir-

⁶ Bailyn, “Challenge of Modern Historiography,” 5. In fairness, some social historians did try to offer an American version of an overarching framework or synthesis on the model of the French *Annales* school of Fernand Braudel and other scholars. But such a large-scale synthetic account never quite caught on, even as many of the techniques of the *Annales* school had a tremendous influence on U.S. historians. See Walter Nugent, *Structures of American Social History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1981).

ing practices, in editorial decisions by leading journals, and in methods of training graduate students. Political historians, once the unrivaled leaders of the discipline, found themselves forced to defend not only their turf, but their relevance. In response, however, many also rethought their own area and started to transform it. The best political historians began incorporating social history perspectives even as they defended their field's claims to significance. Political history reemerged by asking the big questions that social history sometimes disdained. Even so, the rift has never fully healed. Political historians, even as they have borrowed heavily from social history, and social historians, even as some have sought to connect social history to larger political concerns, remain bound by an uneasy truce that frustrates synthesis.⁷

In a perceptive 1993 article, Fred Anderson and Andrew R. L. Cayton examined the continuing decline of synthesis in early American history. After surveying the effects of social history on the expansion of early American historiography, Anderson and Cayton agreed that this wealth of material posed significant challenges for scholars seeking synthetic accounts of early America. But if Bailyn seemed somewhat doubtful about the likelihood of a return to synthesis, and if Bender was cautiously optimistic, Anderson and Cayton were unapologetically hopeful that meaningful synthesis could return to the writing of early American history. As they explained, "historians have it in their power to realize the potential for synthesis that has, until lately, remained latent within the fragmented social history of early North America." Weighing in on the debate about narrative history as well, Anderson and Cayton made a cautionary note but remained bullish about the emergence of a sophisticated synthetic narrative. "[E]ven though narration may re-emerge as a powerful tool for describing the past," they wrote, "it can

⁷ See William Leuchtenburg, "The Pertinence of Political History: Reflections on the Significance of the State in America," *JAH* 73 (1986): 585-600, for a vigorous defense of the continuing relevance of political history and criticism of the acrimony and the fragmentation of the field produced by the rift between social and political history. See also Steven Gillon, "The Future of Political History," *Journal of Policy History* 9 (1997): 240-55; Joel Silbey, "The State and Practice of American Political History at the Millennium: The Nineteenth Century as a Test Case," *ibid.*, 11 (1999): 1-30; Joanne B. Freeman, "The Culture of Politics, The Politics of Culture," *ibid.*, 16 (2004): 137-43.

never again be an end in itself—that synthesis can only grow from studies that take as their goal the reconstruction of multivalent, richly textured, vanished worlds.”⁸

So if this is where the field now seems to be, how did we get here? Specifically, how did the field of early American history become so fragmented and disunited? And why does it seem that even when scholars desire to write for each other, the path to meaningful exchange often seems blocked by the absence not only of a common literature or methodology, but also by the lack of any agreed-upon narratives or syntheses? One of the books under review here, Joyce Appleby’s *A Restless Past*, fruitfully engages these questions. Appleby, professor emerita of history at UCLA, has been a prolific scholar. Author of several books, she is perhaps even better known for a plethora of frequently cited articles, many of which are now gathered in *A Restless Past*.⁹ Like any collection of essays, this one occasionally strains to link all the pieces to a single theme. Nonetheless, the selections in this volume speak to the ways in which early American history writing has been transformed and to the difficulties professional historians encounter when they try to explain their work to the general public.

Appleby is concerned with trying to understand not only tensions within the historical profession, but also the sometimes yawning chasm between what professional historians think of as history and the very different conceptions the idea of history brings to mind in the general public. To explain both developments in the context of early America, Appleby’s powerful 1993 essay, “A Different Kind of Independence: The Postwar Restructuring of the Historical Study of Early America,” traces changes in the way historians of early America understand and interpret the past, but at the cost of alienating many general readers.¹⁰

⁸ Fred Anderson and Andrew R. L. Cayton, “The Problem of Fragmentation and the Prospects for Synthesis in Early American Social History,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 50 (1993): 299-310 (quote p. 310).

⁹ Appleby has published, among other works, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York, 1984); *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); with Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York, 1994); and an earlier collection of her essays, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

¹⁰ Appleby originally published this essay in the *William and Mary Quarterly* 50 (1993): 245-67.

In a historical tour de force, Appleby provides an overview of early American historiography since World War II, arguing that the entire field was reshaped by the impact of intellectual currents in France and England. The results have produced a bountiful scholarly harvest that has done nothing less than transform the way we think about early America in all realms—social, cultural, political, economic, and beyond. As Appleby notes, much of the pre-World War II scholarship was celebratory and patriotic, retelling old heroic tales and showing little skepticism about the leaders and events of the Revolution. This scholarship also tended to portray American history as an unbroken story of progress. But gradually, the writing of American history was transformed—“liberated,” according to Appleby—by early American historians who linked themselves to one or more European frames of reference. Chief among these new departures was an emphasis on social history that looked at the details of everyday life and at ordinary people. Also present was a concentration on the language of politics and the role of language in understanding *mentalities* of groups in the past. Gradually, the study of structures of history replaced the American focus on individualism. Historians, influenced by the French *Annales* school, came to see lives as growing out of, and being shaped by, long-term patterns and developments.

These approaches completely altered the questions scholars asked. For example, the colonial period was no longer seen as merely laying the foundations of American nationhood, but instead as the locus of processes and transformations that gripped everyday life. Historians busily plunged into town and community studies, demographic studies, and other ventures that explored previously unstudied or under-explored topics. The new social history also complicated and deepened the Progressive historians’ old and rather crude conceptions of class. American social historians, inspired by E. P. Thompson and others, sought to convey the complexities of social class, examining how class was lived and the interactions that shaped class formation and consciousness as well as other ways society divided.

At the same time, following the trailblazing work of historians like J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, American

historians began a serious study of language as “a vehicle for cultural meaning.”¹¹ Instead of focusing on individuals and the ideas of certain key thinkers, historians began to move toward studies of how societies and groups constructed their own realities through methods of discourse. Ideology came to be seen as a crucial way of decoding human consciousness. Ideology, or, to put it somewhat differently, the “structuring of thinking,” as Appleby calls it, led Bailyn and other historians to consider the role of ideas and ideological currents in a society as a means of understanding how people used language to construct their own realities.

Collectively, these approaches destroyed the once-dominant interpretations of early American history. Many long-held cornerstone ideas crumbled, including the notion that America was born free, rich, and modern and the idea that American history had been one long story of progress. The concept of American exceptionalism became increasingly problematic. “No longer the custodians of colonial origins and liberal heroes,” Appleby writes, “historians of early America have reconstructed ways of living and thinking quite different from those that triumphed after the Revolution. . . . Their liberation from a patriotically inspired parochialism has gained for them and their readers a new world of experience.”¹² In short, the new approaches changed forever the way historians understood and portrayed the American past.

Appleby’s essay provides a concise summary of a vast body of activity by early American scholars since World War II. It also echoes other recent work examining how the social history explosion transformed the study of political history. A new generation of scholars defined politics more broadly, examined the social sources of political affiliations, considered the role of culture and ethnicity in voting behavior, and studied the practices of politics ranging from voting to parades to campaigning to the role of newspapers. What began in the 1960s and 1970s as the “social analysis” of politics soon led to newer ways of studying—and identifying—politics and political culture. It

¹¹ Joyce Appleby, *A Restless Past: History and the American Public* (Lanham, Md., 2005), 57.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63.

also led to the creation of a new subfield in American political history: political culture—a term that historians and political scientists sometimes define in very different ways, adding a creative tension to the enterprise.¹³

As a result of these transformations and the new directions they fostered, historians lost the clearly defined schools of interpretive thought that had once organized their work. Thus emerged another main reason for the diffusiveness of early American historical writing: the absence of any clear or dominant interpretative school to write either for or against. Previously, eras of American historiography have been organized around dominant schools of interpretation. Scholars have accordingly structured their own work around those schools, writing either to reinforce a dominant viewpoint or to challenge it and offer an alternative. In the early twentieth century, the Progressive historians provided an overarching interpretation of American history that was eventually supplanted at mid-century by the Consensus historians, who provided a different overarching interpretation of the American past.¹⁴ Both Progressive and Consensus historians were in turn challenged by the new social historians, along with a new ideological school and several other offshoots of scholarly trends noted by Appleby.

¹³ See Samuel P. Hays, "The Social Analysis of American Political History, 1880-1920," *Political Science Quarterly* 80 (1965): 373-94. For an updated and extended discussion, see Richard L. McCormick, "The Social Analysis of American Political History—After Twenty Years," in his book *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York 1986), 89-140. For historiographical and conceptual overviews of political culture, see, among many others, Ronald P. Formisano, "The Concept of Political Culture," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31 (2001): 393-426; Glen Gendzel, "Political Culture: Genealogy of a Concept," *ibid.*, 28 (1997): 225-50; William Reisinger, "The Renaissance of a Rubric: Political Culture as Concept and Theory," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 7 (1995): 328-51.

¹⁴ For excellent overviews of the transformation of U.S. historical writing and the shifting influences of various interpretive schools of thought or frameworks, see especially John Higham, *History: The Development of Historical Studies in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965); Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988); Peter Charles Hoffer, *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, Frauds—American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, and Goodwin* (New York, 2004). For discussions of recent practice in the profession, see also the special issue on "The Practice of American History" in *JAH* 81 (1994): 933-1217, and the articles in the 100th anniversary issue of the *AHR* 100 (1995): 645-864.

Each new school defined itself against the other, usually dominant, school, and the lines of division seemed clear.

Since the late 1960s, one of the most significant organizing principles of American historiography has been the concept of republicanism. First used by historians to explain the coming of the American Revolution and then the creation of the new Constitution and government, republicanism became an interpretive device to explain American political development in the 1790s, the Age of Jefferson, the Age of Jackson, and beyond. If republicanism was perhaps more a subfield than a "school," it still held considerable potential for organizing the work of scholars who could either argue for the importance of republicanism in early America or, alternately, those who could argue instead for limits to republicanism because of the presence of liberalism. Some argued for the coexistence of both interpretive stances and against the hegemony of one or the other. Regardless of the interpretive position one took, historians had a dominant theme, or a synthesis, with which to organize the body of scholarship on early America. But today, republicanism seems spent as an interpretive device, and the republicanism-liberalism debate has become stale and dated.¹⁵

And still the larger problem remains: nothing has taken its place as a central means of understanding or interpreting early American history, and the absence of a dominant interpretive school has added to the fragmentation of the field. Those who would try to construct a clear counter-synthesis or counter-model cannot do so because no overarching synthesis or model holds sway. Defining one's scholarship in oppositional terms—

¹⁵ The literature on republicanism and the republicanism-liberalism debate is immense. One may track the debate at various stages in Robert Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly* 29 (1972): 49-80; Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," *ibid.*, 39 (1982): 334-56; the special issue of *American Quarterly* 37 (1985); Milton M. Klein et al., eds., *The Republican Synthesis Revisited: Essays in Honor of George Athan Billias* (Worcester, Mass., 1992); Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *JAH* 79 (1992): 11-38; as well as the sources cited in those texts. Joyce Appleby has been a major player in this debate, as exemplified by her essays in *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination*, which collectively served to challenge the validity of the republican synthesis for the early republic and argued instead for understanding the era through the lens of liberalism.

as a break with school X or model Y—is no longer easily done. Instead, the study of early American history has fragmented even further to internecine squabbles within subfields of the period. Social historians battle over the relative interpretive value of gender or race, while another group argues for class. Political and cultural historians often divide on the relative political agency and power various actors held and even over whether the latest kind of political history is actually “new.” Each subgroup has its own questions, its own issues, and its own internal debates, fragmenting the fields even more. Some of the recent complaints from historians about the lack of synthesis may actually be laments over the loss of well-defined schools of interpretive thought.¹⁶

Adding to the fragmentation of early American history is the absence of “big-name” historians to match those luminaries of previous generations. I am not suggesting that the best current scholars are not as good as those of preceding generations. Rather, because of the diversity of the field and the enormous output of scholarly writings, there is arguably no one in the present generation with the extensive *reputation* that Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, Lance Banning, Jack P. Greene, and others earned in theirs. Put in terms of this review, it is not at all clear who the logical successors to Joyce Appleby and Edmund S. Morgan will be. Again, this is not to deny the extraordinary talents of the current generation of early Americanists. But even the biggest names presently working seem not to stand bestride the profession the way Bailyn and others did. The reason is not that the quality of the top historians has fallen off; it is the result, instead, of the fragmentation of the field. With so much

¹⁶ Still, some scholars are trying to define different approaches and establish new schools, or at least new interpretive models, of history. An important new collection of essays on early American politics and political culture argues for the existence of a “new, new” political history to supplant the “old, new” political history that emerged in the 1970s. See Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds., *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, 2004). But in the concluding chapter in this volume, William G. Shade, himself a practitioner of the “old, new” political history of the earlier generation, casts doubt on the differences with the older school claimed by the newer work and observes that they have far more in common than the editors of this volume suggest.

scholarship going in so many different directions, there is less of a chance for any historian to rise to the level of preeminence occupied by Appleby or Morgan. This development is common to other areas of the profession as well. In fact, the best description of the phenomenon comes from noted diplomatic historian George C. Herring, who observed in a recent interview that “what really struck me [while working on a synthesis of American diplomatic history] . . . is that there are not the giants in the field now the way there were when I came into it. But there are so many people doing so much good work in so many different areas that it really is very exciting.”¹⁷

At the same time that the community of professional historians has been fragmented, there has also been a growing tension between academic historians and popular historians, or, more broadly, between the academy and the public. Appleby in particular notes with dismay a growing reluctance on the part of academic historians to write books and articles for the general public. The same developments that have led to more sophisticated scholarship also explain why the history-reading public turns away from academic histories and instead to popular historians such as David McCullough, Stephen Ambrose, Tom Brokaw, and others. The problem is not so much that popular historians sell lots more books than academic historians, but that, as Appleby notes, by writing only for a specialized audience of other scholars, historians miss a chance to be part of the public debate over the meaning of history. They also miss the chance to enter into discussions with the book-reading public about what historians do and how they operate. In general, academics tend to dismiss the work of many popular historians as being superficial and triumphalist—mere storytelling in their accounts of great men and wars with little real analysis or engagement with argument and interpretation. For their part, many popular historians fire back that academic history is poorly written and narrowly focused. As Appleby makes clear in her essay “The Power of History,” the losers from such

¹⁷ See Kenneth H. Williams, ed., “The Issues Raised by Vietnam Go to the Heart of Who We Think We Are: An Interview with the University of Kentucky’s George C. Herring,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 102 (2004), 287-355 (quote p. 309).

a standoff include both the public *and* the academy.¹⁸

In an essay derived from her 1997 presidential address before the American Historical Association, Appleby argues that the rise of social history and the influence of intellectual currents such as the social construction of reality and postmodernism influenced the writing and teaching of history over the past several decades in ways that struck many in the general public as odd and nonsensical at best, pernicious and unpatriotic at worst. The histories taught in schools now included so many new individuals, groups, concepts, and topics as to seem wholly unfamiliar to anyone reared on the "older" histories. Most significantly, the inclusion of so many new aspects of study meant that these newer angles of inquiry and the points they raised "couldn't be folded into old stories because the old story line was too simple in its linear development, too naïve in its celebration of individual achievement, too ideological in its insistence on common national values."¹⁹

Furthermore, the tendency of this work to raise troubling questions about the American past assaulted the sensitivities of some in the public who decried the loss of undisputed "facts" and a narrative of progress and triumph. As professional historians pushed ever further in the direction of social history mixed with linguistic and cultural theoretical perspectives, the story of U.S. history told by academic historians became less

¹⁸ The tension and mutual disregard between academic and popular historians has generated considerable writing. For a variety of discussions, see Hoffer, *Past Imperfect*, 1-9, 62-92; Sean Wilentz, "America Made Easy: McCullough, Adams, and the Decline of Popular History," *The New Republic*, July 2, 2001, 35-40; David Waldstreicher, "Founders Chic as Culture War," *Radical History Review* 84 (2002): 185-94; Jeffrey L. Pasley, "Federalist Chic," *Common-Place*, February 2002 (online at <http://common-place.dreamhost.com//publick/200202.shtml>); David Greenberg, "That Barnes and Noble Dream: What's Wrong with the David McCulloughs of History," *Slate*, May 17, 2005 (online at <http://www.slate.com/id/2118854/entry/2118924>); Anne Matthews, "Leading Men: Authorities on the Revolutionary Era Say How the Founding Fathers Became Cultural Heroes," *American Scholar* 74 (2005): 126-31; Gordon S. Wood, "Founders & Keepers," *New York Review of Books*, July 14, 2005, 34-36; Todd Estes, "The Unpopularity of Popular History in the Academy: An Academic's Thoughts on David McCullough's Visit to Campus," *Oakland Journal*, Winter 2006, 9-26 (online at http://www2.oakland.edu/oujournal/files/wi2006_unpopularity.pdf).

¹⁹ Appleby, *Restless Past*, 138. For a provocative examination of the many myths created and perpetuated about the American founding, see Ray Raphael, *Founding Myths: Stories That Hide Our Patriotic Past* (New York, 2004).

and less comprehensible to general readers. To some, it became downright maddening and produced a backlash. Conservative political and cultural critics denounced "revisionist history" and accused historians of being unpatriotic. Believing that postmodernism and relativism unnecessarily complicated what some thought should be simple and straightforward, critics accused historians of subverting "truth" and "fact" and daring to "interpret" history, which many thought was, had been, and always should be merely an agreed-upon body of facts that taught several simple, unchanging, and usually uplifting stories.

The controversy only became more widespread with the disputes over the commemorations of key historical anniversaries or events such as the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus and the bicentennial of the Constitution. Again, professional historians largely abdicated their responsibility to engage the public. Rather than entering into a dialogue with politicians, pundits, and critics, the academy was largely silent. What was lost, Appleby shrewdly observes, was a connection to the history-reading public, which seemed mystified by the controversy but, in the absence of an effective defense by professional historians, often sided with the critics of revisionism by default. Appleby suggests that historians could have entered the fray by explaining how the process of historical interpretation works. Specifically, she called for them to help the public give up the mistaken idea "that historians operate like vacuum cleaners, sucking up scraps from the past for later assembling." Contrary to critics and much of the public that decries "revisionist" history filled with interpretations, Appleby wants historians to explain that historical work *must* involve interpretation, that since interpretations are always being revised by new questions and new research, history always has been—and always will be—revisionist. "If we can close the door," she writes, "on the popular view of history as an uninterpreted body of facts we can open it to the infinitely more interesting issue of how questions lead to knowledge through the mediating filter of culture."²⁰

The tendency of many academics to absent themselves from the debate has left the field open to ideologues with axes

²⁰ Appleby, *Restless Past*, 147.

to grind, and to amateur historians whose works leave much to be desired by way of analysis. But it also leaves historians poorly positioned to do what Appleby believes they can do so well: act as translators, as she puts it, to explain to the public how history unfolds, what historians do, and why historians do what they do. They need to offer to the public an explanation of historical methods, of revisionism, of postmodernism and the many other terms used, usually in a pejorative fashion, by critics who have their own political points to make. The reluctance of historians to explain how they do their work too often means that they appear standoffish or petulant whenever public controversies erupt over celebrating Columbus Day, the Enola Gay Smithsonian exhibit, or the battle over the recent history standards. It may also help to explain why so many in the general public turn to popular biographies of American founders—such as David McCullough's *John Adams*—instead of to the much better works of scholarship on the founding being produced by academics.²¹

As a result, historians have lost authority with the general public. By not explaining themselves and their work properly and carefully, Appleby argues that historians have lost favor and status with the public, which now sees academics and the books they write as irrelevant. This was not always the case, and Appleby has taken steps herself to correct it. She has been a codirector of the History News Service and encourages historians to write for newspapers and other popular publications to explain how the past has shaped present-day issues. Appleby and others who write for popular publications as well as scholarly journals may help historians raise their profiles while disseminating the value of history and the kind of work

²¹ See Appleby, *Restless Past*, 145-49. For further discussions, see Mark Leff, "Revisioning U.S. Political History," *AHR* 100 (1995): 829-53; Gary B. Nash, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York, 1997); Mary Jacoby, "Madame Cheney's Cultural Revolution: How the Vice-President's Wife Makes Sure That Historians and Other Scholars Follow the Right Path," *Salon.com*, August 26, 2004 (online at http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2004/08/26/lynn_cheney/index.html); Hoffer, *Past Imperfect*, 93-130. For an insightful commentary on McCullough's treatment of Adams and how it embodies the popular history style, see Lance Banning, "Popularizing the Founding: A Review Essay," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 99 (2001): 153-57.

done by professional historians.²²

For a long time, Edmund S. Morgan has done just that. Morgan, an emeritus professor of history at Yale University who has written or edited some fifteen books, has long sought to reach an educated audience outside the academy as a reviewer for the *New York Review of Books*. Recently, some of his reviews were collected and published as *The Genuine Article*. These pieces range widely, covering books on social and cultural history, religious and political history, and biography. Some of the reviews date to the 1970s; others come from the past few years. All of them bear Morgan's trademarks: graceful writing, a solid grasp of the authors' core arguments, thoughtful observations linking the book to larger comparative themes, and, frequently, flashes of wit and humor. Perhaps more important than any single review is the example Morgan sets by reviewing serious works of history for serious readers in a nonacademic forum.²³

Morgan's reviews are striking when read in collected form like this for several reasons. For one, the reader can see how several of Morgan's own books took shape out of his reviews of the works of others. For example, in a lengthy review of a spate of books on Benjamin Franklin, Morgan raised some of the provocative interpretations of Franklin that eventually reached print in his 2002 book *Benjamin Franklin*. One can also see the development of Morgan's thesis about the political fiction of democracy, a notion that he first tried out in a 1978 review of several new primary-source document collections from the American Founding. *The Genuine Article* also allows readers to follow major changes in historiography and to survey trends in the profession over the past four decades. One can see espe-

²² The History News Service can be accessed online (<http://www.h-net.org/~hns/>). For a discussion of the decline of popular historians whose writing is respected both inside and outside academia and the once-prominent example of Bernard DeVoto as a scholar who exemplified that crossover appeal, see Wilentz, "America Made Easy."

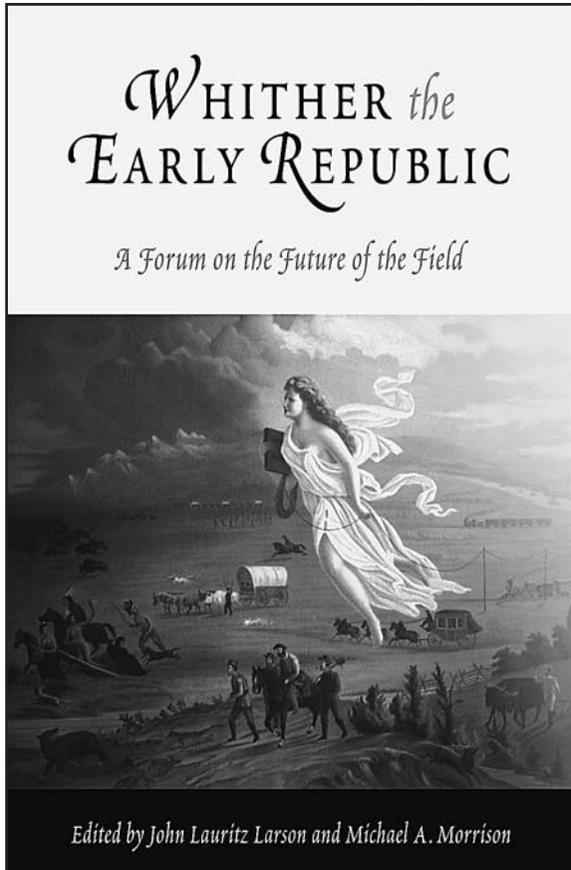
²³ Morgan is joined as a reviewer for the *New York Review of Books* on early American history topics by another prominent early Americanist—Gordon Wood, professor of history at Brown University. Another duo of professional historians from a subsequent generation, Sean Wilentz and Alan Taylor, frequently review history books for *The New Republic*. Taylor's collected book reviews in that journal have been published recently as *Writing Early American History* (Philadelphia, 2005).

cially the rise and ubiquity of social history, as Appleby noted. Read alongside the Appleby collection, the Morgan book supplies some specific examples of the benefits and the trade-offs that come with the rise of new techniques and approaches that Appleby explores in her work. While Appleby's essays often directly address the development of new research questions, techniques, and interpretations, Morgan's collected reviews indirectly reflect those changes through his incisive ruminations on the literature of a changing discipline.²⁴

If the Appleby and Morgan collections look backward to survey what historians have done, the third volume under review looks forward. Originally published in the Summer 2004 issue of the *Journal of the Early Republic* as part of a forum designed to ascertain the future direction of the field, *Whither the Early Republic* reproduces that forum and adds an editorial introduction and conclusion. John Lauritz Larson and Michael A. Morrison, the editors, have themselves done yeoman service in the field of early American scholarship through their long tours as editors of the *Journal of the Early Republic*, which, along with the *William and Mary Quarterly*, is one of the two flagship journals in the field. This volume is meant to be speculative, to invite practitioners to ruminate on the current state of the field in their respective areas, and to think about what those fields might look like in the future. The results are interesting, stimulating in some cases—and downright dispiriting to those who long for synthesis. This collection of twenty essays grouped together into five different areas of studies reiterates just how fragmented the field currently is and how much more fragmented it will likely become. If early American history is already spinning out in centrifugal waves, this book suggests that the pace of that centrifugal motion will likely increase.

The volume explores five topics: "continental possessions," about the struggle for control of North America; "pursuing happiness," on economic culture; "interactive landscapes," which focuses on interactions of the environment, humans,

²⁴ See *Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 2002) and *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York, 1988). The reviews that gave rise to these works are found in *The Genuine Article*, "Secrets of Benjamin Franklin," 163-84, and "The Great Political Fiction," 207-24.



University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005

and animals (as well as germs); “commodification of people,” dealing with the buying and selling of human beings in the capitalist marketplace; and “private, public, and spirit worlds,” about the construction of cultures. All of these are undeniably significant themes, and many of the essays that address them, while understandably brief, are still suggestive, creative, and insightful. But they also make clear just how many smaller conversations are already taking place among specialists in the various subfields that verge on these five areas. As these scholars call for new approaches or the expansion of ongoing practices, it seems likely that any effort at even a partial synthesis might be overwhelmed by the sheer outpouring of recent, forthcom-

ing, and ongoing scholarship. While this surely indicates a healthy field, it also suggests that the cacophony of voices will continue, leaving behind many specialists in many subfields and thus inhibiting efforts at meaningful conversations across the discipline, let alone the creation of a synthesis.

The editors of *Whither the Early Republic* helpfully address this long-standing tension “between inclusive synthesis and particularity,” noting that historians, “with characteristic aplomb . . . seem to want both.” But even as they endorse the innovative developments in the scholarship of early America, Larson and Morrison note the difficulty of scholars in mastering even one of these exploding fields, or maintaining a reading comprehension of more than a few of them. They admit that the continuation of such trends will make it “very difficult for readers and writers who would draw together the threads of our discipline.” They also use an apt analogy to describe what has happened to the field of early American history over the past several decades: “Every host or hostess knows that a table of six or less can converse together all through dinner; larger groups will split up into smaller clusters, and nobody will have heard the same conversation. By encouraging students and scholars to ask all kinds of new questions, we have opened the table to far more participants, and we must learn to accommodate their divergent goals, objectives, and experiences.” The editors note the obvious benefits of expanding the conversation, like new and creative scholarship on topics historians had not previously thought about or explored, at least not in these ways. But they, too, recognize that the “exponential” growth of books and articles caused a “fragmentation of the resulting conversation.”²⁵

Nothing seems likely to slow the explosion of scholarly inquiries and the expansion of fields of study. We are left, then, to decide what to do about it. How can conscientious historians, struggling to conduct their own research and teach classes in their specialty, have any hope of staying on top of this growing pool of scholarship? Is this process not likely to lead to greater specialization and ultimately to scholars knowing more and more about less and less, further inhibiting synthesis?

²⁵ John Lauritz Larson and Michael A. Morrison, eds., *Whither the Early Republic: A Forum on the Future of the Field* (Philadelphia, 2005), 194-95.

I believe that the path away from centrifugal overdrive and fragmentation leads through the realm of politics, political history, and the study of political culture. The continued validity of the study of politics, of course, requires something other than old-fashioned political history or the “great men-great events” school favored by popular historians. Rather, a study of politics and political culture can help us step away from the brink of evanescence and to reengage with the public. Perhaps more importantly, a broad engagement with political culture can help historians reengage with each other.

Political history has been transformed over the past forty years. Far from replacing or supplanting political history, social history has, instead, informed the study of it, primarily by focusing attention on the political activities of those below the elite level. Joyce Appleby’s writings make the impact of that transformation abundantly clear. The development of political culture has rendered old-fashioned, top-down political history nearly obsolete in the academy. Even the biographies and the studies of political elites and major political events look radically different since even these traditional works are now informed by the newer, nontraditional kinds of political history. The result has been the creation of a social history of politics, a kind of scholarship that defines politics broadly and uses social and cultural history to produce new insights about the political world. The study of politics is, fundamentally, the study of power—how it is obtained, used, allocated, and, especially, contested. By defining politics in ever-larger terms and by exploring both the social and cultural dimensions of politics, historians of political culture have decisively transformed the study of politics in ways that make traditional political history at once both relevant and irrelevant. By redirecting the study of power away from a focus only on those who had it and exercised it and toward the inevitable contests and negotiations over power, political culture offers a much richer, fuller, more compelling kind of political history.²⁶

²⁶ See the sources cited in note 13 for fuller discussion. Political scientists tried to define “political culture” precisely and rigorously and, when they could not do so, began to back away from the term after endless intradisciplinary infighting. Historians, by contrast, have rarely worried much about precise or rigorous definitions, have avoided intradisciplinary disputes, and have used the concept widely and with great

More importantly, political culture has transformed political history into a subfield with far greater relevance and potential for interaction with other subfields than traditional political history ever had. And, because questions about power are fundamental to political history yet also deeply relevant to all other kinds of history, political culture offers historians a way to bridge the chasm that seems to be opening even wider between various subfields, as the essays in *Whither the Early Republic* suggest. Political culture offers a way for scholars of various stripes to connect with those of different stripes—when they choose to do so and when they need to do so. To return to the dinner-table metaphor, there is nothing wrong with side conversations about the particular subfields, but there is no need to limit ourselves to those exclusively. Political culture permits general conversations among very different groups of specialists, conversations that ultimately might help all parties to understand better the rich history of early America.

It is both troubling and perplexing, therefore, that *Whither the Early Republic* seems to recognize no role for political history. Yet all five of the central themes it explores ultimately relate to the contested and negotiated worlds of power and, thus, to the world of politics and political culture. One of the strongest claims that political culture can make about reunifying the field of early American studies is that it offers a way for historians to make links and connections among these fragmenting fields. With the distance between social history and political history, it seems a particular shame that political culture is not more utilized as a way of getting beyond that separation. As Joanne B. Freeman writes, summarizing the divide between social historians and political historians, “in many ways the study of political culture bridges this gap, combining elements of both social and political history. Like social history, it relies on deep

interpretive utility. See the Formisano and Gendzel articles in particular. I side with the historians both in thought and practice and define the term loosely as being the set of assumptions, values, and practices that people bring into the political realm. Or, to put it somewhat differently (paraphrasing historian David Waldstreicher), the study of political culture is the examination of the spaces and places in which politics happens. Such general and fluid definitions seem to have served historians well. If political culture was “founded” by political scientists, the term now seems happily to “belong” to historians.

archival research . . . it focuses on everyday realities . . . and, like social history, much current scholarship on political culture focuses on populations that have traditionally been on the edges of the political narrative." Furthermore, Freeman argues, the conjoining of social history, political history, and cultural history "can be particularly powerful when focused on moments of dramatic unrest or revolution," a trait that "helps to explain the current flowering of political culture scholarship among historians of early national America."²⁷ It also makes the *absence* of such considerations in *Whither the Early Republic* all the more surprising. Indeed, as recent work has demonstrated, the impact of political culture has transformed all facets and time periods of American political history, not just the early republic. In short, political culture has great value, both as an interpretive device in itself and as a means of bridging the gaps between social and political history. By demonstrating the continuing relevance of politics and political history to the profession, political culture is a scholarly vehicle that historians can use to reverse some of the fragmentation that exists.²⁸

But before a comprehensive yet still-meaningful kind of synthesis can be written around the concept of political cul-

²⁷ Freeman, "The Culture of Politics, the Politics of Culture," 137-43. On the tensions between social and political historians see also Gillon, "The Future of Political History," 240-55; Silbey, "The State and Practice of American Political History at the Millennium," 1-30. For an interesting discussion of the relationship between social and cultural history, see Paula S. Fass, "Cultural History/Social History: Some Reflections on a Continuing Dialogue," *Journal of Social History* 37 (2003): 39-46. For extended discussions of political, social, and cultural history in non-U.S. fields, see Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, "Why do Social Historians Ignore Politics?" *Social History* 5 (1980): 249-71; John Garrard, "Social History, Political History, and Political Science: The Study of Power," *Journal of Social History* 16 (1983): 105-21; Donald R. Kelley, "The Old Cultural History," *History of the Human Sciences* 9 (1996): 101-26.

²⁸ On the transformation of political history, see the essays gathered in three recent collections: Pasley et al., *Beyond the Founders*; Byron E. Shafer and Anthony J. Badger, eds., *Contesting Democracy: Substance and Structure in American Political History, 1775-2000* (Lawrence, Kan., 2001); Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton, 2003). See also an important recent volume of essays on early national politics, Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara Oberg, eds., *Federalists Reconsidered* (Charlottesville, 1998). For a consideration of a related phenomenon, the rise of the American Political Development (or "APD") school, which studies the role of institutions, authority, and governing structures in the American past, see Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York, 2004).

ture (or anything else), historians need to come to terms with a fundamental division between idealists and behaviorists, first observed by Gordon Wood forty years ago, that, in many respects, still splits historians into camps and frustrates efforts at synthetic interpretation. The tensions Wood observed in his seminal 1966 *William and Mary Quarterly* article, "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," continue to constitute a visible fault line dividing historians even today. Wood argued that if the old Progressive interpretation had reductively discounted the role of ideas in understanding the motivations of historical figures, the new ideological school had gone to the opposite extreme by downplaying class and social motivations and over-determining the role of ideas in explaining the past. Wood called for a blend of the two approaches. He argued that to understand the American Revolution, it took the study of ideas and actions, ideology and economic status; in short, rhetoric and reality.

Wood cheered the rise of the ideological school of interpretation because he saw it as a necessary corrective to the dismissive tone the Progressive and neo-Progressive historians took toward ideas. But if the neo-idealists corrected the picture, the danger of their powerful, persuasive interpretation was that it pushed the pendulum too far in the opposite direction. Their works tended to make the Revolution almost wholly about rational calculations and intellectual understandings, necessarily, if unintentionally, devaluing the impact of social and economic factors. As Wood noted of Revolutionary-era Americans, "their rhetoric was never detached from the social and political reality." Neither rhetoric nor reality alone could explain the Revolution. Instead, it was "the meaningfulness of the connection between what the Americans said and what they felt that gave the ideas their propulsive force and their overwhelming persuasiveness."²⁹

²⁹ Wood's article originally appeared as "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 23 (1966): 3-32. It was reprinted in *In Search of Early America* (Richmond, 1993) in a collection that gathered the ten most influential essays published in the *William and Mary Quarterly* on the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the Third Series of the journal, which began in 1943. The article appears under the same title in *In Search of Early America*, pp. 54-77, and appears there with a postscript by Wood. Because it includes Wood's retrospective on the original piece,

To my mind, the idealist-behaviorist (or rhetoric and reality) divisions that Wood cautioned against forty years ago parallel all too well the current tensions between political and social history. But the study of a broadly conceived political culture may be the way around that false and unsatisfying dichotomy. A few recent books might serve as models for historians to emulate, books that both bridge the rhetoric-reality divide and also demonstrate the value of using political culture as a means of understanding and interpreting early American history. A superlative example of the kind of work that can be done is Alan Taylor's Pulitzer Prize-winning *William Cooper's Town*. The book is wonderfully written and rests, like the best social history, on a mountain of painstaking archival research. It tells simultaneously one large story about the democratization of American society, several smaller stories about William Cooper's experiences, and numerous microhistorical tales about the village of Cooperstown and the myriad of activities, such as building libraries and schools, that shaped life for Cooper and the other residents during the tumultuous decades after independence. Is it social history? Yes. Is it also political history? Indeed. Is it cultural history? That too. One might argue as well that it is both a grand narrative and a microhistory. In short, Taylor's book is an ideal blend of all these kinds of approaches. Taylor is able to discuss politics—national and local—but also branch out naturally to talk about social, cultural, and economic developments. However, what drives the book and gives it coherence is its focus on political culture as a lens for seeing the rest of the transformations in and around Cooperstown. The book also provides a concrete example of Joanne Freeman's claim

I have used this version of the article, and the quotations in this passage are from p. 75. In the postscript, Wood observed that he "simply tried to urge historians not to get too carried away with exclusively intellectual explanations of the Revolution. . . . that if we were ultimately to see the Revolution whole, from all sides, then we had to examine its social sources as well" (p. 76). Wood noted, too, that if subsequent scholarship was any indication, his article had had very little effect on historians. Part of the problem, he believed, was his title, which he here called "wrongheaded" and "perverse." Despite the title, Wood noted, "I wrote the article as a protest against such dualities," and he concluded the postscript thusly: "History that recognizes the importance of both culture and society, both consciousness and underlying social and material circumstances, is ultimately the kind of history we need to write" (p. 77).

that political culture can bridge the gaps between political and social history.³⁰

If Taylor's book provides a superb example of how different kinds of history might be bridged, several other recent publications suggest that the centrifugal forces described in *Whither the Early Republic* are being offset by a countervailing tendency—the creation of new works that move decidedly in the centripetal direction. In the past several years, historians have produced volumes on early American history that cover a wide expanse of time and subject matter yet remain argument-driven, analytically sophisticated works of synthesis. In 2004, Walter A. McDougall published *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History, 1585-1828*, the first installment of a projected trilogy, which surveys North America from the age of colonization through Andrew Jackson's election. McDougall offers an engagingly written, arrestingly observed survey of American history that manages to say many fresh things about familiar topics. While the book's title captures part of his argument, the overriding thesis is shaped by the elucidation of one of his central themes: "the American people's penchant for hustling—in both the positive and negative senses." As he elaborates, he takes account of the bad connotations of the term (self-promotion, fraud, and chronic reinvention), but also the good ones: "builders, doers, go-getters, dreamers, hard workers, inventors, organizers, engineers, and a people supremely generous." Although this wide-ranging and absorbing study covers considerable ground, it remains coherent by framing American history in a synthesis built around the individual pursuit of ambition—not a new theme, but one McDougall gives a new twist. Remarkably comprehensive, covering parts of four centuries, McDougall's book is a return to an older kind of history, but only partially so. This is not merely narrative history; the book shows how an analytical study can be embedded in

³⁰ Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1995). See also the interview with Taylor in Daniel J. Philippon, "A Conversation with Alan Taylor, Winner of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize in History," *Early American Review*, Fall 1997 (online at <http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/fall97/taylor.html>).

a narrative format.³¹

Even more ambitious in scope is Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton's *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000*. Thinking broadly about the history of the continent as well as its people, Anderson and Cayton argue that imperial ambitions—rather than being sporadic and atypical episodes in American history—have, rather, been fundamental and essential to the growth of the country. They further argue that war and imperialism have been closely linked, suggesting that the historical record cannot bear out the claim Americans like to make that the nation fights only defensive wars. Their reading of this vast swath of American history suggests the presence of imperialism alongside republicanism, all set against the backdrop of war. Thus the authors use narrative history but put it toward analytical and interpretive ends. They seek, as they phrase it, “to rearrange the landscape of historical memory and meaning” by stressing the importance of wars to the story of national development. Anderson and Cayton, like McDougall, give readers a clear way to synthesize vast amounts of time, events, and developments through what might be termed the political culture of war and empire.³²

A third recent example, somewhat less comprehensive than the other two in terms of years covered, is Sean Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*. While the subtitle indicates a focus on the first half of the nineteenth century, this book actually begins with the Revolution and treats the early national period before getting into the Jeffersonian era. This is another large work, longer in number of pages than the other two even though it covers fewer years chronologically. It is magisterial in scope but remains firmly anchored by Wilentz's organizing thesis, that the early republic saw the rise of a democratic ethos in politics, social, cultural, and economic life. Wilentz casts his net widely, but a central engine driving the book is his argu-

³¹ Walter A. McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner: An American History, 1585-1828* (New York, 2004), quotes pp. xiv, 7.

³² Fred Anderson and Andrew R. L. Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000* (New York, 2005), quote p. 421. I have discussed this book at greater length in another essay. See Todd Estes, “Power, War, State-Building, and Empire in Early America: A Review Essay,” *XVIII: New Perspectives on the Eighteenth Century* 3 (2006), 49-54.

ment about the democratization of politics and political culture that both shaped and reflected other changes in the country. Incorporating a vast sea of scholarship, this book aspires to take its place with other magnum opuses that tell important stories; indeed, it recently was awarded the Bancroft Prize. But, like the books mentioned above, *The Rise of American Democracy* is far from a simple narrative. It articulates, develops, and supports an interpretation of American development and organizes its materials into a coherent and powerful synthesis that uses as building blocks numerous works on more particular topics. Wilentz, Anderson and Cayton, and McDougall all demonstrate how synthesis is still possible without losing sophistication or subtlety of interpretation. These books implicitly answer the calls for writing history with a broad focus and put the lie to the idea that synthesis can only be achieved by sacrificing, at too great a cost, the sophistication of a monograph. All three works are synthetic, but all three also advance important interpretive arguments, suggesting that the historiographical whole may be greater than the sum of the monographic parts.³³

All three books might also be labeled as works of political culture. While none of them is explicitly framed as such, all can accurately be so categorized. Wilentz's book is perhaps most clearly a study of political culture, but Anderson and Cayton's work falls into that category, and even McDougall's, which might seem to embody the least amount of political culture of the three, can be read as an example of such work as it deals largely with the intersections between social and political developments. More so, each of these books—admittedly, some more than others, and each in its own way—also speaks to the five grand themes laid out in *Whither the Early Republic*: continental possessions; pursuing happiness; interactive landscapes; commodification of people; and private, public, and spirit worlds.

Joining these books, and sharing a similar bent toward the-

³³ Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005). Another—albeit earlier—book that organizes all of American history under the theme of freedom is Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York, 1998), which is also a synthetic work that nonetheless articulates significant interpretive positions. For an illustration of the utility of using political culture as an organizing concept to compare the disparate practices of politics in the American colonies, see Richard R. Beeman, *The Varieties of Political Experience in Colonial America* (Philadelphia, 2004).

matic, interpretive syntheses molded around political culture, are a series of recent textbook treatments of the early republic written for upper-level undergraduate courses by Paul A. Gilje, Paul E. Johnson, and Reginald Horsman.³⁴ These three works are organized loosely around the emergence of a democratized political world and a market economy, and the authors use those anchors as focal points around which to shape synthetic interpretations of the new republic. The appearance in each of these books of a thematic and conceptual underpinning for giving shape and meaning to the events of the period is significant. These books supplant the standard and outdated (if still useful) surveys of early America that were very traditional narratives of top-down political history and were descriptive rather than analytical or argument-driven.³⁵ Furthermore, not only do they fit the description of political culture, but each one speaks to the five themes for the future of the field in *Whither the Early Republic*. They also mesh well with the arguments of Wilentz, McDougall, and Anderson and Cayton. Wilentz explicitly makes the same point that the texts do—and that all these books demonstrate: that the rise of democracy and market culture was contested. There was nothing inevitable or foreordained about their rise. And since all these developments were objects

³⁴ Paul A. Gilje, *The Making of the American Republic, 1763-1815* (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2006), blends political and social history in its effort to demonstrate its thesis: that “the creation of the United States helped to foster the aggressive individualism and the dynamic economic patterns that we associate with American capitalism” (p. vii). Similarly, Paul E. Johnson’s *The Early American Republic, 1789-1829* (New York, 2007), focuses on national politics and the rise of American market society. The book, he writes, is about “the beginnings of American nationhood, American democracy, and American free-market capitalism.” The principal argument of the book is to demonstrate that although many Americans assume these three developments were in the natural order of things, “none of those were natural or inevitable in 1790, and that all of them were contested and partial in 1830” (p. ix). Another recent textbook by Reginald Horsman, *The New Republic: The United States of America, 1789-1815* (Harrow, England, 2000), while much more traditional in coverage and focus than either Gilje or Johnson, nonetheless advances as a unifying theme the rise of “a new individualism” in politics, society, and culture that transformed politics and the marketplace and argues for the dominant importance of the market during this era (pp. 1-3).

³⁵ See, for example, the volumes in the New American Nation series on this period by John C. Miller, *The Federalist Era, 1789-1801* (New York, 1960), and Marshall Smelser, *The Democratic Republic, 1801-1815* (New York, 1968). Another work in a similar vein is a volume in the Harlan Davidson American History Series by Morton Borden, *Parties and Politics in the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1967).

of contestation in politics, culture, and society, political culture provides an excellent analytical lens through which to see and understand them.

Do these newer works that both synthesize and interpret, that connect hundreds of studies of the particular to a handful of general core themes, constitute a moment of historiographical change? Do they foretell a pendulum swing back in the direction of reunification and synthesis? It is too soon to tell. Much will depend on the critical reception these books receive and, especially, on whether they remain lone beacons or are joined by other, similar types of work. Perhaps the new textbooks will have greater immediate significance since they will be used in college classrooms and may well reach a broader audience, affecting the way the history of the early republic is conceptualized and taught. In any event, the conjunction of these important new interpretive books and the textbook treatments, all of them centered on the analysis of political culture in one form or another, seems a significant development on the road to synthesis.

To be sure, the challenge of synthesis is and will remain formidable. Of those critical of calls for a return to synthesis, Eric Monkkonen issued the harshest retort, seeing synthetic works as antithetical to serious scholarship and defending "what is unfortunately but commonly called fragmentation, narrowness, technicality, and low public appeal." Monkkonen seemed to think that historians must choose either monographs or syntheses and that the act of synthesis automatically compromises scholarly rigor and subtlety and stunts developing research.³⁶ While his reservations need to be considered seriously, I believe he far overstates the case for the "dangers" inherent in synthesis. In fact, historians need *both* monographs *and* syntheses. Each depends on the other for providing an intellectual mastery of early American history. As Anderson and Cayton argued recently, synthetic treatments have little value if they are merely simplifications of a multitude of works. But a true, thoughtful, and intellectually sophisticated synthesis of mountains of monographic literature can help to illuminate not

³⁶ See Monkkonen, "The Dangers of Synthesis," 1149.

only the field as a whole, but the individual books themselves. "Even if narrative again becomes a privileged form and synthesis the primary goal, Anderson and Cayton note, "historians will never cease to need the monographs on which everything else must depend." Indeed, Wilentz and the others are able to erect their syntheses only because hundreds of monographic building blocks already exist.³⁷

Despite objections, the possibility of a creative, sophisticated, interpretively subtle and argument-driven synthesis is as real as the need for that synthesis. It should be both rigorous enough to be meaningful, yet flexible enough to incorporate many disparate forms of scholarship. Its interpretive grasp should be extensive. It must use its inclusiveness to explain the period and to give it some larger meaning and significance. Above all, it should help us *organize* the scholarship and how we think about the field. But if Monkkonen is too strident in his criticism, some caveats are in order. To use Thomas Bender's words, the parts must be in place before they can be arranged into some kind of whole. A new synthesis cannot be a forced or false consensus imposed on the field, nor should it be a straitjacket that contains or limits research. At the same time, it cannot be so general that it is diaphanous, meaningless, as thin and unsatisfying as weak tea.³⁸

Have we reached the point where early American historians—and early American history—are ready for a new synthesis? Is political culture the way to get there? And does political culture have the requisite blend of rigor and flexibility? I think so. And I think the road to a new synthesis runs through political culture. If political culture is not exactly a new synthesis by itself, it represents the means *toward* a new synthesis. The use of the active verb "searching" in the title of this article was deliberate, intended to suggest that the search for a new synthesis is an active undertaking, that the search is ongoing and not yet complete. It also signals not the definitive statement of a new synthesis, but the process by which one might emerge. The call for synthesis is not premature. The time for it has come.

³⁷ Anderson and Cayton, "The Problem of Fragmentation," 310.

³⁸ I owe this thought and phrase to William Bruce Wheeler.

And the concept of political culture offers the promise of a rich, historically sound, and useful synthesis. While the dilemma early American historians face is very real, the resolution is well within our grasp.