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CATO AND HIS HEIRS: ROMAN IDEAL OF SUICIDE

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Herodotus is one of the oldest departmental journals on campus run entirely by undergraduate students. Its mission is two-fold: to offer interesting historical writings to the Stanford community and to recognize excellent historical work by undergraduates. We hope this newest volume will provide useful information, multiple jumping-off points for future conversation, and a glimpse into the discipline called history.

These essays represent a small sampling of the work being done by students under the direction of History Department faculty and staff. We note the chronological breadth—from Ancient Rome to Theodore Roosevelt—and the methodological depth—including analyses of the Classics, of political speeches, of newspaper articles, of novels, and of historical works themselves—offered by these selections.

Despite the diversity of subject and style in these essays, we suggest that they all engage the fundamental questions of who humans are and how they interact with the world around them. Jeffrey Schwengman addresses two differing conceptions of the unconscious in nineteenth-century France; Nick Kapur analyzes the constraints and conditions for socially-acceptable suicide during the Roman empire; Alex Olson discusses two perspectives on the influence of human agency and decisions in environmental history; Joshua Hawley investigates the evolving relationship between the government and the governed in early twentieth-century America; and Elisabeth Presser examines the ability of ideas to shape public discourse by scrutinizing American responses to John Stuart Mill. Although the sensibilities and mindsets described frequently differ from our own, by evaluating earlier conceptualizations of the human as well as the relationship between human and environment, these essays prompt further reflection and inquiry into our personal interactions with other people and our surroundings.
We gratefully acknowledge the generous assistance of the Carl F. Brand Fund which has financed *Herodotus* for many years and the aid graciously given by dedicated Stanford faculty and staff. Furthermore, we credit Margo Richardson for her continuous encouragement and sustained support without which this undertaking would not have been possible.

Finally, we invite and encourage all comments, submissions, and interest in editing future volumes of *Herodotus*. Please direct any inquiries to Nick Kapur (nickpk@stanford.edu), Ashley Renlund (arenlund@stanford.edu), or the History Department staff.

— *Herodotus* Editorial Staff,
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JEFFREY SCHWEGMAN

One of the distinguishing features of late nineteenth-century European intellectual life was a rejection of the conception of human nature inherited from the Enlightenment. Whereas most eighteenth-century philosophes had granted humans free will, arguing for the supremacy of reason over all other human faculties, many intellectuals at the close of the nineteenth century had become convinced that human thoughts and actions were largely determined by psychological causes beyond the scope of reason. Two intellectual traditions in particular seem to have contributed to this new vision of human nature: the psychology of the unconscious and the study of the effects of heredity and the environment on human development.

According to Zeev Sternhell, the new psychology of the unconscious did much at the end of the century to undermine traditional claims for human free will and rationality by exposing the mysterious irrational forces in the human psyche. Although today we often associate the discovery of the unconscious with Freud, historian Lancelot Law Whyte has shown that both the idea and the study of the unconscious long predated the great German psychoanalyst. According to Whyte, “the general conception of unconscious mental processes was conceivable (in post-Cartesian Europe) around 1700, topical around 1800, and fashionable around 1870-1880.”

But what exactly was the unconscious? As we will see, in the late nineteenth century the concept could be given a wide range of different meanings. It is helpful, however, to begin with a general and all-encompassing definition: the unconscious is an ensemble of mental processes and desires about which the conscious self has no direct knowledge, but that nevertheless influences or determines our conscious thoughts and desires. The English scientific philosopher Sir William Hamilton (1788-1856) summed up this general sense of the term when he wrote, “The sphere of our conscious modifications is only a small circle in the centre of a far wider sphere of action and passion, of which we are only conscious through its effects.” The French historian and philosopher Hippolyte Taine expressed the same
Taine proceeded to extend the idea of a hereditarily and environmentally determined temperament to entire races and civilizations, arguing that each race or civilization has a unique way of thinking and acting according to "some very general disposition of mind and soul, innate and appended by nature to the race, or acquired and produced by some circumstance acting upon the race." Thus, for example, a Frenchman will think and act in a way characteristically different than will a German.

These two developing ways of thinking about the human mind—-theories of the unconscious and theories of hereditary and environmental determinism—were not necessarily linked. It was possible to speak of unconscious desires without giving them hereditary origins. Likewise, it was possible for a rigid materialist to discuss hereditary temperaments without making use of the vocabulary of the unconscious. For example, the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, famous for his theory that criminality is the product of a hereditary criminal temperament, described this criminal temperament with no mention of the unconscious:

The epilepsy explains the plagiophobia, the asymmetries of the entire body, the sclerosis of the skull, the osteophytes of the clivus, the hemorrhaging of the meninges... the frequent valvar insufficiencies... the cellular hyperplasia along the nervous bundles, indicative of already ancient congestive and hemorrhagic processes, finally, the edema of the cortical layer and the atheroma of the temporals.

In practice, however, these two conceptions were often combined. Many thinkers argued that the temperaments or dispositions produced by heredity and the environment expressed themselves through the unconscious ideas and desires of the individual, which in turn determined that individual's conscious ideas and desires. We have already seen how Taine, famous for his theory of race, milieu, and moment, also wrote about the unconscious.

These two nascent modes of conceiving human nature worked together to produce a general belief amongst many late nineteenth-century intellectuals in psychological determinism. Yet lurking beneath this superficial consensus lay a stunning variety of differing interpretations and theories. The unconscious was not tied to a specific world view, as one might possibly expect of a concept that did so much to revolutionize ideas about human nature. Rather, it was freely adapted to fit the ideologies of thinkers with radically differing world views. This flexibility can be seen through a comparison of the way the
concept was used by two influential fin-de-siècle French writers: Maurice Barrès and Émile Zola.

Maurice Barrès (1862-1923) is best remembered as one of the leading intellectual spokesmen of the new right-wing, anti-Dreyfusard nationalism of the end of the century. Yet, as Sternhell argues, Barrès’ thought went through many transformations and developments in the decades leading up to the Dreyfus Affair. A Decadent, dilettante, and pseudo-anarchist in the early 1880s, he became a fervent supporter of Boulanger and in the early 1890s developed a blend of conservative nationalism, socialism, and anti-semitism in which Sternhell sees the beginnings of the twentieth-century fascist aesthetic.13 Émile Zola (1840-1902), probably the most famous novelist of the fin-de-siècle period, was the self-proclaimed leader of the new school of literary naturalism. He participated fully in the scientism of his age and worked to incorporate many of the popular biological theories of the day into his fiction. His masterpiece, Les Rougon-Macquart, is a series of twenty novels that traces the effects of heredity and the social environment upon the members of a single family living during the Second Empire.

Both Barrès and Zola were firmly convinced that human ideas and desires are determined by unconscious temperaments produced through the influence of heredity and the environment. Yet whereas Barrès perceived this hereditary unconscious as a positive and healthy force working for the rejuvenation of humanity, Zola often depicted it as a destructive and unhealthy force. Their interpretations differed radically because the two authors were participants in two different intellectual traditions, each of which lent themselves to a different worldview. Barrès was a key figure in the emerging neo-Romanticism of the end of the nineteenth century, and his organic nationalism can be compared to the teleological philosophy of the early nineteenth-century German Romantics. Zola possessed a much more traditional conception of human nature, maintaining that excess desires and appetites must be held in check by the more rational self. Zola was also influenced by contemporary theories of degeneration and atavistic regression, which held that primitive instincts had not been completely wiped out of the human species by evolution and could still resurface in modern man.

In my comparison of these two figures I have chosen to focus on two texts in particular: Barrès’ Scènes et doctrines du nationalisme (Scenes and Doctrines of Nationalism, 1902), a series of anecdotes and doctrinal expositions that dates from his anti-Dreyfusard period, and Zola’s novel La Bête humaine (The Beast in Man, 1890). There is perhaps something arbitrary in my decision to focus on these specific works, but my aim is to show the enormous flexibility of the idea of the unconscious in fin-de-siècle French thought, and through these two texts, with their sharp contrasts, serve this purpose well. In making my comparisons, I have not chosen to place great emphasis on the differences between terms such as the “unconscious,” “instinct,” or “temperament.” Neither Barrès nor Zola was very consistent with their use of terminology, and both switched freely back and forth between these and other such terms. Both were heavily influenced by Taine and his theory of hereditary temperaments, and both made use of the vocabulary of the unconscious. They both articulated conceptions that combined the two psychological theories, and my intent here is to explore the interpretations they gave to this combination of theories, not to attempt to disentangle the combination’s separate components.

* * * *

“We Nationalism,” Barrès once wrote, “is the acceptance of determinism,” and indeed, a doctrine of psychological determinism lay at the very heart of his political philosophy.14 Barrès was deeply influenced by Taine’s theories of race, milieu and moment, and we can see the traces of this influence in his famous doctrine of la terre et les morts (literally “earth and the dead,” but suggestive of “soil and ancestors”). According to Barrès, human identity is determined entirely by the soil one grew up on and the ancestors in whose image one is formed—or to put it another way, by one’s environment and heredity:

We are not the masters of the thoughts that are born within us. They do not come from our intelligence; they are simply reactions patterned after ancient physiological dispositions. Human reason is bound to the past in such a way that we must always walk in the footsteps of our predecessors. . . . We are the continuation of our parents. . . . They think and speak within us. Any line of descendants is nothing but the repetition of a single being. . . . It is an overwhelming vertigo in which the individual disappears only to find himself part of a family, a race, a nation.15

By insisting on psychological determinism, Barrès was pursuing a concrete political goal—the attainment of national unity. Having grown dissatisfied with the elitist individualism of the Decadents, Barrès turned in the late 1880s to the ideal of national solidarity as a means of finding spiritual fulfillment. The tremendous cultural conflict
of the Dreyfus Affair served only to intensify his nationalism. According to Barrès, France was in a period of crisis, floundering about for lack of a national consensus:

Our great illness is that we are divided, troubled by a thousand different wills, by a thousand individual imaginations. ... Does an incident occur? It is interpreted by each party according to its own special definition of France. ... [It] is examined by ideologues who choose their axioms according to their tastes.17

In this state of discord, France could accomplish nothing; worse yet, her disputes were slowly killing her. To reestablish a national consensus, the entire nation needed to learn to listen to the unconscious voices of la terre et les morts:

In order to create a national consciousness (that is to say, a national consensus), we must learn to associate the sovereign ideologues of our era ... with an element more unconscious and less voluntary. ... If we wish to permit the consciousness of a nation such as France to emerge, we must root individuals in la terre et les morts [so that they may hear] the voice of their blood and the instinct of their soil.18

Because all Frenchmen and women have the same psychic temperament, formed across the ages by a common French heredity and environment, Barrès believed that they would find a national consensus the moment they began to listen to their unconscious desires. At this point, France would automatically and unconsciously be drawn towards a single political philosophy and a single government. “This new authority will necessarily appear as soon as our country comes to know itself and consequently learns to distinguish its future. If we were in agreement to appreciate our forces, our accumulated energy would quite naturally take on a direction, and an organism representing the national will would effortlessly come into being.”19

Such, in brief, are the outlines of Barrès’ nationalist political philosophy to the extent that they touch on his conception of the unconscious. He condemns abstract reason because it divides public opinion and fails to grasp the deeper reality of the world. This deeper reality lies in the imperatives of the unconscious and in the fundamental psychic unity of all French people. Barrès’ conception of a national or racial temperament clearly owes much to Taine, yet there are some important differences between the two thinkers. Taine held that national temperaments can have a negative as well as positive effect on national development. Race, milieu, and moment are mechanical

“forces, magnitudes, and directions”20 that combine like neutral, physical forces to produce both periods of renaissance and periods of cultural decline:

Thus are explained the long impotencies and the brilliant triumphs that make their appearance irregularly and without visible cause in the life of a people; they are caused by internal concomits or contrarieties [amongst the three factors]. ... That hidden concord of creative forces produced the finished urbanity and the noble and regular literature under Louis XIV and Bossuet, the grand metaphysics and broad critical sympathy of Hegel and Goethe. That hidden contrariety of creative forces produced the imperfect literature, the scandalous comedy, the abortive drama under Dryden and Wycherley, the feeble Greek importations, the groping elaborate efforts, the scant half-graces under Ronsard and the Pleiad.21

Barrès, on the other hand, glorifies the French national temperament, depicting it solely as a source of regeneration and progress:

Doubtless all of these oscillations [in French history] are not appealing to individual reason. It seems it would have been better for France not to have developed through such uncertainties and contradictions. But how! We wish to see in nature nothing but an eternal spring, and yet we are compelled by the accumulated experience of generations to understand that the snows of winter and the rains of autumn were precisely what was necessary for spring! What is more, is it not true that the well-being that we enjoy today took shape in centuries past through yet crueler contradictions?22

Beneath all of the seemingly contradictory twists and turns of French history, the French national temperament has been working consistently to further the progress of the nation. Where Taine’s temperaments can be compared to physical elements, Barrès’ national unconscious resembles a benign spirit, nudging France ever onwards. How can we account for the shifting meaning of the national temperament from Taine to Barrès?

According to Sternhell, Barrès participated in the emerging current of neo-Romanticism at the end of the nineteenth century. The neo-Romantic movement was characterized by “the resurgence in the celebration of the irrational” and “the cult of sentiment and instinct.”23 Certain late nineteenth-century thinkers, including Bergson, Nietzsche, Dostoievsky, Shaw, and Barrès, believed that “irrational forces seemed to contain the only possible source of creative energy; they were the only means capable of producing enthusiasm and grandeur, of freeing man from the dry mediocrity of intellectual life.”24 Barrès treated abstract intellectualism with contempt and defined the emerging class
of self-proclaimed leftist "intellectuals" with sarcasm: "Intellectual: individual who persuades himself that society must be founded on logic and who fails to realize that it is in fact built upon necessities anterior and perhaps even foreign to individual reason." Ideas, he argued, "must be accompanied by their sentimental force," because "feeling and sensibility lie at the root of all things." Barrès glorified the unconscious national temperament because it satisfied his Romantic search for a new source of vitality and sentiment.

Barrès' celebration of the national unconscious temperament can also be compared to other tendencies in early nineteenth-century Romanticism. First, in comparing the national temperament to the forces of nature that govern the seasons, Barrès emphasizes the fact that it is a natural force. In criticizing the abuse of abstract reason, he suggests that reason is unnatural because it remains divorced from the true irrational and emotional reality of things. By couching his arguments in language of natural and the unnatural, Barrès clearly seems to suggest that whatever is natural is good. This Romantic faith in the benevolence of nature suggests the influence of Rousseau and can be found throughout the century in many descriptions of the unconscious, particularly in those that do not mix the concept with theories of heredity. Whyte maintains that the early nineteenth-century Romantic poets were among the first to popularize the idea of the unconscious and cite several examples of thinkers who viewed the unconscious as a natural force working for the health and well-being of man:

The wise part of us, then, is that which is unconscious of itself; and that which is most reasonable in man are those elements in him that do not reason. Instinct, nature, a divine and impersonal activity, heal in us the wounds made by our own follies; the invisible genius of our life is never tired of providing material for the prodigalities of the self. (H. F. Amiel, Swiss student of German literature and philosophy, 1869)

The mind has obviously worked more clearly and successfully in this automatic condition, when left entirely to itself, than when we have been cudgeling our brains, so to speak, to get the solution. (William B. Carpenter, English physician and naturalist, 1874)

It is possible that for certain thinkers the concept of the unconscious remained attached to the early Romantic celebration of nature. In employing the unconscious in this sense, Barrès may have simply borrowed Romantic ideas that had long been associated with the term.

Secondly, Barrès' characterization of the national temperament has much in common with the teleological philosophy of early nineteenth-century German Romanticism. According to Emile Bréhier, the majority of post-Kantian philosophers in Germany (ca. 1800-1830) shared a common dislike of Newtonian mechanism. These philosophers believed in "the profound unity of nature, conceived as a living force, circulating through all living beings, and inseparable from its individual manifestations." This unity was conceived "in a way completely different than that of mechanism; it was no longer the unity of a law that determines the movement of each material mass, but rather like the unity of a theme whose variations make up the diverse forms of being. And this unity [was] perceived not through the analyses of the understanding, but through the immediate intuition of a kinship between all forms." For these philosophers, the materials and organisms of the phenomenal world were all manifestations of a single nature and a single design.

This Romantic conception of nature was often used as the foundation for a teleological theory of history. For example, Goethe (1749-1842) believed that the idea or the reason of nature governed all change throughout the universe. According to him, "The idea is eternal and unique; we are wrong to speak of it in the plural. All things that we perceive, all things that we can express are nothing but the different manifestations of the unique idea." The teleological vision was expressed even more forcefully by Hegel, whose philosophy, according to Whyte, was "pervaded with the sense of an unconscious historical movement often becoming in man an unconscious will." According to Hegel, "Manifestations of vitality on the part of individuals and peoples, in which they seek and satisfy their own purposes, are, at the same time, the means and instructions of a higher and broader purpose of which they know nothing—which they realize unconsciously." In the late nineteenth century, echoes of this teleology seem to have found their way even into the thought of Eduard Von Hartmann, a disciple of Schopenhauer. In his immensely popular Philosophy of the Unconscious (1868, French translation in 1877) Hartmann went even beyond Schopenhauer's pessimistic vision, calling for the extermination of the human race. Yet, as Whyte suggests, there are many passages reminiscent of Hegel in Hartmann's work.

Goethe, Hegel, and Hartmann all exercised a profound influence over the young Barrès' intellectual development. It is not surprising that we can detect traces of this teleological world view in Barrès' own doctrine of the national unconscious. Barrès attacked any intellectual, whether on the right or on the left, who campaigned for a
return to this or that period of the French past. In a revealing letter to Charles Maurras, a neo-monarchist and the other primary intellectual spokesman of the new right wing nationalism, Barrès took his fellow nationalist to task for his unreasonable desire to return to the past. While admitting that in abstract theory monarchy was probably the best form of government, Barrès was quick to defend all of the developments in French history, including those of his century: “I do not claim to date all of French history to a single century, but I do also not ignore its most recent periods.”3 For Barrès, all of the changes and evolutions in French history spring from a single source—the national temperament—and they all contribute to the same evolution of the French national genius:

What moral anguish would be necessary if we were called upon to decide according to personal preference between all of the seemingly contradictory evolutions or our nation throughout the last century! After all, consular France, monarchist France, the France of 1830, the France of 1848, the France of the authoritarian Empire, the France of the liberal Empire, in a word, all these Francs that, with such a prodigious mobility, have flown to contradictory excesses, proceed from the same origin and tend towards the same goal; they are the development of the same genre and on the same tree of the fruits of diverse houses.”

The national temperament plays the same role in Barrès’ philosophy as does the idea in Goethe’s, the spirit in Hegel’s, and the unconscious in Hartmann’s; it is a sort of French “world spirit,” producing all of the diverse developments in French history. And like the guiding principles of the German philosophers, that of Barrès is benevolent and progressive: it guides France across “the snows of winter and the rains of autumn” towards “the spring.” We have come a long way from Taine’s conception of the national temperament. Like a tremendous math problem whose results can be calculated, Taine’s temperament is the product of interactions between mechanical forces. It is neither good nor bad, but simply neutral, like all of the mechanistic natural forces in the Newtonian universe. Barrès’ temperament, however, is a vital, organic, and benevolent force, and clearly bears the markings of the German Romantic influence.

To summarize, we have seen that Barrès’ concept of the national unconscious temperament, drawn foremost from the historical theories of Taine, was deeply permeated with Romantic or neo-Romantic values: anti-rationalism, faith in the benevolence of nature, and teleological metaphysics. It is because of these Romantic influ-

ences that Barrès gave his unconscious such a positive connotation. Yet the Romantics were not the only intellectuals to make use of the unconscious; in Zola, we shall see something entirely different.

* * * *

Like Barrès, Zola drew heavily upon Taine’s theory of race, milieu, and moment in conceptualizing his own works. In the preface to his great cycle of novels, Les Rougon-Macquart, Zola stated his intention to study the effects of heredity and the environment on the diverse members of a single family living during the Second Empire:

Physiologically the Rougon-Macquarts represent the slow succession of accidents pertaining to the nerves or the blood, which befall a race after a first organic lesion, and, according to environment, determine in each individual member of the race those feelings, desires and passions—briefly, all the natural and instinctive manifestations peculiar to humanity—whose outcome assumes the conventional name of virtue or vice.”

In most of his novels, the twin forces of heredity and environment weigh heavily upon the destinies of the main characters. In his preparatory notes for the Rougon-Macquart cycle, Zola wrote, “Conceive each novel like this: first posit a human case (physiological); set up two, three powers (temperaments); establish a struggle between these powers; then lead the characters to the denouement according to the logic of their particular being, one power absorbing the other or the others.” More often than not the denouement is tragic and the deterministic physiological forces harmful, driving the characters helplessly towards degeneration and neurosis.

If Zola had only used materialistic jargon like “power” and “temperament” to describe the psychology of his characters, we would be right to question whether his novels can be accurately situated within a discourse on the unconscious. Undoubtedly Zola, with his unabashed admiration for science (as well as extensive background in current medical literature), aimed to give his theories an air of scientific materialism. Yet in some of his novels one can discern side by side with this materialist veneer descriptions of psychological phenomena that resemble much more closely the concept of the unconscious. For example, in Thérèse Raquin (1867), Thérèse and her lover Laurent are haunted in everything they do by the image of Camille, the man they have murdered. They seem to see his face everywhere—in paintings, in their marriage bed, at the dinner table. In a particularly interesting
scene, Laurent, an aspiring artist, suddenly realizes that every face he has painted resembles the face of Camille. What is worse, he is unable to draw anyone else:

Now, every time, his hand unconsciously [sans qu’il en fut conscience] drew the features of that dreadful face that followed him everywhere. . . . The thought that his fingers had this inescapable involuntary power [la faculté fatale et inconsciente] of continuously reproducing Camille’s portrait made him look at his hand in terror. It seemed to be no longer his.”

Here Zola clearly uses the language of the unconscious to describe the work of unconscious processes governed by the temperament and environment of the protagonist.

It was in *La Bête humaine*, however, that Zola dealt most thoroughly with the unconscious, and the picture he painted was an extremely dark one. The novel’s main character is Jacques Lantier, a train engineer, who, in spite of his normally reserved temperament, is finally driven by the psychopathic urgings of his unconscious to murder his lover. In his lucid, rational state he has no desire to kill, but he is “a man driven to acts in which his will counted for nothing and for which the cause deep within him had vanished from view.” His unconscious is almost an independent being against which he must struggle in order to master himself: “Ever since he had left the room, knife in hand, it had not been him doing things but the other man, the one he had so frequently sensed stirring in the depths of his being, that unknown person from far back who burned with this hereditary thirst for murder.”

As always with Zola, there is a hereditary explanation. Jacques stands at the end of a long genealogy of alcoholics (his mother was Gervaise, of *L’Assommoir*), and represents the final degeneration of a family in decline:

The family was hardly what you might call all there, many of them were half cracked. He could feel it well enough sometimes, this hereditary crack; not that he suffered from bad health . . . rather it was those sudden losses of control, deep in his being, like fractures, holes, from which his self would escape, in the midst of a kind of thick haze that bent everything out of shape. At such moments he was no longer his own master but rather the obedient servant of his muscles, of the rabid beast within. . . . And he was beginning to think that he was paying for the others, for the fathers and grandfathers who had drunk, for the generations of drunkards of whose blood he was the corrupt issue, that he was paying the price of a gradual poisoning, of a relapse into primitive savagery that was dragging him back into the forest, among the wolves, among the wolves that ate women.

Yet Jacques is not only afflicted by a degenerate heredity, but also by *la bête humaine* (“the beast in man”), a set of dark instincts from a distant evolutionary past when humans were savages and animals: “These hands . . . must have come down to him from someone else . . . [They] were the legacy of some ancestor from a time when man used to strangle wild beasts in the forest!” These ancient instincts lie hidden and dormant in the unconscious of all human beings; as Zola wrote elsewhere, “There is a *bête humaine* deep down in all of us.” In Jacques they once again rise to the surface when his degenerate heredity wrecks his psychic equilibrium.

Jacques is given the most psychological detail of all of the characters in the novel, but he is not the only one to be threatened by the *bête humaine*. Roubaud, Flore, and Pecquex are all driven to murder in a sudden fit of jealous rage that, at least in the case of Roubaud and Flore, disappears mysteriously as soon as they have committed the murder (Pecquex dies at the moment he murders Jacques). As is the case with Jacques’ psychotic outbursts, their homicidal rage is an irrational force that overwhelms them and then just as quickly disappears without any logical cause. Jacques is only an exceptionally bad case of a problem that threatens all of humanity, and as the ending suggests, even civilization itself. In a letter to one of his correspondents, Zola summed up the bleak vision of his novel: “In the novel you can hear the continual rumble of trains; it is progress that passes by, heading for the twentieth century, and that in the middle of an abominable and mysterious drama, unbeknownst to all. The *bête humaine* beneath civilization.”

Zola considered the *bête humaine* to be synonymous with or at least a part of the unconscious; before settling on the title *La Bête humaine* he toyed with *L’Inconscient* (The Unconscious). We are thus faced in *La Bête humaine* with a portrait of the unconscious radically different from that drawn by Barrès. In Zola’s novel the unconscious is the source of all of the terrible passions—jealousy, rage, bloodlust—and is held up as a threat to the continued existence of civilization. How can we explain this difference in interpretation?

One of Zola’s primary sources of inspiration for *La Bête humaine* was the treatise *Criminal Man* (1876, first French translation in 1887) by the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso. Lombroso was the main figure in a school of criminology that stressed the importance of heredity as a cause of crime. According to Lombroso, primitive man is violent and savage: “In the state of savagery . . . man
knows no remorse; his criminal exploits are a source of vanity; justice is for him synonymous with violence and force.” In *Criminal Man*, he argued that criminality is primarily caused by an atavistic regression (a skip backwards in heredity) to these “animal instincts that may well become blunted for a time in man thanks to education, the [social] environment, and the fear of punishment, but are reawakened all of a sudden through the influence of certain circumstances, such as sickness, meteors, imitation, drunkenness of the sperm, the fruit of an overly long continence.”

It is quite likely that Zola drew much of his immediate inspiration for the characterization of criminality in *La Bête humaine* from Lombroso’s book, having so recently read it himself. Nevertheless, the novel was more than a simple response to Lombroso’s theories and sprang in part from a much longer development in Zola’s own thought. In Zola’s 1885 novel *Germinal*, published before the French translation of *Criminal Man*, we can already see Zola toying with the ideas of atavistic regression and the born criminal. The miner boy Jeanlin, “who, with his pointed muzzle, green eyes, long ears, resembled some degenerate with the instinctive intelligence and craftiness of a savage, gradually reverting to man’s animal origins,” sinks deeper and deeper into a primitive state of criminality until he is finally compelled to murder to satisfy a mysterious and irrational desire welling up within him.

As Daniel Pick has shown, both Zola and Lombroso were participants in a wider nineteenth-century discourse on degeneration and evolutionary regression. The majority of late nineteenth-century anthropologists and evolutionists, starting with Darwin himself, believed that modern humanity had evolved morally as well as physically from the its primitive state. According to John Griffith, in this evolutionary conception of human development, “primitive peoples were associated with boundless desire, or what Durkheim called *anomie*, unchecked by moral restraints.” In a late nineteenth-century intellectual atmosphere charged with Darwinian ideas, many European thinkers were haunted by fears of a racial evolutionary regression back to this primitive state of savagery and violence.

In France, some of the main writers to express this fear were the so-called crowd psychologists, including Taine, Zola, Gabriel Tarde, and Gustave Le Bon. In a France increasingly shaken by strikes, popular socialist and nationalist demonstrations, and anarchist terrorism, these writers imagined the revolutionary mob as a site of mass regression to primitive animality and savagery. Taine pioneered this idea in his fiercely hostile account of the French Revolution, *Les Origines de la France contemporaine* (*The Origins of Contemporary France*, 1876-1893). “We can understand how,” he wrote, “from the peasant, the worker, the bourgeois, pacified and tamed by an ancient civilization, we see suddenly springing forth the barbarian, still worse, the primitive animal, the grinning, bloodthirsty, lustful baboon who laughs as he murders, and gambols over the damage he has done.”

Although Zola criticized *Les Origines* for its extremism, he relied heavily on Taine’s portrayal of crowd regression when writing *Germinal*. While *La Bête humaine* does not deal with crowd psychology (nor is the regression of Jeanlin in *Germinal* directly related to crowd psychology), it is quite possible that Zola’s theory of the bête humaine owes something to his exposure to these authors. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the original features of *La Bête humaine*. Not all those who wrote about atavistic regression made use of the unconscious; as we have seen, Zola’s most direct predecessor, Lombroso, did not. In his novel Zola made the unconscious the source of the regressive urge, thus transforming the unconscious into the terrifying bête humaine.

Zola’s negative portrayal of the unconscious owes much to theories of degeneration and regression, but we can perhaps find a more basic cause for his distrust of unconscious forces in his fundamental attitude towards human nature—an attitude quite different from the anti-rationalist sensibilities of Barrès. Let us look more closely at one of the symbolic images of *La Bête humaine*, the train engine. At the beginning of the novel, Jacques keeps his engine (“La Lison”) under his vigilant control, almost as a horseback rider controls his horse: “He had barely known La Lison more obedient: he possessed her, bestriding her as he pleased, with the absolute authority [volonté] of a master; and yet he did not slacken his iron grip, treating her like some tamed beast of which one must continue to be wary.” Yet by the end of the novel the new replacement engine, like the bête humaine raging in the minds of the human characters, has slipped out of his control and runs wild: “And the engine raced, now out of control, onward and onward. At last this restive, temperamental thing could yield to the wild energy of youth, like a young filly, still unbroken, who has slipped from the clutches of her groom and gone galloping off across the open plain.” The train engine symbolizes the bête humaine, or the unconscious, and Jacques as the engineer seems to symbolize reason or the will—that part of the human psyche that tries to restrain the bestial passions. This symbolic description of the parts of the human psyche seems strikingly
similar to the traditional Christian conception of the soul, in which reason struggles to master the passions.

Throughout the Rougon-Macquart cycle, the most successful characters are always those who have a well-balanced psychology. Because of their mental equilibrium these characters are better able to master their appetites and passions. For example, one of the most positive characters in the cycle is Jean Macquart, a soldier and a peasant who is the hero of La Terre (The Earth, 1887) and La Débâcle (The Debacle, 1892). The other members of the Rougon-Macquart family lack Jean’s “reasonable equilibrium,” and their unbalanced temperaments and excessively strong appetites lead to their downfall.

In his preparatory notes for the cycle, Zola sketched out the causes of the family’s rapid degeneration:

The Empire unleashed all the appetites and ambitions. Orgy of appetites and ambition. Thirst for pleasure, leading to an overworking of mind and body. In the case of the body, the rush of commerce, the madness of premiums and of speculation; in the case of the mind, erethism of thought driven near to insanity. ... Fatigue and collapse: the family will burn like matter devouring itself, it will exhaust itself almost in a single generation because it has experienced life too quickly.74

In contrast, Jean is “simple and solid,” “calm and reasonable,” and possesses a “tranquility of disposition” and a “reasonable equilibrium.”75 At the end of La Débâcle he will embody Zola’s hopes for the regeneration of France after the catastrophes of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, while his moody and neurotic friend Maurice, “the deranged son of the bourgeoisie,” is made to stand for those traits that led to France’s downfall.76

In spite of his predilection for modern psychology, Zola seems to have retained an ancient Western attitude towards human nature, found in the Enlightenment, in the Christian era, and in the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers. According to this traditional ethic, a human is happiest when his or her appetites and passions are not too excessive, and when his or her reason reigns supreme. For example, in Le Roman expérimental (The Experimental Novel, 1880), he gave literary naturalism this revealing definition:

We [the experimental moralists] reveal the mechanism of the useful and the harmful, we disengage the determinism of human and social phenomena so that one day humanity may dominate and manage these phenomena. In a word, we are working along with the entire century towards that great masterpiece that is the conquest of nature and the tenfold increase of man’s

power.77

This is why Zola so often cites excessive “appetites” (a word choice that seems to call to mind this more traditional doctrine) as a cause of degeneration in his preparatory notes for the Rougon-Macquart, and why he glorifies characters who possess a “reasonable equilibrium.” Zola was also prone to outbursts of a positivism that reinforced this traditional ethic.

It is to be expected that a writer who had such an aversion to excessive passions, who admired a well-balanced and reasonable temperament, and who claimed to be working for the conquest of nature should see in the unconscious yet another force that threatened to crush human reason and free will. The unconscious—the béte humaine—is the source of humankind’s most destructive and chaotic passions and holds the power to overwhelm and stifle the conscious will. Once under the control of the unconscious, humans are once again pawns of natural forces and become no different than animals or beasts. Zola disliked the unconscious, not only because of his background in degeneration theory, but also because he expressed a fundamental desire to help humanity free itself from the domination of nature.78

* * * * *

After such a long analysis, a brief summary is useful to draw out specific points of agreement and disagreement between the two figures. Both Barrès and Zola believed that the dual influence of heredity and the environment acted together to produce a psychological temperament in every human being. This temperament determined to some degree the unconscious ideas and desires of the person, which in turn determined conscious ideas and desires. Both writers believed that unconscious ideas and desires are derived from heredity and the environment. Both held that the unconscious was an irrational and natural force. Finally, both believed that they could see within the unconscious of a single individual aspects of the psychic temperament of a larger collectivity, be it that of the French nation, or that of primitive humanity.

But if Zola and Barrès were agreement on these points, they differed over three major points of interpretation. First, Barrès glorified the unconscious because it was an irrational force; it was a source of vitality and energy in a world made increasingly sterile by the mediocrity of rationalism. Zola viewed the irrationality of the uncon-
sciousness as a threat; the unconscious was for him a source of the passions and appetites that threaten to crush human reason and human free will. Second, Barrès believed that the unconscious was a healthy force because it was a natural force. Ever the Romantic, he viewed nature and the natural as a needed balm for the unhealthy excesses of civilization. Zola on the other hand, saw nature as a force to be mastered so that it might control and dominate humanity no longer. He envisioned himself as taking part in the great positivist and scientific effort to set humanity free from the bonds of nature. Finally, Barrès made his unconscious part of a guiding principle of progress, whereas Zola made the unconscious a source of regression and degeneration.

These differences of interpretation reveal the differences in world view and intellectual tradition that separated the two writers. Barrès was part of the neo-Romantic revolt of the end of the century, while Zola belonged primarily to the scientific and positivist mainstream and subscribed to more traditional ideas about human nature. Nevertheless, despite these fundamental differences, both writers were able to successfully appropriate the concept of the unconscious for their own uses. Their radically different theories are a testament to the fluidity of the concept at the end of the nineteenth century. Many intellectuals were convinced of its existence, and many believed that it exercised a profound and deterministic control over human thought and actions. Yet the unconscious remained free from any dominant interpretation, available for use by the most varied of ideologies.

Notes

3 Cited in Whyte, 147.
4 ibid., 175.
5 Whyte, 163-164.
6 Sternhell, 13.
7 Colin Evans, Taine: Essai de biographie intérieure (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1975), 381-384. Evans argues that this preface contains the most significant exposition of Taine’s historical theories. Not only is it the first text in which the French historian dealt significantly with his three factors, it is also the “image of [Taine’s] entire work.”
8 Hippolyte Taine, History of English Literature, trans. H. Van Laun, vol. 1 (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Publishers, 1908), 10-11. A note on translations: where possible, I have made use of published English translations. I have taken the liberty of modifying these translations, however, in cases where I disagreed with the translator or felt that crucial words in the French text had been lost. I have not bothered to note these modifications in the footnotes except when I have almost completely rewritten or altered the translation. All other translations are my own.
9 ibid., 17.
10 ibid., 16. Throughout the nineteenth century, and even after the widespread acceptance of Darwin in the 1880s, French biology continued to be dominated by the Lamarckian principle of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Human adaptations to the social milieu could thus be translated into hereditary biological traits, and most French thinkers tended to blur the distinctions between nature and nurture, heredity and the environment. Mike Hawkins, Social Darwinism in European and American thought, 1860-1945: Nature as model and nature as threat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27.
11 ibid., 19.
12 César Lombroso, L’homme criminel: criminel-né, fou moral, épileptique, étude anthropologique et médico-légale, trans. MM. Regnier and Bournet, with a preface by Dr Ch. Létourneau (Paris: Ancienne Librairie Germer Bailliére et Cie, 1887), 657.
13 Sternhell, general premise of the book. For his discussion of Barrès and fascism, see 369.
15 ibid., 18-19.
17 Barrès, 62-63.
18 ibid., 65-67.
19 ibid., 71.
20 Taine, 23.
21 ibid., 24.
22 Barrès, 64.
23 Sternhell, 9.
development. By the time Zola wrote *Germinal* (1885), whose main character (originally intended to serve as the main character in *La Bête humaine* as well) has some of Jacques’ psychopathic psychology, instinct and the unconscious were beginning to take on the dark, sinister implications given to them in *La Bête humaine*. Unfortunately, a full examination of this intellectual evolution lies outside the scope of this paper.


46. *ibid.*, 234.

47. *ibid.*, 52-53.


50. At the end of the novel, Pécquex (the stoker) tries to push Jacques off the speeding train engine and both characters fall to their deaths. The unmanned train, now transformed into a symbol of the *bête humaine* and transporting cars full of drunken soldiers off to the battlefields of the Franco-Prussian War, speeds off into darkness and the destruction of war, completely out of control.


53. *ibid.*, 482.

54. Pauline McLynn, “‘Human Beasts’? Criminal Perspectives in *La Bête humaine*,” in Zola—“La Bête humaine”: texte et explications, ed. Geoff Woollen (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1990), 125.

55. Lombroso, 413.

56. *ibid.*, 665.


60. John W. Griffith, *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological*

61 See Griffith, 7 and Pick, 106.
63 ibid., 44.
64 Quoted in Barrows, 77.
65 Barrows, 112-113.
66 Zola read at least the first two volumes of Taine’s Les Origines de la France Contemporaine (Barrows, 94-95) and Gabriel Tarde’s La Criminalité comparée (Mitterand, “Notice” in La Bête humaine, 482).
67 Zola, La Bête humaine, 151.
68 ibid., 366.
71 Zola, La Débâcle, 650.
74 Émile Zola, Le Roman expérimental, in Le Roman naturaliste: anthologie, 98.

The attitude toward nature expressed in La Bête humaine and Le Roman expérimental is not representative of Zola’s intellectual career as a whole. In many of his earlier and later novels Zola would hold nature up as a model for human society. See note 44 above.

Cato and His Heirs:
Roman Ideals of Suicide

NICK KAPUR

ROMAN SOURCES FROM THE PERIOD of the empire attest to what may seem a startling number of suicides by both prominent public figures and ordinary citizens. Many of the great authors of the period celebrate the act of suicide in their poetry and prose, including Seneca, Lucan, Tacitus, and the younger Pliny. Famous suicides such as Seneca, Arria, Otho, Brutus and Cassius, and especially Cato, were immortalized and even emulated. Given the evidence, one might imagine a Roman view of suicide in which self-killing was almost universally celebrated, accepted, and admired. Such an assumption would be incorrect. A close examination of relevant sources clearly reveals that the Romans only accepted suicides that fell within a limited set of conditions, methods, and motives.

That the Romans often saw benefits from suicide cannot be denied. Seneca, a passionate defender of suicide, writes that “the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can” and that “the best thing which eternal law ever ordained was that it allowed one entrance into life, but many exits.” Similarly, the elder Pliny writes, “the chief consolation for nature’s imperfection in the case of man is that not even for a god are all things possible - for he cannot, even if he wishes, kill himself, the supreme boon that nature has bestowed on man among all the penalties of life.” For Lucan, suicide is sweet and fitting, but “only those whose onrushing fate is already upon them are granted this revelation: those who will go on living - the gods keep them in the dark, that they may endure to live on: death is a blessing!” The Stoic philosopher Epictetus uses elaborate metaphors to endorse suicide: “Above all, remember that the door stands open. Do not be more fearful than children. But, just as when they are tired of the game they cry, ‘I will play no more,’ so too when you are in a similar situation, cry, ‘I will play no more’ and depart. But if you stay, do not complain.” Similarly, he later adds, “Is there smoke in the room? If it is slight, I remain. If it is grievous, I quit it.”
Roman writers advocating suicide often praised it as a path to freedom. For Lucan this can mean a freedom from fear of death itself: “Make death your choice, and all fear vanishes.” For Seneca, life is nothing but “bonds of slavery” subjugating men to the whims of Fortune. However, although “Fortune has all power over one who lives . . . she has no power over one who knows how to die.” Lucan agrees: “It is no arduous feat to escape slavery by one’s own hand . . . weapons were granted that none need live as slave.” Plutarch has Cato express a similar sentiment when his sword is brought to him the evening before his suicide: “Now I am master of myself,” he declares. Seneca eloquently sums up this idea of suicide as an expression of freedom in De Ira:

In whatever direction you may turn your eyes, there lies the means to end your woes. Do you see that precipice? Down that is the way to liberty. Do you see that sea, that river, that well? There sits liberty—at the bottom. Do you see that tree, stunted, blighted and barren? Yet from its branches hangs liberty. Do you see that throat of yours, your gullet, your heart? They are ways of escape from servitude. Are the ways of egress you show you too toilsome, do they require too much courage and strength? Do you ask what is the highway to liberty? Any vein in your body.

Although suicide clearly had many supporters, it was by no means universally accepted and endorsed by Roman society. Perhaps the most obvious evidence of this is that the sources often depict relatives and associates of suicides attempting to dissuade them from killing themselves. The younger Pliny recounts how Arria’s son-in-law Thrasea tried to persuade her not to die with her husband Paeatus, asking her if she would wish her daughter to die with him if he were to kill himself. She replied, “If she lives as long and happily with you as I have with Paeatus—yes.” Similarly, Cato’s friends tried to steal his sword to prevent his suicide and had a physician bind his wound against his wishes when they discovered he had stabbed himself, forcing Cato to rip the wound open again so he could die. Cornelius Nepos records that Agrippa tearfully pleaded with his father-in-law Atticus, attempting in vain to dissuade him from killing himself. Thus, although Romans were accepting of suicide to a certain degree, no one denied that it was a sorrowful event that deeply saddened family and friends. Indeed Pliny, writing of the suicide of his friend Corelius Rufus, declares that he is “even sadder” that Rufus died by his own hand because “death is most tragic when it is not due to fate or natural causes.” Although he understands his friend’s choice intellectually, he grives nonetheless: “Send me words of comfort, but do not say that he was an old man and ill; I know this . . . everything I know comes naturally to my aid, but is powerless against a grief like this.”

Some Romans in fact, entirely disapproved of suicide. Seneca writes that there are many men who “hold it accursed for a man to be the means of his own destruction; we should wait, say they, for the end decreed by nature.” Suetonius relates that the emperor Claudius tried to remove a knight from the list of the members of the equestrian order for having attempted suicide. According to Appian, Julius Caesar, as part of his quadruple triumph of 46 B.C., paraded grotesque images through Rome of his defeated enemies Scipio, Petreius, and Cato committing suicide, in an attempt to turn popular sentiment against them. Evidently, Caesar saw suicide as a reprehensible act and believed his fellow citizens did also. Virgil seems to agree. Although he does place Cato in the Elysian Fields, he relegates other suicides to a gloomy place where they pine for light. Other examples of Romans who disapproved of suicide include the lawyer Marcian, who called suicide a deed of wickedness, and the poet Martial, who wrote against the practice of soldiers killing themselves when defeat was imminent: “While fleeing from the enemy, Fannius killed himself. I ask you, isn’t this madness, to die so that you won’t die?”

Clearly the Romans held conflicting views about suicide. While some approved of almost any form of suicide others rejected it entirely. Most Romans, however, probably fell somewhere in between. Cicero warns against the danger of frivolous suicides, writing of a philosopher who argued so eloquently that death saves us from the misfortunes of life, that King Ptolemy II of Egypt had to forbid him from making such statements in his classes because so many of his students committed suicide upon hearing them. Similarly, he speaks disparagingly of a certain Cleombrotus of Ambracia who “had suffered no misfortune, but still threw himself off a wall into the sea after reading Plato’s book.” According to Tacitus, when M. Cocceius Nerva, a close friend of the emperor Tiberius, decided to kill himself even with “his position unthreatened, his health sound,” Tiberius chastised him, “declaring that his own feelings and reputation would suffer grievously if his most intimate friend chose to die without cause.” Even Seneca, the ardent advocate of suicide, cautions against suicide attempted for the wrong reasons. Suicide should only be committed if one has a valid complaint against life, he argues, not because of “that weakness which has taken possession of so many—the lust for death.” Seneca fears that suicide is becoming more of a fashion
than an exit from truly severe hardship; men should only commit suicide if life has become truly unbearable, not when it is merely irksome.\textsuperscript{25} 

What Cicero and Seneca disapprove of in these situations is the lack of suitable motives for suicide. It is clear from the sources that motives were critical in the minds of the Romans when determining whether a suicide was justified; certain motives were acceptable, others were not. Thus Cicero writes that “Cato, now, in departing this life was delighted at having a reason for dying. The god who rules within us forbids us to depart hence without his orders. But when the god himself gives a just cause, as he has once done to Socrates, and now to Cato, and often to many others, I assure you that the wise man will gladly escape from this darkness into that light.”\textsuperscript{26} The Romans were willing to accept the suicides of their fellow citizens, but they demanded a “just cause,” in other words, a proper motive.

One of the most common and widely accepted motives for suicide was to preserve one’s dignity after a military defeat. Many of the most famous suicides fall into this category, including those of Cato, Brutus, Cassius, Antony, Varus, and Otho. To a defeated Roman general, all his options other than suicide were effectively fates worse than death. If he had been defeated by a non-Roman enemy, he faced capture and likely execution—both unbearable humiliations. If his enemy was another Roman faction, he faced either execution and its attendant humiliations (such as having his head paraded through Rome), or else, perhaps worst of all, clemency from his conqueror. Roman aristocrats, who prided themselves on being utterly equal to their peers, could not abide being beholden to anyone for anything, and what debt could be greater than owing another one’s very life? Plutarch relates how Scipio Metellus tried to grant clemency to Granius Petro, one of Caesar’s lieutenants during the African campaigns, after capturing the ship he commanded. Petro refused to accept this dishonor, declaring that “it was not usual for Caesar’s soldiers to take but to give mercy, and having said so, fell upon his sword.”\textsuperscript{27} It was well known that Caesar prided himself on his clemency, and thus avoiding the dishonor of being pardoned by Caesar was undoubtedly one of Caesar’s primary motives for committing suicide. Indeed, Caesar is supposed to have said, upon learning of Cato’s suicide, “Cato, I grudge you your death, as you have grudged me the preservation of your life.”\textsuperscript{28}

Military suicides were not only committed by generals. The sources record several instances of ordinary combatants making mutual suicide pacts when faced with certain defeat. Tacitus records such a pact among four hundred soldiers who killed each other following their defeat by the Frisians in Lower Germany in A.D. 29.\textsuperscript{29} Lucan describes a similar suicide pact among a small group of Julius Caesar’s soldiers trapped on a raft and surrounded by Pompey’s fleet.\textsuperscript{30} Although the incident is probably fictional, it is no doubt indicative of a real phenomenon. Another example of a suicide pact is that of Zealots defending the Jewish rebel fortress at Masada, who killed themselves just as the Roman army was about to take the fortress after a two-year siege. Similarly, Suetonius relates that on several occasions groups of Caesar’s soldiers, faced with capture by Pompey’s forces, “preferred death to the alternative of serving with the Pompeians.”\textsuperscript{31} For generals, soldiers, and rebels alike, suicide was a means of snatching a small measure of victory from the jaws of defeat.

The other type of suicide that appears with great frequency in the sources is the suicide of men condemned to execution or about to be condemned to execution. Tacitus informs us that by the time of the Pisonian conspiracy against Nero (A.D. 65), the condemned had been taking their own lives for so long that it had become customary to allow every condemned man a short respite to “choose his own death,”\textsuperscript{32} whereas in the past this privilege was only occasionally granted.\textsuperscript{33} The number of men who chose suicide over the vastly more humiliating death by execution is likely beyond count. Some of the more famous suicides of this type include Seneca, Lucan, Piso, Nero’s “Arbiter of Taste” Petronius, and Arria’s son-in-law Thrasea. One of the earliest recorded suicides of this type was famously that of the younger Gracchus in 121 B.C., who “being on the point of arrest . . . presented his throat to the slave.”\textsuperscript{34}

While the obvious motive for suicide among the condemned was avoiding the dishonor of execution, another motive was insuring one’s heirs would inherit. Describing the suicide of Pomponius Labeo, Tacitus writes “Such deaths were readily resorted to. They were due to fears of execution, and because people sentenced to death forfeited their property and were forbidden burial, whereas suicides were rewarded for this acceleration by burial and recognition of their wills.”\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, some men may have been falsely accused and condemned in order to secure their wealth for the state. According to Tacitus, Nero had a forged letter made up, supposedly written by convicted conspirator Lucan to Seneca’s brother Annaeus Mela, because he coveted Mela’s wealth. Mela made a will and committed suicide, hoping to salvage some of his wealth for his heirs.\textsuperscript{36} Even in
the case of suicide, however, the will of a condemned man could still be invalidated if his suicide was deemed to have had an improper motive. Under Roman law if a suicide was ruled to have been motivated by a guilty conscience his property would go to the state. Indeed, Mela felt compelled to add a postscript to his will protesting his innocence, fearing that his suicide might be judged the result of a guilty conscience thus invalidating his will. Just to make sure, he also willed large gifts to Tigellinus, who was Nero’s right hand man at the time, and to Tigellinus’ son-in-law Cosstantianus Capito. A third motive for suicide that was widely accepted by the Romans was severe pain or physical handicap. Pliny’s friend Corelius Rufus, for example, “suffered so long from such a painful affliction that his reasons for dying outweighed everything else that could give him.” In another letter, Pliny celebrates a woman who urged her husband to commit suicide because he was suffering from unbearable ulcers on his genitalia and then joined him in death, calling it “not less heroic than Arria’s deed.” Tacitus relates how Caninius Rebilus “escaped the miseries of invalid old age by opening his veins.” Tacitus obviously feels this was the correct action, as he proceeds to give Rebilus the backhanded compliment that “no one had thought he had the courage for this.” Seneca argues by analogy that his friend Aufidius Bassus, “a noble man, shattered in health and wrestling with his years” should commit suicide:

> Just as in a ship that springs a leak, you can always stop the first or the second fissure, but when many holes begin to open and let in water, the gaping hull cannot be saved; similarly, in an old man’s body, there is a certain limit up to which you can sustain and prop its weakness. But when it comes to resemble a decrepit building—when every joint begins to spread and while one is being repaired another falls apart—then it is time for a man to look about him and consider how he may get out.

Perhaps the most famous suicide due to unbearable suffering was that of Atticus, Cicero’s dear friend and later a friend to Agrippa, who starved himself to death to escape the terrible pain of an abdominal cancer.

The fourth motive for suicide that was generally condoned by the Romans was loyalty. The sources often attest to wives, soldiers, servants, and slaves committing suicide with their husbands or masters. Seneca’s wife Paulina insisted on dying with him, and according to Tacitus,

Seneca did not oppose her brave decision. Indeed, loving her wholeheartedly, he was reluctant to leave her behind to be persecuted. ‘Solace in life was what I commanded you,’ he said. ‘But you prefer death and glory. I will not grudge you your setting so fine an example. We can die with equal fortitude. But yours will be a nobler end.’

Another example is Sextia, the wife of Mamercus Scaurus, who, anticipating his impending condemnation for writing a tragedy critical of Tiberius, urged him to suicide and joined him in death. Tacitus approves, calling it an act worthy of the ancient house of the Amelii. Suetonius and Tacitus record that several of Otho’s soldiers committed suicide before his funeral pyre. Similarly, Cassius’ lieutenant Titiinus, upon hearing of Cassius’ suicide, slew himself. Plutarch also relates that when Mark Antony asked his servant Eros to help him kill himself, Eros drew his sword and moved to slay Antony, but then suddenly turned the sword upon himself, his loyalty thus eliciting Antony’s admiration: “It is well done Eros. You show your master how to do what you had not the heart to do yourself.” Cleopatra’s two servants Charmion and Iras supposedly committed suicide with her as well. The most famous suicide due to loyalty is of course Arria, whose husband Paetus was ordered to commit suicide by the emperor Claudius in 42 B.C. When Paetus was reluctant to fulfill the emperor’s command, Arria seized his dagger, stabbed herself in the breast, and handed it back to him, famously declaring, *Paete, non dolet* (Paetus, it does not hurt), words that Pliny deemed “immortal, almost divine.” Arria eventually became a cult figure of sorts, one of the most celebrated of all Roman suicides.

We have seen that in general the Romans accepted four motives for suicide: saving face after a military defeat, avoiding the dishonor of execution, ending severe pain and suffering, and loyalty to a husband or master; obviously, suicides did occur for other reasons, but these were not generally celebrated or condoned. However, a proper motive for suicide was not enough; a proper method was also required. It is no coincidence that nearly all of the most celebrated suicides died by sword or dagger. This was the best way to kill oneself, the so-called “Roman death” of soldiers and generals, celebrated since the time of Lucretia. Next best was opening the veins. This was considered an easier way, generally employed by women and older men, but was not dishonorable. Very old men often died by self-starvation. Poison was generally frowned upon as unmanly, and was rarely used by public figures. The exception was hemlock, used by philosophers and men like Seneca who were attempting to emulate.
Socrates. Hanging was almost never used by the members of the elite, although when suicides among the lower classes are documented, hanging seems fairly common, as certain petty public servants were charged with cutting down the hanged. According to a passage in the Digest of Justinian, the wives of hanged men were forbidden to remarry for ten months. Drowning was rare as well. Cato’s ally Scipio threw himself into the sea upon his defeat by Caesar’s forces, but he had stabbed himself first. Ultimately, how one killed oneself was nearly as important as why one killed oneself; none of the suicides employing the drowned-upon-means of poison, hanging, or drowning were widely celebrated by the Romans.

The ideal Roman suicide had two other properties besides a proper motive and an acceptable method. First, the Romans felt that suicide should above all be a thoroughly rational act; only after a careful consideration of the situation, based on the powers of reason and uninfluenced by emotions or passion, they believed, should a Roman decide whether or not to kill himself. Pliny writes of his friend Titus Aristo’s contemplation of suicide, “Many people have the impulse and urge to forestall death, but the ability to examine critically the arguments for dying, and to accept or reject the idea of living or not, is the mark of a truly great mind.” Similarly, he compliments his friend Corellius Rufus because “he was led to make his decision [to die] by the supremacy of reason.” When Cato’s friends tearfully beg him not to kill himself, he asks them “did I become deranged, and out of my senses, that thus no one tries to persuade me by reason?” Likewise Seneca argues, “when reason advises us to make an end of it, the impulse is not to be adopted without reflection or at headlong speed. The brave and wise man should not beat a hasty retreat from life; he should make a becoming exit.”

As Seneca’s point illustrates, because a Roman’s decision to die was a rational one, he was expected to be utterly calm and composed when committing suicide, rather than excited, upset, or overly hasty. Thus Tacitus credits Seneca with “philosophical imperturbability” at the moment of his suicide, compliments Asiusius, a falsely accused senator, because “he remained calm to the end,” and praises Otho for settling his affairs calmly, “not like a man at the point of death.” Nepos writes admiringly that on his deathbed Atticus “voice and expressions were so controlled that he seemed to be talking of going not from life to the hereafter but from one house to another.” Similarly, Seneca compliments the composure of his friend Aufidius Bassus: “he contemplates his own end with the courage and counte-
nance which you would regard as undue indifference in a man who so contemplated another’s.”

Because of the rationality and deliberation with which Romans tried to approach their suicides, they often had time to carefully plan and orchestrate their deaths. The night before his suicide, Cato is said to have sat in bed, calmly read Plato’s Phaedo, and upon hearing the birds chirping in the morning, risen and turned his sword on himself. The night before Otho’s suicide, he calmly wrote two letters, one to his sister and one to his girlfriend, burned his papers to avoid incriminating any of his comrades to Vitellius, gave orders that the boats and wagons be made ready for the retreat of his army, and distributed the money he had with him among his men. Tacitus records that before Asiusius killed himself he exercised as was his daily routine, bathed and dined cheerfully, and inspected his own funeral pyre, ordering it moved so the flames would not damage the trees in his yard. One of the most elaborately planned suicides was that of Petronius, as related by Tacitus, who privately severed his veins, then had them loosely bound up and went to talk with his friends, but not about serious topics, and had them recite not discourses on the immortality of the soul, but light lyrics and frivolous poems. As if it were any other day, he rewarded some of his slaves and beat others, and then appeared at dinner and dozed off - all this so that his suicide would appear to be a natural death. He also found time before succumbing to compose an elaborate list of Nero’s sexual escapades, which he appended to his will as a final joke against the emperor.

The second characteristic Romans generally expected of an ideal suicide was that it be a public event, committed in the presence of friends and family, and prefaced by a speech intended for public consumption, containing an explanation of motive, words of comfort, and advice for the future. Atticus is a good example. Once he had decided to die, he summoned his son-in-law Agrippa, and his friends L. Cornelius Balbus and Sextus Peducaeus and gave the following speech:

You are all my witnesses that I have tried every means to preserve my health, and on that there can be no argument. I am satisfied that there is nothing more I can do for my illness, and so I have reached a decision. I want you to know that I do not mean to continue to feed my illness, for the food I eat merely prolongs my life, increases my pain without hope of cure. First of all I ask that you approve of my plan and then that you do not try to dissuade me.

Cato, Brutus, and Otho also gave such speeches to their associates at the moment of their suicides. Seneca reports that even a lowly
barbarian gladiator in the arena saw fit to give a short speech to the crowd before sinking his spear into his throat to escape his slavery.\textsuperscript{69} It was Seneca himself who took this public aspect of Roman suicide to new heights, with a long, drawn out suicide that was nothing short of a dramatic production. The way Tacitus relates it,\textsuperscript{70} upon receiving word that he was condemned to die, Seneca gave a speech to his friends “evidently intended for public hearing” thanking them for their friendship, consoling them, and attacking Nero. He then went to console his wife Paulina, but she insisted on attempting suicide with him. After he and Paulina opened their veins, Seneca summoned his secretaries and dictated a dissertation to be published after his death. Already well on his way to death from slitting his veins, Seneca now had his doctor give him hemlock, in an imitation of Socrates, although Tacitus reports that it had no additional effect. Finally, he had himself laced in a warm bath and proceeded to sprinkle some of the bloody water over his attendant slaves, declaring that this was a libation of Jupiter.\textsuperscript{71}

Interestingly, this Roman view of suicide as a rational act, calmly undertaken, carefully planned in advance, and intended for public consumption is almost entirely at odds with our modern conception of suicide. Whereas most modern societies tend to view nearly all suicides as irrational, hastily planned and executed in a fit of passion, and usually undertaken alone, this type of suicide was the sort most deplored by the Romans, the type of suicide they sought to avoid when choosing their own deaths. Thus Tacitus criticizes a man who leapt to his end from a building for his “sudden and undignified death” and reports that his mother was blamed and banished from Rome for ten years.\textsuperscript{72} Hasty, messy, irrational suicides were never condoned by the Romans.

Ultimately the most celebrated Roman suicides possessed all of these elements, combining an acceptable motive with an honorable method and a rationally conceived, carefully planned, public death. The final ingredient was a life people were willing to commemorate. Nero committed suicide for the right reasons, but had character flaws that prevented people’s desire to remember him (and didn’t do a very good job of killing himself anyway). Nero’s enemy Cerialis committed suicide as his duty demanded, but no one admired his suicide because he was hated for betraying a conspiracy to Caligula.\textsuperscript{73} Conversely, an ideal suicide could immortalize a man who might have otherwise been undeserving. Otho did not succeed at very much in life, but in death he succeeded utterly, and was remembered for it. Even the great Cato,

most deified of all the Roman suicides, was not remembered so much as the stern, unfriendly, and stubborn man he was in life, but as the courageous and heroic last defender of the Republic he became in death.

The Roman view of suicide is complex and not easily defined. It is tempting to infer a kind of suicide “craze” or “epidemic” from the great number of suicides recorded in the sources, but caution is necessary. Suicide was clearly a popular theme in literature, but may have been less popular in real life. Unfortunately, the Romans did not keep statistics on such things. It is also important to remember that many voices are not represented in the sources, voices we only get a whisper of in Seneca’s gladiator and Pliny’s middle-class husband and wife. Generally the sources only discuss the lives of the elite of Roman society. However, what can be determined from the sources is that among Romans of the period of the Empire, an ideal of a model suicide had developed, embodied by Cato and his heirs, that was celebrated and widely imitated. Although suicide was not universally admired by all, when it conformed to certain motives, methods, and characteristics, it could bestow a measure of immortality. Even though many of the speeches and actions of the suicides were probably imagined or embellished, the ideal these stories represent was real, and had great influence on how the Romans chose to die.

Notes


4 \textit{ibid.}, 4.517-20.


6 \textit{Pharsalia} 4.485.

7 \textit{Ep.} 70.6.


9 Plutarch, \textit{The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans}, trans.


Plutarch, Cato the Younger 957.

Seneca, Ep. 24.8; Plutarch, Cato the Younger 958.


Letters 1.12.

Ep. 70.14.


ibid., 1.84. Cicero means the Phaedo, which gives an account of Socrates’ death and Socrates’ assertions about the immortality of the soul.


Ep. 24.25.

Tusc. Disp. 1.74.

Caesar 864.

Plutarch, Cato the Younger 959, cf. Caesar 885.

Ann. 4.73.4.

Pharsalia 4.474-581.

Julius Caesar 68.

Ann. 15.60.

cf. ibid., 11.3.


Ann. 6.29.

ibid., 16.17.

37 Digest 3.2.11.3; 28.3.6.7; 29.5.1.23; 48.21.3.

38 Ann. 16.17.

39 Letters 1.12.

40 ibid., 6.24.

41 Ann. 13.30.

42 Ep. 30.2.

43 Nepos, Atticus 21.

44 Ann. 15.63.

45 ibid., 6.29.


47 Plutarch, Life of Brutus 1213.

48 Plutarch, Life of Antony 1147.

49 ibid., 1151.


51 Digest 3.2.11.3.

52 Appian inexplicably calls him “Lucius Scipio.” His real name was of course Q. Caecilius Metellus Pius Scipio Nasica.


54 Letters 1.22.

55 ibid., 1.12.

56 Plutarch, Cato the Younger 957.

57 Ep. 24.24-5.

58 Ann. 15.63.

59 ibid., 11.3.

60 Hist. 2.48.

61 Atticus 22.

62 Ep. 30.3.

63 Seneca, Ep. 24.6; Plutarch, Cato the Younger 958.

64 Suetonius, Otho 10; Tacitus, Hist. 2.48.

65 Ann. 11.3.

66 ibid., 16.19.

67 Nepos, Atticus 21.

68 Seneca Ep. 24.7; Plutarch, Cato the Younger 958, Brutus 1218; Tacitus, Hist. 2.47-8; Suetonius, Otho 10.

69 Ep. 70.26.

70 Ann. 15.62-4.

71 Thrasaenus did the same thing during his suicide a year later (Tacitus, Ann. 16.34), undoubtedly in imitation of Seneca, who was himself imitating Socrates.

72 Ann. 6.49

73 ibid., 16.17
Here is the Rose, Dance Here:
Two Approaches to Environmental History

ALEX OLSON

HISTORIANS DISAGREE about what their discipline truly means. An entire area of historical study, historiography, is devoted to this disagreement. Traditionally, history has been considered part of the humanities, but more recently, historians have tested the waters of social science and even natural science. One area that sits at such a crossroads is environmental history, which concerns the relationship between people and their environment. As Elliott West, author of The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado, wrote, “For nearly twenty years a superb body of work in environmental studies has attacked the ridiculous conceit that people can act—and can understand past human acts—apart from the environment in which those actions are taken.” Working from this basic assumption, environmental historians widely diverge in their opinions about the logic of history. Some, such as Jared Diamond, believe that history should be viewed as a science. In his book, Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies, Diamond writes, “The book’s subject matter is that of history, but the approach is that of science—in particular, that of historical sciences such as evolutionary biology and geology.” Conversely, West believes that environmental history, while making sure to prevent runaway humanism, must account for the significant role of human imagination in determining historical outcomes.

Most historians, whether they consider themselves humanists or scientists, agree that human history involves a series of human actions. Disagreements arise over the significance of these actions, both to students of history and to the course of history itself. As Jared Diamond sees it, human history in a broad sense was determined long ago by geographic circumstances. The fates of human societies, as Diamond subtitles his book, depend upon where in the world those societies happened to exist. Human actions are but unwitting contributions to “history’s broad pattern.” Elliott West does not believe that any such causal pattern can be identified. To him, human history is an exchange between human imagination and the environment, each continually influencing the other. The following pages will draw out these basic dif-
ferences in more depth, explaining first Jared Diamond’s method and then that of Elliott West. The final section will reflect upon the nature of historical study by comparing both authors’ approaches to environmental history.

*Guns, Germs, and Steel* was written to explain “the history of everybody for the last 13,000 years,” including cultures not ordinarily represented in broad treatments of world history. Diamond’s background includes extensive fieldwork with the indigenous people of New Guinea, and as a result, he casts *Guns, Germs, and Steel* as an answer to a question once posed by Yali, one of the New Guineans with whom he worked: “Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?” In other words, why did Europeans acquire so much more advanced technology than the many non-European societies they eventually conquered? Traditional answers to this question, according to Diamond, usually involve significant assumptions of racism. “The objection to such racist explanations,” writes Diamond, “is not just that they are loathsome, but also that they are wrong.” By pushing back the chain of causation as far as possible, Diamond wishes to show that biological differences have nothing to do with the way history has unfolded.

In addition to his goal of explaining away racism, Diamond also intended *Guns, Germs, and Steel* as an example of history as a science. This is the real underlying significance of his book. His attack on racism is little more than a cover for his attack upon those who view history as part of the humanities. To carry this out, Diamond challenges two assumed features of his opponents’ position: subjectivism in historical study and the belief that people have agency in historical outcomes. His attack on the former is much less important to his argument than the latter, but it nevertheless reveals the chicanery involved in his treatment of racism. He uses the extremely strong emotions stirred by the idea of racism to enliven his far less emotive belief in the value of science.

His argument against subjectivism involves two steps. First, he presents his suspicion that New Guineans are biologically superior to Eurasians, a seemingly racist position. “From the very beginning of my work with New Guineans, they impressed me as being on the average more intelligent, more alert, more expressive, and more interested in things and people around them than the average European or American.” After explaining the grounds for this suspicion, he concludes that “in mental ability, New Guineans are probably genetically superior to Westerners.” This causes many readers to react with harsh intensity against the blatant hypocrisy of such a statement, since it follows a lengthy passage in which Diamond harshly attacks biological explanations of racism. Diamond then directs this reaction against the general notion of historical subjectivism—and in favor of his scientific approach—four hundred pages later. “While one can contest my subjective impression that New Guineans are on the average smarter than Eurasians,” argues Diamond, “one cannot deny” the “big environmental differences” between Eurasia and New Guinea that “ultimately decided the general course of world history.”

Diamond’s argument against the notion that people have determined history resembles his argument against subjectivism. He associates the idea of human agency with the racist explanation for differing historical outcomes, using this association as a rationalization for systematically eliminating all traces of human agency from his chains of causation. In a telling passage, Diamond makes this association explicit: “Europe’s colonization of Africa had nothing to do with differences between European and African peoples themselves, as white racists assume. Rather, it was due to accidents of geography and biogeography—in particular, to the continents’ different areas, axes, and suites of wild plant and animal species. That is, the different historical trajectories of Africa and Europe stem ultimately from difference in real estate.” The following paragraphs will detail the scientific method of proximate and ultimate causation that Diamond uses to prove this assertion. His method involves four distinct steps, each of which work to eliminate human agency as a determining factor in historical outcomes.

The first step is to prove that technologies such as guns, writing, and steel were the proximate causes for the Eurasian conquest of non-Eurasian peoples. The alternative to this would be human choice, be it visionary wisdom or grievous error. As Diamond explains, “The Spanish victories cannot be written off as due merely to the help of Native American allies, to the psychological novelty of Spanish weapons and horses, or to the Inca’s mistaking Spaniards for their returning god Viracocha.” Rather, the success of the Spanish conquest can be attributed entirely to European technological advantages. Atahuallpa, the Inca emperor defeated by Pizarro and his small band of conquistadors, was not stupid or gullible for succumbing to Pizarro’s ambush. He simply could not muster any sort of adequate defense against the steel weapons and horses of the Spanish. Furthermore, he was illiterate, like every other member of the Incan Empire at the time, lacking access to the technology of writing. Because of this disadvantage, “he had no
way of understanding that Pizarro’s men formed the spearhead of a force bent on permanent conquest, rather than an isolated raid.”

The second step is to prove that food production was the ultimate cause of the proximate factors involved in large-scale conquests such as Pizarro’s. Because only societies with surplus food could afford to support non-food-producing specialists, nomadic societies of hunter-gatherers faced significant disadvantages. Among the specialists they lacked were “artisans such as metalworkers, who develop swords, guns, and other technologies.” Furthermore, the denser populations made possible by food surpluses fostered epidemic “crowd diseases” to which Eurasians gradually developed resistance. These germs played an important part in the conquest of populations that had never developed immunity to such diseases. In the worst epidemics of the Spanish conquest of America, for example, “up to 99 percent of the previously unexposed population was killed.” Spanish conquistadors did not die from Native American germs in such great numbers because Native American populations were too small for such diseases to develop. In short, food production was “a prerequisite for the development of guns, germs, and steel.”

The third step in Diamond’s method is to push back the chain of causation even further by asking why some societies developed food production but not others. His claim is that differences in the acquisition of food production resulted from differences in environmental circumstances, not biological differences between people. He describes in great detail how the environments of early societies provided favorable or unfavorable conditions for food production, particularly by explaining the process of domestication and how the availability of a package of wild plants and animals affected this. He takes care to note that even though short-term adaptive choices were necessary for the long-term transition to food production, this does not constitute human agency as an ultimate cause. “Whether or not the selection of wild edible plants by ancient hikers relied on conscious or unconscious criteria, the resulting evolution of wild plants into crops was at first an unconscious process.” He goes on to describe how continental axes affected the spread of food production. While Eurasia’s east-west axis allowed for crops to spread easily across great distances of like climate, the north-south axes of Africa and the Americas slowed the spread of food production because of significant latitudinal climate variations. Once this portion of his argument is complete, Diamond reminds us that “in all this discussion of [Eurasia’s] advantages for the early rise of food production, we have not had to invoke any supposed advantages of [Eurasia’s] people themselves.”

His fourth and final step is to describe the actual process of causation as it worked in world history. After asserting the role of technology as the “leading” proximate cause of “history’s broadest pattern,” he explains that the effects of food production as an ultimate cause “became exaggerated, because technology catalyzes itself.” In other words, technology makes it easier to develop even more technology, so an exponential pattern to the development of technology is to be expected. As a result, “Eurasia’s considerable initial advantage was translated into a huge lead as of AD 1492—for reasons of Eurasia’s distinct geography rather than of distinctive human intellect.” Using this huge lead, Eurasians were able to conquer most of the world’s non-Eurasian population. While the historical outcome itself is clear, the challenging part of Diamond’s logic is proving that food production is necessarily linked to conquest. Why did the Europeans have to conquer the Native Americans? Without this link, Diamond’s causes are not necessary but conditional. He attempts to solve this problem in a concluding passage that generalizes the picture of conquest to its broadest scale, where the logical need for a culture-induced “Why?” is less pressing:

Thus, food production, and competition and diffusion between societies, led as ultimate causes, via chains of causation that differed in detail but that all involved large population densities and sedentary living, to the proximate agents of conquest: germs, writing, technology, and centralized political organization.

This clearly does not explain why Europeans decided to start sailing around Africa and across the Atlantic in the late fifteenth century. Why didn’t they wait three hundred years? Moreover, why did they feel the urge to expand and conquer in the first place? Couldn’t they have stayed in Europe? Surely “differences in real estate” from 13,000 years ago could not have determined such seemingly conditional, but devastatingly significant, outcomes.

It seems we should ask why Diamond does not address counterfactual arguments of this sort. This is especially puzzling when considering that he is arguing for necessary causation, the verification of which would seem to require that he refute alternative possibilities. As Diamond sees it, Guns, Germs, and Steel does address counterfactuals; it simply limits itself to those counterfactuals which are significant to the book’s causal argument. These counterfactuals are all quite sweeping, as when he asks why the Incas weren’t the ones to invade Spain rather than vice-versa. When posed as opposing con-
tentions, Diamond can deal with counterfactual and primary arguments simultaneously, and use history itself as proof. Any counterfactuals that do not fit into the scale of his argument, such as the questions posed above, are simply ignored. They concern specifics, and Diamond does not think such specifics matter to the claim that after 11,000 BC, history’s course could no longer change significantly.

Because of this logic, counterfactuals are not the primary confirmatory device of Diamond’s argument. Rather, Diamond believes that he is right because of positive empirical proof at many different levels of his argument. He believes that history provides hundreds of natural experiments which support causal arguments. He uses the development of Polynesia as one example of this. “The ultimate ancestors of all modern Polynesian populations shared essentially the same culture, language, technology, and set of domesticated animals. Hence Polynesian history constitutes a natural experiment allowing us to study human adaptation.” From this experiment, as Diamond asserted for human history in general, we can see that the societies which developed in Polynesia reflect the environmental conditions of the various islands. Complexity and specialization of technology and political organization correlate almost exactly with the density and size of population centers. “In short,” writes Diamond, “Polynesia furnishes us with a convincing example of environmentally related diversification of human societies in operation.” The radicalism of his methodology is apparent, since he clearly believes that people play an unimportant role in determining history.

The primary difference between Elliott West’s Contested Plains and Diamond’s Guns, Germs, and Steel is that West believes people do have significant agency over historical outcomes, primarily by using their imaginations. “If the environment is always helping shape and limit human understanding,” writes West, “people (and only people) are forever imagining new environments and trying to muscle them into being.” Of course, West recognizes that the environment exerts powerful influence over people, not only physically but also by limiting what they can imagine. Unlike Diamond, however, he portrays human beings as uniquely involved with the way history unfolds. “The human animal is the only one with a history of acting [on its] imagination. . . . Through imagination humans thus gain enormous manipulative influence over their surroundings.”

The subject matter of Contested Plains is the clash that took place between white settlers and Native Americans during the middle of the nineteenth century, on the central plains. Traditional historians of this conflict portray Native American society as a collection of primitive, warlike tribal units which existed for thousands of years in a state of historical limbo. When the progress-oriented white settlers moved over the plains, Native Americans simply could not adapt. West views his book as a criticism of such historians. He believes that Native Americans were constantly making choices and imagining new environments. Far from being static, Native Americans were “masters of adaptation.” In one particularly poignant passage, West describes a Cheyenne legend about how their god, Mahoe, reacted to the arrival of the European horse. Mahoe is quoted as having told the Cheyennes:

You may have horses . . . But remember this: If you have horses everything will be changed for you forever. You will have to move around a lot to find pasture for your horses. You will have to give up gardening and live by hunting and gathering, like the Comanches. . . . And there will be other changes. Think, before you decide.15

As it turned out, the Cheyennes chose in favor of horses, but that is somewhat beside the point. This way of looking at Native American history is radically different from both traditional accounts and that of Guns, Germs, and Steel. The transition to life with horses is seen as a conscious decision. To Diamond, such decisions were not decisions, but evolutions based upon environmental necessity. Furthermore, though they adopt equine technology, the Cheyennes consciously reject food production, which in Guns, Germs, and Steel is seen as an ineradicable part of progress. Diamond would see this as one of the “backward steps” found throughout history. West, on the other hand, argues that whether or not nomadic life decreased productive possibilities, it was more attractive largely because of the intangible idea of freedom. “The horse was a liberation,” writes West, “Riding freely over those open grasslands, the Kiowas must have felt they had reached the time and place of their fulfillment. They had become centaurs in their spirit.”

The logic behind this view of history can be illustrated with a few important points. First, West views historical causation in terms of creating potential for change rather than determining the future. “The cumulative results of imagined change are immeasurable. I cannot begin to understand any of them without thinking about several thousand years of human beings trying to improve their condition by redreaming it.” Rather than being part of a determined force, change is significant in that it creates new conditions for imagination. History is not about evolution, but rather “evolving currents of possibility.” For example,
when Native Americans first encountered the horse, this constituted a new condition for imagination. The way they imagined the plains suddenly changed. "As a place, the plains existed in their heads, woven together through memory and perceived design, and when the Spanish suddenly appeared, queer people astride bizarre creatures, plains natives almost instantly began to reimagine their country into something else again."

Of course, people cannot carry out everything they imagine, and this gets at a second key point in Contested Plains. As West describes it, "people never master their environment; they bargain with it." This bargaining process is very much like a craftsman's project, with the environment constituting the available set of tools. If the craftsman uses his tools improperly, they will break. Thus, while the environment not only provides fuel for imagination, it also establishes physical limits on the imagined spaces thereby created. For instance, West describes the soldiers who set up forts in the wake of the Colorado Gold Rush, only to lose many of their horses to the inadequacy of winter grazing land. "Ultimately, ... they too were caught up in the material dynamics of the plains. The army was one more group to learn that a country that offered so much finally hemmed everyone inside the same limits." In short, while people do have a degree of agency over their environment, if they go too far, they will face the environmental consequences of their decisions. Writes West: "Environmental history is, among other things, a lengthy account of human beings over and over imagining their way into a serious pickle."

Considering the environment as a force of both potential and restraint, one can see how West ultimately differs from Diamond. Rather than viewing history as a causal steamroller driving ceaselessly forward, West views environmental history as a series of energy exchanges, a dance between imagination and the environment. In this light, the clash between Native Americans and white settlers was a conflict between different imagined environments, not between hunter-gatherers and the unstoppable force of food production. While Diamond makes the stark claim that "no details of who said what could have blocked the European conquest of Native Americans," West believes the possibilities were far more complicated. Native Americans could have acquiesced to the settlers, integrating somehow into American life. Many would die because of disease, but many would also build immunity. As West writes, "The Cheyennes had shown adaptive genius in their leap to horseback and the plains, and they might reconvert to farming just as smoothly. ... The change would depend ultimately on the spirit with which all sides approached it." The Cheyennes, however, chose to pursue their own vision of the plains, to hold on to their imagined spaces. "The Cheyennes' free-ranging movement, the inspiration and blessing of the life on horseback, was the essence of their own portrayal of the plains." The ultimate failure of this vision was largely the product of human agency, an example of "human beings over and over imagining their way into a serious pickle." As West describes it, "Whites and Native Americans were trying to live out irreconcilable images of what the plains were to be, which was like trying to pour sand into a bucket without losing any." Diamond recognizes the same environmental restraints, but he does not grant significance to the underlying human tensions involved.

Historical scientists like Diamond, therefore, form the second group of historians against whom West aligns himself. West believes that focusing on the idea that "humans are inextricably enmeshed with everything around them" has great dangers, especially if humans are ignored as agents of change. As he describes it, "We are different, and not simply because we walk upright, use opposable thumbs, and tend to go bald. Humans are set apart in their environmental exchanges because they consider and think about their environment as nothing else apparently can." Of course, West would not dispute the objective facts in Diamond's account; most Indians did, in fact, die as a result of white expansion. Instead, he disputes the concept of causation moving inevitably forward, because causation in this sense means nothing to him. The greatest power of the story of the plains was not the rise of food production thirteen thousand years ago, according to West. "In countless variations of trial, success, and failure, dozens of cultures had dreamed their way into this landscape of desire, where the country's greatest power has always been the fertility of hope." The idea of hope, though powerful, is also quite elusive. In setting up an alternative to environmental determinism, what is West's confirmatory logic? He and Diamond clearly are working with two very different epistemologies, so why does West believe that his approach is preferable? We might begin by looking at how he differs from Diamond in terms of historical proof. On a basic level, West points to a number of counter-examples that seem to contradict the idea of necessary causation. While Diamond dismisses these instances as "backward steps, motivated by local political issues," West views them as pieces of evidence which cannot be ignored. Prominent among these is the decision made by the Cheyennes to reject agriculture in favor of nomadic life. Diamond would argue that this is an example of a situa-
tion in which nomadic lifestyle was more attractive than food production in the short-term, hence the backward step. Furthermore, Diamond would say the situation was distorted by the introduction of the horse, a technological step forward. West argues that these generalized explanations simplify Native Americans into creatures incapable of historical reflection themselves. He points to Black Kettle’s offer to return to gardening as proof that the Cheyennes were aware of long-term consequences of the nomadic lifestyle. Despite this awareness, many Cheyennes bravely chose to accept bloodshed and death in order to retain their imagined identities. This choice does not make rational sense according to Diamond’s necessary causation, but West uses such choices as evidence in building a more complicated explanation.

As West sees it, historians like Diamond stand outside of history, imposing a simplified logic on the past. Diamond creates the hypothesis of environmental determinism, and then attempts to explain history in terms of this hypothesis. He generalizes his way past specific counterfactual objections, maintaining that his causal argument holds for “history’s broad pattern.” This allows him to read his conception of progress into whatever evidence he confronts. In an example of this approach, Diamond explains his take on the Internet:

One might wonder whether the geographic reasoning employed throughout this book has at last become wholly irrelevant in the modern world, now that ideas diffuse everywhere instantly on the Internet. On reflection, though, we see that the supposedly new rules are just reflections on the old ones. . . . Prospects for world dominance of sub-Saharan Africans, Aboriginal Australians, and Native Americans remain dim. The hand of history’s course at 8000 BC lies heavily on us. 25

West views this sort of reflection as reductionism, and herein lies the second and most important aspect of his confirmatory logic. He thinks he is right because of the complexity of the argument he has built. He does not dismiss anything that could be considered evidence. This is why Contested Plains took over a decade to write, but it is also why West’s argument works at multiple levels of specificity. He does not try to find a single chain of causation because he believes the scope of possible historical outcomes is too great for causal necessity to be verified. As he sees it, the white conquest of the central plains, though devastating to Native Americans, was nevertheless another rearrangement of environmental conditions, a new part of the dance of twelve millennia. “Within a decade of the gold rush the plains nomads had lost the power to pursue the life they envisioned. That did not end the story, however,

for the good reason that the story never ends. . . . On the reservation, their adaptive genius survived.” 37

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Having examined the historical approaches of both Diamond and West, how can we determine, if possible, the best way to study environmental history? One might step back and look at what both authors have accomplished, in terms of understanding the historical relationship of people to their environments.

Guns, Germs, and Steel does seem to be extremely powerful for giving us a broad conceptual framework within which to consider history. This framework banishes many racist explanations for current inequality that have haunted previous historical inquiry. As Diamond explains: “We have to wonder. We keep seeing all those glaring, persistent differences in peoples’ status. . . . Until we have some convincing, detailed, agreed-upon explanation for the broad pattern of history, most people will continue to suspect that the racist biological explanation is correct after all. This seems to me the strongest argument for writing this book.” 38 Critic Thomas Disch was not exaggerating when he described Guns, Germs, and Steel as “Darwinian in its authority.” 39 Its emphasis on the unimportance of individuals in history does make it susceptible to distorting interpretations, in the same way that The Origin of Species led many to accept Social Darwinism. Nevertheless, Diamond’s success in challenging racism through the sheer power of scientific explanation approaches Darwin’s achievement of debunking creationism in the same manner.

As indicated, however, problems begin to arise when explanation becomes extreme in eliminating human agency from history. These problems are not only social, but historiographical as well. In Diamond’s case, Guns, Germs, and Steel loses its explanatory power once culture reaches a certain degree of complexity. For example, consider Diamond’s treatment of China. As much as he tries to portray cultural decisions as products of environmental conditions, his method cannot explain why China did not colonize the New World, especially since it was superior to Europe long after the time of Christ in all the factors Diamond describes as ultimate causes of conquest. He explains the situation as follows: “China’s connectedness eventually became a disadvantage, because a decision by one despot could and repeatedly did halt innovation. In contrast, Europe’s geographic balkanization resulted in dozens or hundreds of independent, competing statelets and
This explanation is tenuous at best. For one, the balkanization he describes seems to be much more political than geographic. But even putting that question aside, what if the “decision by one despot” had been to carry out wars of conquest? In this case, China’s “chronic unity” could have led it to conquer the world. Consider the current situation of the United States. Its unified military allowed it to defeat two powerful aggressors during World War II and rise to the position of global superpower. This strength has allowed it to carry out an economic and cultural dominance unparalleled in history. Clearly, Diamond’s method fails to prove the necessity of his causation once society reaches a certain degree of complexity.

Even so, claiming that proof constitutes the grounds for successful history would imply that the primary function of history is empirical. Another way to look at the issue would be to discard the idea of proof altogether and ask again the question of environmental history: what is the historian accomplishing to enrich our relationship with the environment? Because viewing history as science ignores imagination, in Diamond’s case the answer might very well be nothing, except for the secondary goal of discarding the racist myth. As philosopher Richard Rorty writes, “The achievements of modern science exhausted their philosophical significance . . . when they showed us that there are no spooks.” Elliott West, conversely, finds a value in our relationship with the environment that is more significant than science. For him, “Imagining new arrangements becomes a kind of storytelling.” Diamond would find this comment silly, the same sort of subjective idea that leads to things like racism. But to West, storytelling is what studying history is all about. The same narrative longing that gives rise to imagination also keeps Shakespeare alive today and keeps West interested in history. Diamond’s emphasis on the idea that people have no historical agency makes this longing seem hollow. To him, people are puppets in an elaborate puppet show, and that’s all there is to it. West addresses this possibility in the final few sentences of his book: “Ultimately the issue is not survival but decency and common sense. Everything passes, the psalmist reminds us. No one escapes. The best we can hope is to learn a little from the speaking dead, to find in our deep past some help in acting wisely in the teeth of life.” Diamond is not concerned with this sort of learning, choosing instead to stick to the facts.

Of course, portraying the dismissal of narrative learning in Guns, Germs, and Steel as a problem appears to be a mere conflict of values, a classic argument between scientists and humanists. However, this criticism cuts far more deeply into Diamond’s methodology than it seems at first glance, revealing inadequacies at the core of his logic of history. As stated, Diamond sees history as environmental causation that is necessary and not contingent upon human agency. History, as he describes in his preface, is an onion “whose layers are to be peeled back in search for historical understanding.” Yet Diamond’s focus on the results of onion-peeling ignores the historiographical implications of the act of peeling, because such an act cannot take place without a recognition of life as a contingent and historical state of being. In poet Wallace Stevens’ words, “… the absence of the imagination had itself to be imagined.” There is an agency in the very idea of studying history, because in history is the recognition of a subject’s capacity to change. Without this recognition, we would be like lizards, who have no awareness of past and present. As Rorty described, in a lecture on philosopher Martin Heidegger, “There is no world for the lizards because they don’t know they’re going to die.” Only in this state of being would we be as purely subject to environmental causation as Diamond’s history-as-science claims. As Heidegger wrote, in a passage that recalls West’s idea of conditional imagination, “By the opening up of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and limits.” A telling example of this is that of the first settlers of Denver, as described by West. “They had hardly established a post office and had not yet named any law officers when they founded a historical society.” In a published directory, “Readers could find all the requisites of an American city. Denver had a past, a future, a chess club, and fourteen lawyers.”

Diamond would obviously disagree with this assessment of his work. He sees the idea of history-as-science as the objective elimination of the moral dangers of subjectivism from history. Even from a moral perspective, however, Guns, Germs, and Steel can easily be seen as a failure. The belief that objective truth is the purpose of intellectual study, claimed Nietzsche, “is a belief of the unproductive who do not desire to create a world as it ought to be.” This is the ultimate moral implication of Diamond’s view of history. It does not matter to him whether we imagine new worlds because “biological systems are in the end wholly determined.” Even though currently, “that deterministic causation does not translate into predictability,” Diamond hopes it will eventually. Nietzsche would view this goal as “the impotence of the will to create.” Indeed, what would happen if history-as-science reached the point where it could predict everything? One can imagine an absurd world in which people are preoccupied with trying to avoid
their prescribed fates. Nevertheless, Diamond remains “optimistic” that history can be pursued “as scientifically as studies of dinosaurs—and with profit to our own society.” Where is the profit? It lies in teaching us “what might shape our future.” West, on the other hand, maintains his faith in possibility, in the will to create. “The results were sometimes horrifying, but frontiers set loose more creativity than the plains had ever witnessed. The previously unthinkable suddenly could be thought.”

West does not allow this creativity to become an out-of-control humanism. As an environmental historian, he recognizes the limits imposed on humanity by the world in which they live. For thousands of years, writes West, men were “knocked to their knees” by the environment. When most desperately experiencing such limits, the Cheyennes issued a “simple, elusive petition” to Indian agent Thomas Twiss: “We wish to live.” When describing how Twiss felt about helping them, West sounds much like Jared Diamond, though he carefully avoids using deterministic language of his own:

Even if the agent had wanted to halt the flow of events, and he definitely did not, Twiss thought it was too late. As he saw it, a combination of progress and fate had built into a momentum only a fool would confront: “It is beyond human power to retard or control it.”

The closest he comes to admitting environmental determinism in his own words is to describe the movement of the settlers as “a rolling undeniability.” The notion of undeniability, however, is very different from inevitability. West refuses to speak in terms of determinism because to him, environmental history viewed in this way lacks any meaningful purpose. He fully realizes that some things might actually be determined. West and Diamond, Yali, and even the lizards will die. The most convincing reason to prefer the historical methodology of Elliot West over that of Jared Diamond is that I no longer need history to tell me this, especially when stated at the exclusion of creativity. A historian who retains humanism might rightly say, as a settler on the plains once did, “Here a man is still worth something.”

Notes

3. ibid., 26.
4. ibid., 9.
5. ibid., 14.
6. ibid., 19.
7. ibid., 20.
8. ibid., 21.
9. ibid., 408.
10. ibid., 75.
11. ibid., 79.
12. ibid., 90.
13. ibid., 92.
14. ibid., 86.
15. ibid., 143.
16. ibid., 241, 264.
17. ibid., 264.
18. ibid., 292.
19. ibid., 55.
20. ibid., 66.
21. West, xxiv.
22. ibid., xx.
23. ibid., 86.
24. ibid., 54.
25. ibid., xxi.
26. ibid., 36.
27. ibid., 233.
28. ibid., 273.
29. ibid., xxii.
31. West, 261.
32. ibid., 290.
33. ibid., 312.
34. ibid., xviii.
35. ibid., 330.
37. West, 318.
39. ibid., Jacket.
40. ibid., 416.
Preacher of Righteousness:
Theodore Roosevelt and the Rhetorical Presidency

JOSEPH HAWLEY

Theodore Roosevelt believed he “stood at Armageddon and battled for the Lord.” According to Elting E. Morison, the reality of the Roosevelt Presidency was nearer to the line from Macbeth: “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” What is certain, however, is the profound historical impact of Roosevelt’s presidency on American politics in the twentieth century. Once dismissed as an insincere reformer and dangerous political jingo, reconsideration of Roosevelt began in earnest at mid-century, with John Morton Blum’s The Republican Roosevelt. TR, he argued, was a genuine reformer, albeit a conservative one. With the 1987 publication of his The Rhetorical Presidency, Jeffrey Tulis moved historical consideration of Roosevelt into a new domain. “The early years of the twentieth century,” he wrote, “were a time of ferment in the presidency.” Indeed, the opening decades of the 1900s witnessed a transformation of presidential practices and behavior that at once signaled and caused a “fundamental transformation of American politics.”

The Roosevelt presidency, contrary to Morison, was more than a “fairground of radiant, irresponsible life.” It was a birthing room of lasting change. A new consciousness of the country’s international role, the heyday of Progressive reform, and the nascent of what has been variously described as the administrative, regulatory, broker, or nanny state, all date to this period.

Inseparable from this transformative foment is the change in the presidency itself. Once regarded as a quiet office, secondary to Congress in importance, “possessing enormous prerogatives but finding little occasion to exercise them,” the presidency post-Roosevelt became the sun around which American governance revolves. Modern clichés tell the story: “let us return to the tried and true—a president who leads, and a Congress that responds to presidential leadership.” A paradigm of the president as popular leader who arouses the nation and builds consensus for a legislative agenda is what Tulis calls the rhetorical presidency. It began, at least in part, he says, with Theodore Roosevelt.

But if Tulis provides a new angle from which to assess the
presidency in general and the Roosevelt presidency in particular, he does not penetrate the Roosevelt enigma nor provide a rationale for Roosevelt's institutional innovations. At the heart of this historian's dilemma is a simple question: why? Why did Roosevelt act as he did? Was he conservative, a liberal, a progressive, or a reactionary? Did he possess a coherent governing agenda or was he, as John Morton Blum maintains, a man of process rather than ends?

TR's presidential record is vast, his policies numerous, his impact far-reaching. But focusing specifically on his part in the rise of the rhetorical presidency offers a window into Roosevelt's thought. While he was certainly no systematic philosopher or political theorist, Roosevelt did work from a consistent set of beliefs. In fact, TR's institutional innovations, and the new view of the executive those innovations express, arise from his attempt to preserve and adapt for the twentieth century a philosophy of public righteousness, essentially republican in character, grounded in a coherent understanding of civil society and government.

Grasping Roosevelt's underlying political thought begins with understanding his historical actions, his break with past tradition, and the social and political climate to which he responded. In May of 1905, Roosevelt had just been inaugurated as the youngest president in American history. But if his victory was great, his strength was about to be tested. A growing clamor in the Middle and Far West for railroad rate regulation fell on the deaf ears of his own party in the United States Congress. Labor violence was imminent in Chicago, the South was testy about tariff reform, and President Roosevelt feared the country was being menaced by class conflict and civil unrest. He would later declare this period to be the most important moment in the nation's history since the Civil War.

"Ours is an age of combination," Roosevelt said repeatedly as president. For him, as for millions of other Americans, this was a self-evident statement and the central fact of life in the early twentieth century. Insurance companies, packinghouses, banks, and railroads combined into regional and eventually national conglomerations as a wave of industrialization swept over the country. Growth of these business combinations, or trusts, had at least two major socio-political results that would develop elements of Roosevelt's thought and prompt him to action.

The first effect was a dramatic increase in the sheer size and scale of the nation's social and economic life. "A complex industrial system connected people in a vast scheme of interdependence that coordinated their labors." Railroads, in particular, displaced rivers and other waterways as the highways of commerce. Local communities all over the country were linked by the railway system, bringing not only "outsiders" of all sorts to small towns, but directly impacting the business cycle of the community. Towns that sprang up along the rail lines were entirely dependent on the stream of traffic and/or goods the railroads provided. And established communities too found themselves adjusting to the ebb and flow of the railway lines that brought jobs, goods, and visitors.

While small towns grappled with the impact of large, impersonal forces on local life, the growth of cities was challenging the traditional American disdain for urbanity. The Jeffersonian republic of small, independent agrarians had long been an American ideal (if not quite a reality). A powerful urbanization trend raised new concerns about the health of a nation whose people lived primarily in the squalid centers of disease and social corruption very similar to the Jeffersonian conception of large cities. Together, the challenge to the small town and the growth of the city combined to induce a serious concern with agency. As Roosevelt himself wrote in retrospect,

A simple society can exist as a democracy on a basis of sheer individualism. But a rich and complex industrial society cannot so exist; for some individuals called corporations become so very big that the ordinary individual is dwarfed beside them, and cannot deal with them on terms of equality.

Massive corporations swamped the individual and produced a feeling of helplessness. The great economic and social forces of the day were beyond the control of the average man, many felt, and the everyday citizen could no longer completely determine the trajectory of his own life, let alone that of his community.

Added to this loss of agency was the second great effect of business combination: political corruption. "It was simple. A state boss collected money from the railroads, the packinghouses, the insurance companies, and the banks in his state. This money he sent to his henchmen in the counties. . . . The object and aim was to control the nomination of those who would run for the legislature and State Senate," wrote Kansas newspaperman William Allen White of turn-of-the-century politics. State legislators then pledged their allegiance on crucial matters affecting the trusts and in the election of United States Senators, who were first chosen by the party boss in conjunction with the relevant industrial powers. All "over the United States, our
Herodotus

The political influence of the nation’s major business conglomerates was extensive and ubiquitous. To varying degrees in various parts of the country, large corporations exerted significant power, if not control, over the entire electoral process from county convention to state legislature to United States Senate. As combinations continued to grow, more than a few commentators began to fear their enormous political authority was menacing America’s constitutional order.

Self-government, the founders theorized, would be forever susceptible to the danger of faction, or the tendency of one group of citizens to exert influence and power to their own advantage rather than for the public as a whole. But “a republic,” James Madison believed, “promises the cure.” By delegating legislative responsibility to a small group of elected representatives, the factional whims of the masses, with their various sectional prides and self-interests, would be “passed through a medium” (Congress) designed to “refine and enlarge the public view.” Representatives, selected by the people, would come to Congress not merely to advocate the narrow interests of their region, but to deliberate about the nation’s common good. The advantage of a democratic republic consists, at least partly, “in the substitution of representatives whose enlightened views and virtuous sentiments render them superior to local prejudices and to schemes of injustice.” Thus “one out of many”—in a country replete with regional hatreds, religious controversies, and sharply divergent opinions, a common, national purpose could be forged through the slow, deliberative machinations of representative government.

Madison’s vision, however, presumes and depends upon independent legislators. Or at least, legislators willing to vote according to the public rather than sectional interest. For this scenario to be plausible, however, distance is needed between the elected and the electors so that rational debate and deliberate procedure can produce sound, unified public policy rather than the default sectional squabbling. Should that distance be collapsed, or should there exist representatives unwilling or unable to vote independently and in the best interests of the entire country, the process of deliberation is ruined and the aims of representative government confounded. Corporations thus able to compel senators or other elected officials to vote in the industrial interest against the interest of the country posed a serious threat to constitutional government.

Roosevelt sensed the danger, and predicted the people would find it imperative to reassert their own sovereignty over the power of the trusts, and in so doing, reaffirm the legitimacy of democratic government.

Neither this people nor any other free people will permanently tolerate the use of the vast power conferred by vast wealth... in its corporate form, without lodging somewhere in the Government the still higher power of seeing that this power, in addition to being used in the interest of the individual or individuals possessing it, is also used for and not against the interests of the people as a whole.

Combination’s dual effects of erosion of agency and political corruption loomed ominously on the American horizon at century’s turn. Beginning in the waning years of the nineteenth century and building to a crescendo between 1896 and 1906, two reformist schools attempted to grapple with the problem. The populists, primarily Democrats, were lead by William Jennings Bryan, and the progressives, typically Republicans, by Robert La Follette. To Roosevelt both elements were of the same party: dangerous demagogues, inciting unrest and encouraging an unhealthy view of government.

The general election campaigns of 1896 and 1900 did not directly touch the question of the trusts, but focused instead, as Roosevelt said, on “two great moral issues: (1) the imperative need for a sound and honest currency; (2) the need of meeting in manful fashion... the problems arising from the Spanish War.” Nevertheless, the tactics employed by the Democratic nominee, William Jennings Bryan, symbolized for Roosevelt the populist approach typical of both Bryan and La Follette to the other “great moral issues” of the day, namely the trusts and government regulation.

In Roosevelt’s mind, these populist appeals were deeply irresponsible and dangerous to the moral health of the country. “It is not merely schoolgirls who have hysterics; very vicious mob-leaders have them at times and so do well-meaning demagogues when their heads are turned by applause,” Roosevelt said from the campaign stump in 1896. His stigmatization of Bryan as “mob-leader” as well as demagogue is not merely a rhetorical flourish. Roosevelt firmly believed the peril posed by Bryan’s populist appeals came from his wholesale attack on wealth and privilege as such. To criticize the wealthy simply because of their wealth was, in TR’s mind, to incite class divisions and envy. “The forces which they (Bryan and Altgeld) have rallied behind them... are the dark and mean hostility and envy
felt for all men of ability."\(^{15}\)

Bryan’s attacks on wealth and privilege place him in the company of mob-leaders, Roosevelt believed, because they encourage envious citizens to distrust anyone wealthier, better connected, or better educated than themselves. For TR, a child of the aristocracy and a social conservative, it is to be expected that society will naturally include equals and unequals. Persons are born with different talents and aptitudes in different societal stations. That some should acquire greater wealth or be more materially privileged than others is not itself unjust, so long as wealth or privilege is not acquired through unjust means.\(^{16}\) To resent another merely on the basis of his or her social standing is to resent the natural constitution of society. “The Bryanites have more and more dropped free silver . . . the fight has nothing to do with bi-metallism; it is simply a gathering of the forces of social unrest.”\(^{17}\) In a letter to his friend Albert Shaw, he is even more explicit: “The silver question was a very small part of the campaign. It was fundamentally an attack on civilization, an appeal to the torch.”\(^{18}\)

Against this backdrop, we can reject the assertion made by many Roosevelt contemporaries and not a few historians that the differences between Roosevelt, Bryan, and La Follette were only ones of “temperament” and “approach.”\(^{19}\) They were emphatic differences of thought. If Bryan knew this explicitly from Roosevelt’s campaign attacks, La Follette understood implicitly from Roosevelt’s presidential performance. As the former Wisconsin Governor and Senator wrote in 1913, “[Roosevelt’s] most savage assault upon special interests was invariably offset with an equally drastic attack upon those seeking to reform abuses. These were indiscriminately classed as demagogues and dangerous persons.”\(^{20}\) Roosevelt, La Follette charged, was forever willing “to accept half a loaf. I believe that half a loaf is fatal whenever it is accepted at the sacrifice of the basic principle sought to be attained.”\(^{21}\)

La Follette actually posed more problems than Bryan for Roosevelt. To begin with, La Follette was a Republican. His emergence as a populist/progressive spokesman and then as United States Senator “presented Roosevelt with delicate political choices. He did not share some of the policy positions of the reformers.”\(^{22}\) In fact, Roosevelt believed La Follette and reformers and journalists of his ilk cultivated a dangerous view of government. “One of the chief counts against those who make indiscriminate assault upon men in business or men in public life,” Roosevelt said in April 1906, “is that they invite a reaction.”\(^{23}\) Not only do they make genuine, lasting reform more difficult, but they encourage Americans to view themselves in terms of class identity. They promote the idea that government must be responsive to various classes and interests, that the whole business of government is to strike “working agreements between the dissident elements that make up society.”\(^{24}\)

Roosevelt rejected this notion. Class-consciousness of all sorts should be fought, he believed, and government according to anyone’s interests other than the whole people must be denied. “More important than aught else,” he concluded his April remarks, “is the development of the broadest sympathy of man for man. The welfare of the wage-worker, the welfare of the tiller of the soil . . . their good is not to be sought in pulling down others.”\(^{25}\)

In the late winter of 1904, Roosevelt warily eyed the situation in the Midwest, where the clamor for rate reform continued to grow. With some radicals, including La Follette, now suggesting government ownership of railroads, Roosevelt was prompted to action. In his Annual Message to Congress he urged anew rate legislation and warned of rising radicalism should rate regulation fail. The New York Times, for one, doubted there was any public desire for reform.\(^{26}\) In the spring of 1905, after the Senate killed a modest reform attempt, Roosevelt decided to act on his own.\(^{27}\)

The president had been scheduled to attend a Rough Riders reunion in Texas for some time and was also already planning to vacation (and bear hunt) in Colorado. Roosevelt changed nothing; he simply decided to speak out along the way.\(^{28}\)

Stopping in Dallas and San Antonio en route, then Denver and Chicago on the return trip, Roosevelt publicly and repeatedly urged the adoption of new rate legislation. His remarks in Denver are typical of his rhetoric throughout the trip:

I have spoken of the policy of extending the powers of the Inter-State Commerce Commission and of giving them particularly the power to fix rates . . . that represents in my mind part of what should be the general policy of this country. The policy of giving not to the State, but to the National Government, an increased supervisory and regulatory power over corporations is the first step.”\(^{29}\)

In The Rhetorical Presidency, Tulia calls Roosevelt’s rhetorical appeals “a decisive break with precedent.”\(^{30}\) Nineteenth-century institutional mores had forbidden direct appeals by the executive to the people for fears of demagoguery and subversion of the republican process. A president who spoke directly to the people in order to urge specific
Legislation undermined the independence of legislators (recall the concern with corporate influence), improperly collapsing the distance between magistrates and multitude crucial for deliberative government. Indeed, one of the articles of Andrew Johnson's 1866 impeachment accused him of improper, demagogic appeals to the people in an attempt to secure passage of his Reconstruction agenda.

Tellingly, the term Johnson used to describe his infamous rhetorical appeals, "swings around the circle," was blithely appropriated by TR in description of his own speaking tours. To prevent class warfare and stem the tide of radicalism, Tulis says, Roosevelt broke precedent extremely "in service of moderation . . . used popular rhetoric against popular rhetoric [and] denounced demagoguery demagogically." The modern rhetorical presidency, charged with "building a public consensus" and "securing a mandate," was born.

It is not clear that Roosevelt's break with the past was as sharp as Tulis would have it. More recent scholarship has suggested presidential rhetoric had been tending in this direction for over a decade. If Roosevelt was speaking directly to the public as presidents do today, he was hardly giving the sort of policy speeches modern executives do—his remarks are general calls for reform and broad statements of principle. There is no discussion of legislative minutiae and no hint of the public bargaining that goes on regularly today. Most importantly, there is little evidence that Roosevelt sought to condemn "demagoguery demagogically." Perhaps Tulis regards TR's public statements against radicals as intentional misrepresentations, but Roosevelt himself almost certainly did not. His public and private correspondence, as well as his earlier statements regarding the dangers of radicalism, suggest exactly the opposite—Roosevelt forthrightly believed he was combating demagogues and telling the unvarnished truth; which is to say, there is no indication of rhetorical "winking" in his public pronouncements on demagoguery, radicalism, or rate reform.

The last point goes to the heart of Tulis' difficulty with Roosevelt. Whether it was as pointed a departure as he envisions, Tulis persuasively demonstrates Roosevelt did break with the past, and in so doing, laid the foundation of the modern rhetorical presidency. But Tulis believes Roosevelt broke precedent purely for the sake of moderation, that his appeals were a "campaign for moderation—moderate use of popular rhetoric, moderate appeals for moderate reform." Roosevelt was attempting to mediate between the "claims of and against wealth." Pushed to its conclusion, Tulis argues, "the logic of Roosevelt's position justifies blatant appeals to passion, demagoguery in its worst guises, if that is what is necessary to preserve or restore the constitutional order."

Yet this analysis of Roosevelt's actions depends on the theory of "demagogic demagoguery," that Roosevelt was intentionally misrepresenting (or at the very least overstating) the beliefs of his opponents in order to provoke a public reaction against the radicals. In light of the historical evidence, this theory must be rejected. Further, it is doubtful, given Roosevelt's frequent statements about "classless" government conducted by and for the interest of the whole people, that he would envision his rhetorical innovations as a way to mediate or balance the competing interests of classes.

Without his theories of double entendre rhetoric and class mediation, Tulis cannot account for Roosevelt's institutional behavior. Roosevelt does not act merely to preserve moderation or balance the competing claims of various interest groups. He acts in an attempt to preserve and adapt for the twentieth century a coherent public philosophy. To assess that philosophy, we must turn to the rhetoric itself.

In analyzing TR's "swing" speeches, Tulis apparently regards Roosevelt's statements on "morality" and "righteousness" as the flourishes of a rhetorician attempting to inspirit the populace, much as a modern president would. In fact, it is precisely Roosevelt's statements on morality and righteousness that occasion his speaking at all. They, and not the attendant policy talk, are the true heart of the matter.

"Mr. Roosevelt is nothing if not a moralist. Nothing seems really to interest and arouse him if it does not present itself from the moral point of view," editorialized the New York Times in the midst of rate regulation debate. "La Follette declared, "Roosevelt is deserving of credit for his appeals . . . for higher ethical standards, social decency, and civic honesty. He discussed these matters strikingly and with vigor. He often confessed, however, a distaste for and lack of interest in economic problems." On the occasion of the former president's death, Gifford Pinchot, Roosevelt's long-time friend, colleague, and confidant said it best. "Roosevelt," he wrote, "was the greatest preacher of righteousness in modern times."

No one who knew Theodore Roosevelt, or who reads or studies him today, can ignore the strong moralistic overtones of his rhetoric. Properly locating these convictions in a broader conception of his public life is more challenging. John Morton Blum's attempt is the most systematic, probing Roosevelt's "roots of conviction." Yet he concludes Roosevelt was ultimately concerned with "process" and procedure, "lacking, as he did, a systematic sense of government
ends.”

However, Blum is hard-pressed to explain the consistency of Roosevelt’s public actions. He settles on a theory of hidden rationales, arguing Roosevelt’s thought and deeds were informed by certain intellectual presuppositions. Blum emphasizes, with varying degrees of plausibility, the influence of Social Darwinism, Roosevelt’s “aristocratic hauteur,” and a bland doctrine of “power and order.”

None of these intellectual presuppositions, though, fully account for the symmetry of Roosevelt’s behavior over time, which explains Blum’s tendency to abandon each rationale in turn as he moves through his study.

John Milton Cooper comes closer. “Roosevelt,” he writes, “wanted to preserve the heroic virtues of disinterested service and nonmaterial goals,” and sought ways “to promote such virtues among citizens.” This insight provides an explanation for Roosevelt’s moral fervor and a starting point for sketching his public philosophy.

Roosevelt is concerned with ends, though he regards process as integral to their realization. He does have an informing philosophy of civil society and government, though it is not systematic. The contours of his philosophy emerge not in a treatise, but in the deeds of his public life, and there perhaps most clearly in his words and actions during the rate debate. For government, reform, and life were all, he believed, “a quest for the moral.”

Theodore Roosevelt believed his era an “age of combination”; he did not think either the growth of business conglomerates was unnatural. “Creation of these great corporate fortunes has not been due to the tariff or any other governmental action, but to natural causes in the business world,” he said upon assuming the presidency in 1901. Amplifying upon the theme two years later, he told the residents of Milwaukee he did “not desire the abolition or destruction of big corporations, but, on the contrary, recognize them as being . . . the results of an inevitable process of economic evolution.”

Repeated in one form or another in every written message to Congress on the subject, and in nearly every public speech, Roosevelt’s insistence on the inevitability of trusts speaks to his view of society as a living, organic whole. Social and economic life develop together and influence one another in an ongoing, unbroken “process of evolution” that spans the country’s history, linking the generations and providing a shared past.

This view suggests the interrelated nature of society—and the absurdity of trying to separate economic phenomena from social effects—providing an approach to reform. “This is an age of combination, and any effort to prevent all combination will not only be useless, but in the end vicious, because of the contempt for law

which the failure to enforce the law will bring.” Roosevelt advised Congress in 1905 that any attempt to prevent trusts will fail because of their natural origin in society’s evolution. Reform must not be an attempt to create a new world by act of will, but is instead a response to the circumstances of the time. “Men in public life and men who direct the great business interests . . . should work not in antagonism, but in harmony toward this given end. The effort to make progress should be tentative and cautious. We must grow by evolution, not by revolution.”

True conservatives, Roosevelt believed, are progressives because they act to preserve the institutions and values of society by adjusting the legal and political framework to fit the changing times. Reform is an act of preservation, not innovation.

Periodic reform is essential to prevent a general societal upheaval (“there must be no hurry, but there must be no halt”)—especially when radicals are at the doorstep. “Those who are anxious that there should be no sudden and violent changes must remember that precisely these sudden and violent changes will be rendered likely if we refuse to make the needed changes in a cautious and moderate manner.”

Radicals and demagogues like Bryan and La Follette are dangerous because in their zeal to right wrongs they pull down the whole structure of society. Recall Roosevelt’s belief in the natural existence of great wealth and disparities in education and ability. Bryan and La Follette, to his mind, make the mistake of innovating rather than preserving. They wish to create a whole new society requiring different institutions and a different social reality than the one history has provided. Thus Roosevelt’s belief that Bryan’s demagogic appeals for “reform” were actually “appeals to the torch.”

TR’s understanding of reform as preservation also explains his concern with “process.” It is imperative the established institutions and customs of the country be honored and observed—their perpetuation is the very concern of reform. “There must be no hurry,” Roosevelt says. The deliberative channels of republican government must be utilized and careful reflection given to prevent rash, radical legislation.

Societal development is organic: living and ongoing. Healthy reform is a response to and affirmation of its continuing growth and its earlier history, not an effort to undo the results of the past or ignore the actual circumstances of the present. Roosevelt’s belief in the interrelated nature of civil society—economic phenomena, social traditions, and past generations all linked together in its growth—begins to suggest his understanding of government, and the practical expressions of reform.

Trusts, Roosevelt believed, threatened America’s democratic
Herodotus

republic because they skewed the representative system." They existed outside the democratic order, citizens without a sovereign. The fortunes amassed through corporate organization are now so large, and vest such power in those that wield them, as to make it a matter of necessity to give to the sovereign—that is, to the Government, which represents the people as a whole—some effective power of supervision." The government is, first and foremost in TR’s thought, a common endeavor representing all citizens. James Madison’s postulate of the Federalist Papers that deliberative, republican government could bind together fractious identities and interests for the good of the whole is firmly enshrined in Roosevelt’s philosophy. “It is right to remember the interests of the individual,” he told a group of lawyers in October of 1905, “but it is right also to remember the interests of that great mass of individuals embodied in the public, in the Government.”

For Roosevelt, “the people” and “the government” (usually rendered “Government” in his work) are the same. His understanding of civil society, with its organic constitution, easily leads him to view government as a natural extension and expression of citizens acting in concert. There does not exist in his mind (at least not as sharply) the modern dichotomy between people and “government,” where government is viewed as a neutral bystander or broker presiding over society, vested with narrow power for keeping order and other limited ends. Our attendant contemporary concern with the plight of individual civil liberties versus the coercive power of the state appears to him an outmoded, purely historical phenomenon:

Our law comes down from the time when the State, the Government, was all powerful compared to the individual. . . . Circumstances in the past three or four centuries have wholly changed. . . . At present there is not the slightest question as to the individual rights being preserved.

It is perfectly natural for Roosevelt to speak of the federal government (or government in general) with a collective pronoun, as he does in an Atlanta speech urging government regulation of railroad rates: “It is not only in the interests of people of wealth themselves, but in our interests, in the interests of the people as a whole.” And later in the same speech, “It is no less in their interests to treat us fairly—by ‘us’, I mean the great body of our people . . . the whole body politic.” When Roosevelt says it is imperative for the people to assert their sovereignty over corporations, he means through government regula-

tion. “It is as much the duty of the Nation to guard its own interests and rights as it is the duty of the individual to do so. Within the Nation, the individual has now delegated that right to the State; that is, to the representative of all individuals.”

Undergirding his approach is a strong Burkean conception of representation (one shared, incidentally, by James Madison). The state, through its representative institutions, will embody and preserve the public interest. The legislator does not come to Congress to act on “local prejudices” or to secure the “local interests” of his constituents, but to represent their interests and viewpoints in deliberation about the common good. Thus Roosevelt’s abhorrence for what he calls government “by interests.” In a statement of belief remarkable for its clarity, Roosevelt rejected the view characteristic of both his former vice president, William Howard Taft, and present-day political theory.

Mr. Taft says that “every class” should have a “voice” in the Government. That seems to me a very serious misconception of the American political situation. . . . One of the most important of all the lessons to be taught and to be learned is that a man should vote, not as a representative of a class, but merely as a good citizen, whose primary interests are the same as those of all other good citizens. The belief in different classes, each having a voice in Government, has given rise to our present difficulty; for whosoever believes in these separate classes, each with a voice, inevitably, even though unconsciously, tends to work, not for the good of the whole people, but for the protection of some special class—usually that to which he himself belongs.

Progressive reformers such as La Follette and Woodrow Wilson only exacerbated the problem with calls for middle-class “distributive justice” in the case of the former and “public action to promote the economic interests of the less advantaged” in the case of the latter. Their proposals embodied the same mistaken conception of government, just from the opposite end of the political spectrum. The danger with government as a “broker” state mediating between competing groups is not only that it tends to reward one class at the expense of others; it threatens to create a “riot of individualistic materialism.” The rightful ends of government, as the rightful ends of life, are not material, but moral.

Reform is necessary, TR tells Congress, to exert the people’s sovereignty over the trusts and to prevent the growth of “interest-group” government.

In the past, the most direful among the influences which have brought about the downfall of republics has ever been the class spirit, the growth of the spirit
Herodotus

which tends to make a man subordinate the welfare of the public as a whole to the welfare of a particular class to which he belongs. . . . The standard which we should establish is the standard of conduct. It is a man’s moral quality . . . which really counts.  

Roosevelt finds no difficulty in believing the individual must sacrifice his own ends for the common good. Yet his justification for the paramount claim of the public interest is not utilitarian (greatest good for the greatest number of people). For the business of government is not to satisfy the existing claims of independent individuals or groups, as utilitarian theory would suggest. Instead, Roosevelt assaults the very foundation of utilitarianism by asserting that a good citizen has the same interests or ends as “all other good citizens.” How could this be possible in a liberal, pluralistic society? For Roosevelt, the answer is found in man’s civic identity. All citizens, as citizens, have the same ultimate end: self-government. It is the greatest political good, and its practice and perpetuation is the aim of social and political progress. “The noblest of all forms of government is self-government; but it is also the most difficult.” Difficult because it requires a particular way of life, and a certain sort of person.

Self-government is not any easy thing. Only those communities are fit for it in which the average individual practices the virtue of self-command, of self-restraint, of wise disinterestedness combined with wise self-interest; where the individual possesses common sense, honesty and courage.

It is, as TR says, a man’s moral quality that counts because it is man’s moral qualities that sustain self-government. The federal government, in his schema, relates and responds to individuals not according to their status as members of particular classes or social groups, but as moral agents capable of self-government. “The chief factor in the success of each man—wage worker, farmer, and capitalist alike—must ever be the sum total of his individual qualities and abilities.”

The nation needs “a moral standard” by which to engage and assess individuals, and also to judge the success of “any business or political question,” For if republican government regards citizens as moral entities, engaging them in that capacity means crafting policies that make possible and encourage their moral development. “Business success, whether for the individual or for the Nation, is a good thing only so far as it is accompanied by and develops a high standard of conduct—honor, integrity, and civic courage.” The welfare of the country and the survival of self-government depend on the moral hardihood (which TR sometimes calls “manhood”) of the aggregate people. Roosevelt commented,

For the harm to morals is worse than any possible harm to material interests, and the debauchery of politics and business by great, dishonest corporations is far worse than any actual material evil they do the public.

Reform is vital not only to assert the sovereignty of the citizenry over the trusts, to stem the threat of class government and materialism, but to make possible the heroic virtues.

“This Government,” Roosevelt wrote to Congress in urging rate reform, “stands for manhood first and for business only as an adjunct to manhood.” In other words, the material makes the moral possible, not vice versa. Specific government policies find their justification in the sort of lives they make possible. As Roosevelt told a group of Stanford University students in 1903, for example, “The first need of any nation is intelligent and honest citizens. Such can come only from honest and intelligent homes, and to get good citizenship, we must get good homes,” he continued, urging the adoption of new land settlement measures. “Citizenship is the prime test in the welfare of the nation.”

Government, he believes, is the people acting in concert through their representatives for the common good. It emerges from the natural, organic life of society, linking the economic, social, and moral life of a people, from generation to generation. Whether the policy was land settlement or rate regulation, “each nation shall be known by its fruit. . . . We judge a nation by the net result of its life and activity. And so we judge the policies of those who at anytime control the destiny of a nation.” Reform, in this context, preserves rather than innovates, always striving to cultivate the moral vigor indispensable for a free people, and encourage the qualities necessary for citizenship. And it is this citizenship in the nation—man as moral agent, capable of possessing the traits and temperament to sustain self-government—that is the shared, political end of all members of the American republic. A common “moral standard” by which to judge politics, business, and individual behavior provides a basis for government action and binds together the American people as moral agents rather than members of classes or parties.

Nearly every public speech even given by Roosevelt, and certainly every major speech on the rate question, contains references to the moral life of the individual and the nation. Righteousness is,
indeed, his great theme. But if the elements of TR’s public philosophy, now taken together, explain his moral emphasis, and provide a rationale for rate reform, government regulation, and condemnation of radicals, we cannot yet fully explain his institutional innovations. We still seek to understand his part in the rhetorical presidency. For this we must remember that although Roosevelt was, for the most part, deeply conservative (as his intellectual moorings suggest), he made at least one major radical judgment. He judged that the founders’ project of disinterested, deliberative representative government had, in some sense, failed.

Abraham Lincoln was Roosevelt’s favorite president, without question. The entire Civil War period, with its hues of military virtue in service of a common national purpose (preservation of the Union), always figured prominently in Roosevelt’s mental life. But his interest went beyond an imaginative fixation. Roosevelt’s view of the presidency, he himself wrote, was “Lincolnian”:

> Men who understand and practice the deep underlying philosophy of the Lincoln school of American political thought are necessarily Hamiltonian in their belief in a strong National Government and Jeffersonian in their belief... in the welfare of the people as the end of government.

Lincoln violated the Constitution to preserve it, suspending the writ of habeas corpus, most famously, as part of a broader effort to win the Civil War and save the Union. Lincoln’s judgment was at once radical and conservative: to preserve the whole Constitution, some of its constitutive parts would have to be disregarded. Roosevelt repeatedly claims the mantle of Lincoln in two senses: 1) innovation is sometimes necessary for preservation and 2) the executive can serve as the unifying force for the nation.

“We are face to face,” Roosevelt said in 1910, “with new conceptions of the relations of property to human welfare.” Or as he routinely told Congress in written message and the people from the stump, “Old laws and the old customs which had almost the binding force of law were once quite sufficient... they are no longer sufficient.” He spoke, in the first sense, of the need for new rate legislation. But he was also speaking of a new role for the executive in a new era the founders “could not have foreseen.”

The framers distrusted direct appeals to the public; they disliked the notion of speech by government officials, particularly the president, designed to arouse popular passions. The threat of dema-

goguery was too great; the danger of collapsing the distance between the represented and the representatives, the danger of disrupting deliberative government, were too real. The executive should remain, in Jefferson’s word, “quiet.” Congressional representatives would communicate directly with the people and give voice to their thoughts and opinions in Congress. America’s national legislature would “refine and enlarge the public view,” not the president.

Observing the heavy-hand of “railroad bourbonism,” Roosevelt judged that the founding project, as originally envisioned, could not survive. Corrupted by machine politics and unwilling to pursue meaningful reform on its own, neither the state legislatures nor Congress could perform their republican tasks of melding the sectional and class jealousies of the nation into a whole through pursuit of the public interest. Congress, particularly the Senate, was dominated by the industrial interest, not the common interest. If the project of republican government, on which Roosevelt’s public philosophy heavily relied, were to endure, innovations would be necessary. As governor of New York, Roosevelt wrote:

[He] had neither the training nor the capacity... to match Mr. Platt and his machine people on their own ground. Nor did I believe the effort to build up a machine of my own... would meet the needs of the situation. I therefore made no attempt to create a machine of my own, and consistently adopted the plan of going over the heads of the men holding public office and of the men in control of the organization, and appealing directly to the people behind them.

In a revealing passage describing his attempts to prod Congress into prudent reform, Roosevelt despairs at the domination of machine men and extreme reactionaries, and invokes the spirit of Lincoln in tackling the situation.

These men still from force of habit applauded what Lincoln had done in the way of radical dealing with the abuses of his day; but they did not apply the spirit in which Lincoln worked to the abuses of their own day. Both houses of Congress were controlled by these men. ... I was forced to abandon the effort to persuade them and I achieved results only by appealing over the heads of the Senate and House leaders to the people.57

With Congress, in his judgment, unable and unwilling to perform its constitutional function, the presidency would move to fill the void. The presidency would preserve the republican project.

The New York Times wondered if the president’s light regard
for constitutional conventions would permanently damage the country; the New York Herald accused him of improperly influencing Congressional action by making public speeches; the Democratic platform of 1904 charged Roosevelt with “executive usurpation” and called for a return to a “Jeffersonian” presidency. But if TR’s attempt to adapt traditional republican aims defied accepted constitutional norms, his own philosophy of public righteousness at once justified and limited the rhetorical presidency.

Government, he thought, is a natural part of the organic life of society. Its customs and traditions can be changed to fit the broader ends involved. And the broader end in sight for Roosevelt was the preservation of the constitutional project—which meant the imperative of cultivating the moral qualities of good citizenship. The president would become, then, a preacher of righteousness. Like Lincoln, the modern chief executive would embody a shared, national purpose, engage the people as moral agents, and remind them rhetorically of their moral and civic obligations. If Congress would not, the executive would act for the good of the whole people. He would become, in fact, a “steward of the public welfare.”

His actions—his direct speech to the public—were not a usurpation of power, he believed, because their aim was the preservation of republican government and the prevention of dangerous, materialistic class antagonisms. He was obligated to remind the American people of the higher, moral sphere of life, while at the same time providing the impetus for reform to make that life flourish. A corrupted Congress, he was convinced, would not act on its own.

Thus his four spring speeches and those of his fall tour, as well, urge rate reform in general terms, but dwell heavily on its moral justifications. In Denver:

We have the right to look forward with confident hope to the future of this Republic, because it will be not and shall not become the Republic of any class, either rich or poor because it will and shall remain as its founders intended it to be, a Government where every man, rich or poor, so long as he did his duty to his neighbor, enjoyed his full rights, received the guarantee of justice, and had justice exacted from him in return.

In Chicago:

No true patriot will fail to do everything in his power to prevent the growth of any such [class] spirit in this country. This Government is not and never shall be a Government of a plutocracy. This Government is not and never shall be a

Government of a mob. I believe in corporations. They are indispensable instruments in our modern industrialism, but I believe they should be so supervised and regulated that they should act for the interests of the community as a whole.

In Raleigh:

It must be understood as a matter of course, that if this power is granted it is to be exercised with wisdom and caution and self-restraint. The Inter-State Commerce Commissioner who failed to protect a railroad that was in the right against any clamor, no matter how violent on the part of the public, would be guilty of a wrong. ... When I say a square deal I mean a square deal; exactly as much for the rich man as for the poor, but no more. Let each stand on his merits, receive what is due him, and be judged according to his deserts. To more he is not entitled, and less he shall not have.

If Roosevelt’s philosophy of righteousness in some sense birthed the rhetorical presidency, it also gestured towards its limits. The central aim of the reformer, after all, is preservation. Roosevelt sought, above all else, to preserve self-government by championing the moral righteousness needed for its perpetuation and invigorating the institutions responsible for its practice. Uses of the president’s rhetorical prerogative that contradicted these ends would be, in Roosevelt’s mind, clearly prohibited.

This nevertheless leaves a large potential for abuse. Any number of harmful presidential practices—from the most blatant demagoguery to outright public lies—could be justified by shameless appeals to the principles of righteousness and preservation. The key to limiting the potential for abuse, Roosevelt thought, lay in the public nature of the rhetorical presidency. “Publicity,” he said, was the answer to the dangers of bureaucracy and a powerful executive. Likewise, the rhetorical presidency was restricted by virtue of its new role. A president more often before the people was a president more dependent upon public response and approval for authority. Conventional practices may no longer limit the president’s behavior, but the people’s support would. Without it, the rhetorical president would be severely handicapped in negotiating with Congress and passing legislation. His effective authority would be greatly diminished.

So it was all the more important to speak and “educate” the public. TR’s philosophy of righteousness would provide a compass by which to evaluate not only public policy, but presidential practices, as well. The “moral standard,” used by legislators to craft policy, presidents to speak to the public, and citizens to evaluate the performance of
both, would be the shared public philosophy of the nation, providing the very grammar of political discourse.

Roosevelt’s philosophy of public righteousness gives birth to, defines, and limits the rhetorical presidency, all in an attempt to reform the republican project. Yet Roosevelt’s theory never became the nation’s public philosophy, and his attempt to use the presidency as an instrument of republican reform was largely abandoned by his predecessors.

The Rooseveltian president—inspirer, reformer, moralist, rhetorician—does not exist. A rhetorical presidency synonymous with constant public cajoling, overexposure, and policy by opinion poll remains in its stead. For one thing, Roosevelt’s philosophy was never completely unified or by any means unassailable. Contemporary newspapers, magazines, and other recorders critical of Roosevelt exposed many of the opportunities for abuse presented to a man who believes he can do anything the Constitution does not specifically prescribe.

Further, in his zeal to claim Lincoln’s imprimatur as he applied his public philosophy and reformed the republican project, Roosevelt lost sight of the fact that Lincoln’s leadership was extraordinary—not meant to last. Habeas corpus was restored; the presidency became once again, to some degree, a more quiet office. Roosevelt, however, apparently thought executives would go on behaving as he did for the foreseeable future.

They did. They just didn’t believe as he did. As a number of historians have shown, most clearly Jeffrey Tulis and John Milton Cooper, Woodrow Wilson’s understanding of government and the presidency almost completely supplanted Roosevelt’s own. Wilson took the tools of the presidency hewn by Roosevelt—direct appeals to the people, intimate relations with the press, a careful public image—and harnessed them to his attempt to circumvent the separation of powers and bring about “effective government.” Roosevelt’s vision of government as shared endeavor, dealing with individuals as moral agents and cultivating the qualities of self-government, was almost entirely lost.

If there is a conclusion to be drawn from Roosevelt’s actions and his plight, it is perhaps that the search for a solution to the rhetorical presidency begins with a search for a shared public philosophy. Tulis says presidents and citizens need a “political compass” to judge the actions and behavior of one another. They need “a reformed polity, regulated by such a compass, able to judge the rhetorical categories in

which power is expressed, defended, and understood.” A new political education, says Tulis, “is the fundamental task facing America today.” Roosevelt’s “moral standard,” his philosophy of righteousness, was his solution. Through it he could understand civil society and government and locate the rhetorical presidency. If his attempt has been lost, it does not mean it was not worthwhile. If present circumstances are any indicator, perhaps we should try again.

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Notes

3 ibid., 173.
4 The Coolidge presidency is the exception that proves the rule. Calvin Coolidge’s reluctance to propose new legislation, his reticence to speak publicly on matters of state, and his generally “low-key” attitude towards presidential activities was a source of great comment and debate. Such behavior was the norm, more or less, fifty years earlier.
6 Essentially republican because it embodies and trades upon the classical republican concerns for character formation, citizenship, and limited government. It should not be a surprise that Roosevelt’s political understanding was significantly impacted by republican theory: as Michael Sandel has shown in his study on the subject (see below), a strong strand of republican political theory existed in American discourse and thought from the founding through the beginning of the twentieth century. The degree to which Roosevelt adapts and changes the central republican project is, in part, the intended subject of this paper.
7 Michael J. Sandel, Democracy’s Discontent: America in
entirely sincere.

19 William Allen White makes precisely this statement in his *Autobiography*, 346. Unfortunately, a number of historians, including Elting Morison and Herbert Croly, make similar if not identical assertions.


24 Morison, 179.


26 The *New York Times* was a nearly implacable foe of the Roosevelt Administration, highly critical of the president and skeptical of his policies. Throughout 1905 the *Times* editorialized against rate legislation, warned of resultant economic stress and government control should rate regulation be enacted, and doubted the "public outcry" the president continually claimed. For a particularly strongly worded statement on this last point, see the editorial of October 16, 1905.

27 The Esch-Townsend Bill. For a thorough analysis of Roosevelt’s sophisticated legislative strategy for rate reform, see especially John M. Blum’s *The Republican Roosevelt*, "President, Congress, and Control."

28 For the brief historical narrative in this section, I am relying on contemporary coverage by the *New York Times* and also on the scholarly accounts by John M. Blum, Jeffrey Tulis, and Lewis Gould.


30 Tulis, 96. Familiarity with *The Rhetorical Presidency* and the scholarship it inspired is very nearly essential for my argument here and forward—I take as given the premise Tulis’s work seeks to prove, namely that the rhetorical practices of the president have changed markedly in the twentieth century and, in and of themselves, constitute a decisive change in the character of the executive office. It goes without saying, then, that I am relying on his work when I briefly sketch the theory in this section.


32 Martin J. Medhurst, ed., *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency*, (Austin: Texas A&M University Press, 1996). This view is supported by the fact that apparently no major newspaper makes any reference to the novelty of TR’s statements when reporting on his trip. It is not until October that the *New York Herald* suggests in an editorial that the president may be trying to influence Congressmen by appealing to the people. The Herald’s rival *New York Times*, certainly no friend of the Roosevelt Administration, flatly rejects even this modest suggestion.

33 Compare TR’s 1905 rate reform speeches with almost any of President Clinton’s pronouncements during the health care debate. Whereas Clinton spoke incessantly of the minute details of his plan, going so far as to hold national, televised “town meetings” to familiarize the public with the particulars of his proposal, Roosevelt never spoke in more than broad statements of principle.


39 La Follette, 65.


41 Blum, 6.

42 See Blum’s *Republican Roosevelt*, particularly chapters two through eight. Blum relies on these various rationales at different places in his work, always abandoning (or ignoring) the preceding theory. I do not deny the influence (very strong influence, in some instances) each of these elements may have exerted on Roosevelt’s thought and his philosophy. I merely argue he does, in fact, have a public philosophy—coherent, if not systematic.


45 Economically speaking, of course, this may or may not be true, though Roosevelt thought it was. What is important is the underlying understanding of civil society.

Jeffrey Tulis has noted there are over fifty variations on Roosevelt’s standard trust speech, which includes the above assertion.

This view does not originate with Roosevelt, but finds its most eloquent and thoughtful expositor in Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century British statesman. Roosevelt was familiar with Burke and obviously influence by him—he was known to quote the Englishman in his Annual Messages to Congress.


Roosevelt says this explicitly in a Founders’ Day speech to the Union Club three years earlier. There are a number of fairly serious philosophical assumptions tied up in these statements of which Roosevelt was probably not even aware. TR seems to share the general Hegelian assumption of his generation that history is “progressing” and growing towards perfection. Burke, on the other hand, held a very different conception of a history—guided, he believed, and shaped by Divine Providence (teleological as opposed to dialectic). The distinction is not absolutely vital to a discussion of TR’s public philosophy, though it does have interesting implications for political philosophy.

Roosevelt, Union League Speech, 1905.

*Idem,* see also “The Demagogues.” Roosevelt in 1896: “Bryan hates clergymen as such. He condemns business men as such.”

Roosevelt, Fifth Annual Message, 1905.

Previously quoted letter to Cecil Spring Rice. See also Roosevelt’s “How Not to Help Our Poorer Brethren,” an essay dating from the 1896 campaign condemning income redistribution schemes. See also his personal dislike and distrust of La Follette and his “dangerous” socialist program: *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt,* Volume V and Lewis Gould’s *Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt.* For a discussion of TR’s social conservatism see Cooper’s *Warrior and the Priest,* Chapter 14.

Roosevelt did not object to corporate wealth as such, merely to improper use and acquisition thereof. In a letter to Cecil Spring Rice before assuming the presidency: “I do not believe there is any oppression of the masses by these businessmen.” His concern was with the threat he believed such massive interests posed to the operation of government. Contemporary commentators, too, saw this as an epic battle for democracy. These range from the hyperbolic William Allen White to the more retrospect but equally outspoken *Wall Street Journal*


See particularly *Federalist 10* and *Federalist 12;* also, George Will’s *Restoration: Term Limits and the Recovery of Deliberative Democracy.*


Sandel persuasively argues such a conception of government as “neutral state” or “procedural republic,” as he calls it, dates to this century. See his book, *Democracy’s Discontent,* cited previously.


Roosevelt, Fourth Annual Message, December 3, 1904, 7052.


See also James Madison, *The Federalist* (particularly *Federalist 10*).


See John Milton Cooper, 213. Chapter 14 offers outstanding analysis of Roosevelt’s utter contempt for Wilson on this basis.


Roosevelt, Fifth Annual Message, 1905, 7365.

Ibid., 7366.

Roosevelt, Speech in Raleigh, North Carolina, *New York Times,* October 19, 1905, A1. TR repeats this theme over and over again in numerous variations. In a representative passage from his Fifth Annual Message:

*We who possess this priceless boon, and who desire to hand it on to our children and our children’s children, should ever bear in mind the thought so finely expressed by Burke: ‘Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetites. . . . It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free.*

See *Addresses and Messages of the President* for further examples.

Roosevelt, “Message on Death of McKinley,” 6648.

Roosevelt, Fifth Annual Message, 1905, 7360.

Ibid., 7760.

Ibid., 7356.

Ibid., 7360.

Theodore Roosevelt, Speech at Leland Stanford Junior University, May 12, 1903, 191.

Roosevelt, *Founders’ Day Speech,* Philadelphia Union
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League, 1902, 93.

77 The image forever in TR’s mind of the true citizen was Civil War veteran—honest, hardworking, and a conscious believer in the shared destiny of the Union. See his Autobiography, as well as personal letters for repeated references to this ideal, as well as outstanding analysis on the subject by John Milton Cooper, and a discussion of this ideal’s foundation in TR’s biography in Edmund Morris’s The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt.

78 Again, see Morris and particularly John Milton Cooper.

79 Roosevelt, Autobiography, 222.

80 Lincoln’s radical project of preservation is the subject of a recent book by U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist.

81 Roosevelt, “The New Nationalism,” Roosevelt and Reform; Politics, 23.

82 Roosevelt, Message on McKinley’s Death, 6643.

83 Roosevelt, Inaugural Address. He invokes the mantle of Lincoln and innovative leadership in confronting the issues of the new era.

84 See The Federalist, especially numbers 48-50. See also Madison’s Notes on the Constitutional Convention.

85 Expression belongs to the New York Times, coined October 20, 1905, A12.

86 Roosevelt, Autobiography, 152.

87 ibid., 195.

88 A recurring theme for the Times. See especially editorials of March 4, May 11, June 10, and December 26 of 1905. A12.


90 Kansas City Star, October 29, 1905, A11.

91 Roosevelt, Autobiography, 198.

92 Woodrow Wilson’s attempt to harness the presidency’s rhetorical powers in order to affect a more “efficient,” parliamentary form of government would be a gross violation of the rhetorical prerogative, according to Roosevelt. However, TR’s own justification for his use the rhetorical prerogative is so broad as to be difficult to strictly limit. Any number of harmful presidential practices, including blatant demagoguery, could be justified by a shameless appeal to the stated principles of righteousness and preservation.

The Creation of Authority:
John Stuart Mill and the American Civil War

Elisabeth Presser

The English philosopher John Stuart Mill suddenly filled the pages of the Northern American press in the 1860s. Although his standing as an intellectual authority in America had previously been strongest in the South, Mill became a Northern hero during the Civil War. To his countrymen, Mill was a prominent liberal best known for his treatises on logic and economics. While his political influence in England was limited to the more radical sectors, his prestige among intellectuals in the Union appeared almost universal during this decade. Shortly after the publication of On Liberty in 1859 and On Representative Government in 1861, Northern reviewers praised Mill’s defense of individual rights. His endorsement of “sovereignty of the individual,” a phrase he borrowed from New England reformer Josiah Warren, was understandably appealing to American individualistic appetites. His philosophical ideas were not, however, the primary cause of his ascension in Northern intellectual discourse. Rather, his advocacy of Northern actions enabled him to gain a place of high standing in the Union. Northern intellectuals conferred authority upon Mill in order to legitimize the cause of the Union and strengthen its connection to England.

Between 1862 and 1870, over one hundred articles about Mill appeared in Northern political journals, most offering praise of his work. His books and essays were the subjects of glowing reviews. In 1863, Boston architect and author Charles Amos Cummings described Mill in the pages of the Christian Examiner as a thinker who had “given his life to the support of liberal principles, with a devotion and an ability which have made him an acknowledged leader of the liberal writers and thinkers of the age.” By the end of the decade, Mill was an established fixture in Northern intellectual circles. An article in The North American Review affirmed in 1868, “Mr. Mill’s reputation rests upon a foundation too strong to be shaken, upon an eminence too conspicuous to need pointing out.”

There are many reasons why Mill’s philosophy would have appealed to American audiences in the 1860s. One contemporary
reviewer observed, "no people on earth are more interested in the dissemination of real knowledge on this subject [of liberty] than are the inhabitants of the United States." Since its revolutionary inception, Americans faced the difficulty of organizing a government that would maintain order and security yet still allow the maximum amount of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" for each individual. The middle decades of the nineteenth century were a particularly critical juncture in the definition of American liberty. In the throes of civil war, America grappled with the largest of Mill's concerns: the meaning of freedom, the limits of the state, the right of the citizen and the structure of the economy. As battling confederations attempted to define freedom, debates about the nature of liberty became central to the intellectual discourse of the nation.

The relevance of Mill's philosophical projects alone does not account for his high standing in the Union, however. The importance of liberty to America during the Civil War cannot explain the amount of attention that Northern journalists devoted to John Stuart Mill when this fascination is seen in contrast to the concurrent Southern antagonism toward Mill. Confederate supporters risking their lives to drive out Union forces also clung to conceptions of freedom: ideals of liberty motivated Southern soldiers as much as Northern troops. As Southern Review editor Rev. Albert Taylor Bledsoe asked in 1867, "how, in the name of common sense, can a people know whether it loves liberty or not, unless it first knows what liberty is?" This question was just as relevant to Southerners as to their Northern opponents.

The two constituencies often drew upon the same sources in defense of their respective ambitions. Both regions appealed to American revolutionary heritage to justify their opposing conceptions of rights and liberties. Unionists maintained that the Revolutionary War championed the cause of the great American nation; they fought the Civil War in the interest of preserving that hard-won Union. Confederates countered that American revolutionaries had themselves fought against a tyrannical government. Secession, Southerners argued, upheld the cause of their forefathers. Like the Revolutionary War, Mill's work had the potential to appeal just as strongly to both Southern and Northern sensibilities. Many of his treatises—his Political Economy, emphasizing the centrality of the economy in civic and political life, On Liberty, advocating a radical self-determination, and On Representative Government, promoting self-governance for those no longer in a state of "barbarism"—relied on arguments similar to those used by Confederates to justify the protection of slavery. Why then, did Mill find an appreciative audience in the North but not in the South during the 1860s?

In fact, Southern intellectual authorities had honored Mill long before the growth of Northern interest. Southern reviewers promoted his Political Economy throughout the 1850s, using Mill's criticisms of Northern capitalism to defend the Southern system of slave labor. A quotation from the Southern Quarterly Review illustrates the common use of Political Economy to promote slave labor over free labor: "Mr. Mill, impersonating political economy, has no positive arguments to adduce in proof of the absolute and exclusive righteousness of the free labour system."7 Because Mill rejected the Northern economic structure, Southerners could use his work to show that their system was superior.

In 1854, representatives from South Carolina also honored Mill with an official gesture of appreciation. Mill received a package from the Library Committees of South Carolina containing a copy of the posthumously collected work of John C. Calhoun, South Carolinian statesman, secessionist, and slavery advocate. The State of South Carolina, its legislature and the Chairmen of the Senate and of the House of Representatives authorized the collection for presentation "to such individuals distinguished for science learning & public service."8

Mill responded with approval:

I am one of those who believe that America is destined to give instruction to the world, not only practically, as she has long done, but in speculation also; and my opinion is confirmed by the treatise which I have the honor of receiving from you, and which, though I am far from agreeing with it on all points, I consider to be a really valuable contribution to the science of government.

Although Mill indicated objections to aspects of Calhoun's thought, he did not enumerate his points of disagreement. Instead, he indicated only appreciation for Southern philosophy and gratitude for his position among esteemed Southern intellectuals. Presumably, Mill would not have agreed with Calhoun's endorsement of the institution of slavery. Mill made his anti-slavery position apparent in Political Economy in 1848. While private property must be protected, Mill wrote, human beings should not be classed as property:

Besides property in the produce of labour, and property in land, there are other things which are or have been subjects of property, in which no proprietary rights ought to exist at all. But as the civilized world has in general made up its mind on most of these, there is no necessity for dwelling on them in this
place. At the head of them, is property in human beings. It is almost
superfluous to observe, that this institution can have no place in any society
even pretended to be founded on justice, or on fellowship between human
creatures.\textsuperscript{89} Mill clearly believed slavery to be an untenable institution. However,
the lack of discussion of this view, and of direct reference to the United
States, permitted a dismissal of Mill’s perspective on the grounds that
he had never encountered American slavery. A Southern writer in
Debow’s Review wrote that Mill was unable to correctly assess Ameri-
can slavery, being familiar only with the slavery that preceded “an
enlightened civilization” in Europe. “Ours is of an entirely dissimilar
stamp,” the reviewer contended, “and the European knows as little of
the inferior race of men which it has fallen upon our clime and our day
to utilize, as he knows of our swamps and our forests.”\textsuperscript{101} Portraying
slavery as a duty of Southern men to care for the African race, this
writer dismissed Mill’s antislavery bias as ignorant prejudice. Mill
provided even more justification for a pro-Southern reading with the
sentence that followed his disavowal of slavery as an institution: “But,
iniquitous as it is, yet when the state has expressly legalized it, and
human beings, for generations, have been bought, sold, and inherited
under sanction of law, it is another wrong, in abolishing the property,
not to make full compensation.”\textsuperscript{112}
In practical terms, Mill protected the property of slave owners
by excusing them from any responsibility for putting an end to the
institution. By making the government the party responsible for
economic systems, and failing to explicitly call for state-enforced
abolition, Mill merely said what the government must not do without
specifying what it should accomplish. Mill argued for the right of slave
owners to reap the value of their slaves, and maintained that the
government had no right to deprive them of it.
It is not difficult to discern how Southern intellectuals were
able to read Political Economy as expounding a view more favorable to
the plight of the South than that of the North. In fact, Mill’s portrayal
of Northern capitalism was abysmal. He contended that even in a
nation as democratic as America, the free labor system created a society
of people concerned only with making money. The northern and
middle states, he wrote, had achieved total equality for all white men
and had eliminated poverty, but for all this advancement they were
nothing more than a population of greedy individualists focused solely
on accumulation. “[A]ll that these advantages do for them,” he wrote,
“is that the life of the whole of one sex is devoted to dollar-hunting, and
of the other to breeding dollar-hunters.”\textsuperscript{113} While Mill’s abstract
criticisms of slavery might have appeared to indicate a position
disfavoring the South, this direct and vehement rejection of conditions
in the Northern states was a clearer indication of a political stance on
the American situation. Mill’s comments about Northern greed
furnished far more ammunition for the South than his qualified state-
ments about the theoretical inappropriateness of slavery did for the
North. His response to the gift of Calhoun’s speeches, moreover,
connected the works of a pro-slavery statesman to Mill’s hopes for a
stronger and more influential America, further bolstering the Southern
belief in Mill’s advocacy of their cause.
Mill’s reaction to his treatment by Northern intellectuals,
conversely, was marked by irritation and disgust. While thankful to
South Carolina for its gesture of appreciation, Mill was irate with his
treatment in the North American Review. Although the review praised
Political Economy as valuable and intelligent, the reviewer commented
on the lack of general interest in his work. Most people are not
interested in Political Economy, the reviewer explained, because it is
not at all helpful in individual money-making.\textsuperscript{114} Mill wrote to his
American friend who had sent him the article, the lawyer and diplomat
John Jay, that the author of the review “is one whose tone of thinking
and feeling is extremely repugnant to me.” Mill complained that the
review gave “a totally false idea of the book and of its author” by
making Mill seem derisive towards Socialism, and that in his treatment
of Mill’s views on women, “the tone assumed by him is really below
contempt.”\textsuperscript{115} While he was apparently unwilling to comment on the
gross misinterpretation of his intentions in the Southern press, he was
quick to respond to this Northern criticism.
Although Mill did not comment on them in his letters, later
reviews in the North American Review were even more insulting. In
1852, Mill’s perspective on population was deemed “absurd.”\textsuperscript{116}
Another article discounted Mill’s philosophy on the grounds that he
“denies all necessary truth and absolute certainty.”\textsuperscript{117} Other prominent
Northern publications, like the Atlantic Monthly and the New York
Times, did not review Mill’s work at all during this period. The only
review in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine before that year was an
unfavorable critique of Political Economy by the English artist and
intellectual John Ruskin, which appeared in 1860.\textsuperscript{118} Although Northern
intellectuals declined to confront Mill’s direct insult in Political
Economy, they expressed their distaste by ignoring Mill’s work or
classing it as irrelevant.
In 1862, Mill’s identity in America changed abruptly: the North began to laud his work while the South shunned it. Reviews of several of his books, including some that had been in print for many years, appeared in Northern journals for the first time. Mill’s *On Liberty*, widely known in England though largely unfavorably received there, suddenly became a topic of discussion for Northern intellectuals who had ignored the book for three years. Reviews of his earlier publications appeared alongside reviews of the 1861 debut of *On Representative Government*. Mill’s work, old and new, took on interest for the North only after the publication of Mill’s essay, “Contest in America,” which promoted the Union cause in the American Civil War. The essay urged England to abandon its alliance with the South and turn instead toward helping the Union win what Mill viewed as a war against slavery. The South reacted to this treatment by turning away from its allegiance to Mill’s doctrines and branding him a philosophical failure.

Mill sided with the Union in “Contest in America” in the belief that the North was waging a righteous war against slavery. In reality, the initial conflict was largely influenced by disputes over the use of newly settled Western territories and less dependent on moral imperatives to eradicate slavery from the South. At the onset of war, abolition of slavery formed no part of federal ambitions. The joint resolution of Congress in 1861 denied “any federal intentions to interfere with the domestic institutions of the southern states.” The policy toward slavery changed partially as a response to growing abolitionist sentiment in the North and also to aid the incorporation of Southern slaves into the Northern army and to undermine Southern economic strength and morale. Another component of the decision, however, was that Northern policymakers perceived a need to appeal to English sympathies through an antislavery platform.

Britain had abolished slavery in 1833, but still its government leaned toward an alliance with the Confederacy. England relied heavily on the South to supply cotton for the textile factories that employed fully one quarter of the English workforce. Napoleon III of France also wished to side with the Confederacy in hopes that the seceding states would acknowledge the puppet government he was building in Mexico in exchange for his support. Unwilling to go to war with Britain, Napoleon awaited assurance that Britain would back the Confederacy before he would commit to a course of action. The situation was extremely threatening to the North: if England chose to back the Confederacy, the South would have the support not only of the Royal Navy against the Union blockade but of French forces as well. President Abraham Lincoln was eager to forestall such a disaster and recognized emancipation as a weapon in the Northern defense. William M. Dickson, in a speech at Oberlin College in 1865, gave an explanation of the situation:

> While the aristocratic classes in England and other foreign countries were in sympathy with the rebellion, the working classes and the liberals of those countries were not; and in England these had so much power that the Government was bound to respect their opinions. But the laborers of the eminent liberal leaders were much paralyzed by the fact, that our Government had steadily refused to emancipate the slaves. So that the rebel emissaries could plausibly say, as they did, that slavery was not involved in the contest, that the United States were no more for freedom that the Confederacy. In those days of our disasters, these arguments were being pressed with great effect. Fortunately for the country, Mr. Lincoln came to the relief of our liberal friends abroad; the proclamation of emancipation was issued, and the danger of foreign intervention passed away.20

According to Dickson, Lincoln’s foreign policy stance averted the disaster of English and French aid to the South when the North, desperate to avoid the combined forces of England and France, appealed to the antislavery sentiments of English leaders in order to secure support for the Union. This perception among Northern intellectuals gave credence to English abolitionists’ suasion in ending the threat of foreign aid to the Confederacy. Contrary to the perceptions of Northerners like Dickson, however, the Union’s adoption of an antislavery platform did less to discourage an English alliance with the South than did the Confederate retreat at Antietam. Once it became apparent that a Confederate victory was not assured, England had no inclination to violate its neutrality. The clear success of abolitionist rhetoric in swaying Mill, however, as evinced by his contention that the war was fought in order to end slavery, sustained the enduring Northern impression that English antislavery sympathies had saved the Union from defeat. Northern journalists perceived that his support was instrumental in the Union victory. An article in the *Nation* illustrated this belief: “[H]is appearance in the field at important junctures such as the American war ... gives a turn to the fortunes of the day which, though the result may be remote, makes its character certain.” A *New York Times* correspondent conveyed a similar assessment: “The service thus rendered to our country deserves grateful recognition, for it was not only rendered when fast friends were few in Mr. Mill’s country, but it was rendered
by one whose authority gave incalculable credit to the justice of the American cause and the purity of American motives. Northern observers viewed Mill's involvement as decisive in justifying their cause and achieving their victory. "Contest in America" was, in many Union minds, the weapon that dealt the final blow to English sympathies with the South. The Northern press rewarded Mill's support with publicity. After the essay's first appearance in Fraser's Magazine in England in February of 1862, Little's Living Age published "Contest" in the United States the following month. Harper's New Monthly Magazine ran the essay in April. Within a year, Cummings referred to the article as "a paper which we would gladly believe has been so generally read among us as to make it needless for us to do more than simply to recognize [its] perfect consistency." Following close on the heels of the essay's popularity was a general surge of Northern enthusiasm for Mill's work. After the dissemination of "Contest," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Atlantic Monthly, The New York Times, The Nation, The North American Review, The New Englander and Yale Review, and other Northern journals gave extensive coverage to Mill and his work. Mill's endorsement of the Civil War, in "Contest" and elsewhere, brought him acclaim in the Northern press. A reviewer of Dissertations and Discussions described the genesis of Mill's new Northern authority in the pages of the North American Review:

The two [essays] which relate to our own country are already familiar to American readers, and the enlightened interest which they show in the great ideas and principles that dignify the cause of our country has endeared the name of their writer to the American people, and prepared a general welcome in this country for his other writings, even in quarters where the admirable qualities by which they are distinguished had not previously been familiar.

Where before he had been unknown and his work regarded as negligible, he now had a great number of readers and admirers. The Northern Review, which had dismissed Mill as "abundant" and inconsequential in the 1850s, now lauded his work as exceptional. Mill's attitude toward the American Civil War, as articulated in "Contest," had made his name revered in the Union. Not even the factual inaccuracies in "Contest" could undermine the worth of the essay for the Northern intellectual elite. An editor's note introducing "Contest" in Harper's admitted to errors in the essay, correcting Mill's misstatement of conditions and laws in the Southern States. These corrections were as follows:

Congress has passed no law abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, or making an appropriation for indemnifying the slave-owners; and the suggestion for reconstructing the boundaries of Virginia, Delaware, and Maryland is found, as will be seen by our Monthly record for January, not in the President's Message, but in the Report of the Secretary of War. The recommendation that the white population alone should constitute the basis of representation refers solely to Maryland, and does not imply the abrogation of the Constitutional provision by which five slaves are counted as three persons as a basis of representation.

These significant misstatements of fact notwithstanding, the editor of Harper's New Monthly Magazine defended the integrity of Mill's essay: "These slight errors do not lessen the value of the article as embodying the view of our contest held by the ablest political thinker of Great Britain." Although the essay was full of factual errors and misinterpretations of events, Union writers celebrated their perceived link to British sympathies embodied in Mill's support of their effort. His characterization of the Civil War as a crusade against slavery, even if it was mistaken, touched on a growing sentiment that many Unionists wished to emphasize toward the end of the war. Mill presented the North, then, not merely with an English advocate but with a spokesperson for the new abolitionist image of the war. Mill, in turn, repaid his Northern welcome by rewriting his assessment of Northern capitalism to be complimentary rather than disparaging. The critique of free labor in Political Economy was changed to reflect his new respect for the Northern states:

It may be a necessary stage in the progress of civilization, and those European nations which have hitherto been so fortunate as to be preserved from it, may have it yet to undergo. It is an incident of growth, not a mark of decline, for it is not necessarily destructive of the higher aspirations and the heroic virtues; as America, in her great civil war, has proved to the world, both by her conduct as a people and by numerous splendid individual examples, and as England, it is to be hoped, would also prove, on an equally trying and exciting occasion.

The same book—in the very same passage—that had discredited Northern capitalism later applauded it as a necessary and progressive step in the evolution of society. After the publication of "Contest" and the revision of Political Economy, the South was left without any means to fashion a defense of their cause from Mill's writings. The Southern response to this sequence of events was one of contempt toward Mill. The same editors that had published praise of Mill's philosophy in the 1850s now printed reviews describing Mill's
thoughts as abhorrent. The invectives of Southern Review editor Reverend Albert Taylor Bledsoe serve as telling examples of change in the Southern attitude toward Mill after the publication of "Contest." In a review of On Liberty, Bledsoe wrote, "Having just published his glorious evangel of the nineteenth century, and established for ever the great cause of toleration, he proceeded to denounce, with fanatical and furious hate, the maturely-formed and long-cherished opinions of the South as damnable heresies." Southerners viewed Mill as a hypocrite, a traitor to his own principles. Protestations against the doctrine of individual sovereignty reached emotional heights in the Southern press. Bledsoe responded to On Liberty with incredulity: "Society must not on any ground whatever, invade this absolute independence and sovereignty of the individual. What! not even if the common good demands his services?" He concluded with a grand condemnation of Mill's philosophy:

"The concept of knowledge without the reality" has never, since the age of Socrates, been more conspicuously or offensively displayed. We shall only add, in conclusion, that he has left the image or idea of Liberty as nebulous as he found it; and if his "new gospel" should be annihilated to-morrow, it would not deprive the world of one particle of useful light."

Throughout the decade following Mill's declaration of support for the Union in "Contest," Southern writers were happy to dispense with Mill and his ideas. An article in DeBow's Review deemed Mill's study of political economy, once so lauded in the South, "a quackery, a false pretension, a humbug, an airy nothing." The science that had once been relied upon to support the Southern economic system was now seen as fraudulent and inconsequential.

Though he lost the sponsorship of the South, Mill's advocacy of federal ambitions won him many Northern friends. After the publication of "Contest," influential Americans like Ralph Waldo Emerson, E.L. Godkin, editor of The Nation, Parke Godwin of the New York Evening Post, and the prominent abolitionists Moncure D. Conway and Daniel Reaves Goodloe became his correspondents. These friendships, built on mutual admiration and shared ambitions, brought the circulation of Mill's work into a personal sphere. As editors and public figures, Mill's new friends were the agents now primarily responsible for disseminating his ideas in America. Although the initial admiration of Mill came as a response to his writing, these personal associations were a crucial passage into American intellectual discourse.

We can understand the motivation of Northern intellectuals in promoting Mill, then, in two related ways. First, Mill publicly supported the Northern cause. Desiring English backing, Northern journals manufactured Mill's authority in order to bolster their own legitimacy and create a meaningful link to Britain. Growing out of this effort were personal friendships that re-enforced Mill's privileged status and kept him somewhat sympathetic to Northern interests. Thus, Mill became the "King of Thinkers" in American discourse. As the North American Review predicted in 1862,

The author's ideas will gradually diffuse themselves among philosophers who occupy his own intellectual plane; by their agency they will work their way into the common mind as reasonable, but impracticable; then they will be esteemed as desiderata in governmental institutions; and, when they are once objects of desire, they will in due time become objects of the popular will and choice.

Mill's liberal authority began with "Contest" and moved through the channels of scholarship and journalism into the realm of personal influence. His associations brought greater import to the position he had won with his opinions. In less than a decade, Mill's reputation changed from that of an apologist for slavery to a champion for Northern abolition.

If history has forgotten the roots of Mill's American liberal legitimacy, it seems also to have ignored the eclipse of that authority. After the posthumous publication of Mill's Autobiography and "Essays on Religion" in 1873, the tide of public opinion took a decided turn against him. As illustrated in contemporary reviews of these works, admissions of his socialist tendencies, his uxorious relationship to his wife, and his contemptuous attitude toward Christianity led to a rapid and unflattering reassessment of Mill's worth. Part of this rejection was, doubtless, a reaction of embarrassment to these disclosures on the part of his American friends. Also motivating a rejection of Mill were the troublesome constraints imposed by his philosophy. Mill was not only a supporter of Reconstruction but also a steadfast advocate of women's rights. Once legitimized as an authority, it was inevitable that his association with the movement in America would add to its power. The North American Review had predicted in 1864, "Those politicians who have hitherto been entirely indifferent to his loftier generalizations will nevertheless be no longer able to turn a deaf ear to his practical proposals. His influence must surely be felt, even by those who know not whence it proceeds." In making Mill into an authority,
the North gave license to his influence to affect the populace in way that it could not control. The perceived effect of Mill’s political associations changed toward the end of Reconstruction from one of enhancing the value of the ideas he supported to one of depreciation of Mill and his character. The Nation printed in 1873, “It was something, of course, for the extreme democratically party to be able to say that Mr. Mill agreed with them, but perhaps the agreement, so far as the outside world was concerned, told more against Mr. Mill than in favor of his allies.” This statement was a radical departure from the earlier view that Mill legitimized the Northern cause. The Nation’s analysis showed an awareness of Mill’s valor in promoting political projects and interpreted his allegiance in an uncomplimentary light. After many of Mill’s proposals had been enacted with disastrous results, critics claimed that his endorsement of radical reforms did less to bolster the legitimacy of the reformers than it did to render Mill’s authority illegitimate.

Coming at the close of federal Reconstruction, in an atmosphere of national exhaustion and resentment towards federal intervention in the South and its attendant complications, Mill’s death was a convenient parting of the North with its own radical trajectory. As nationalism, racism and laissez-faire policies were permitted to reestablish themselves in the South, Northern newspapers and journals turned away from their erstwhile hero, putting to rest an association that had outlived its purpose. Mill was to lay quietly in repose until the next generation of federal reformers, forgetting the lessons of the previous century’s instrumentalism, took him up once more in their reinterpretation of the First Amendment.

Notes

9 John Stuart Mill to the Chairman of the Library Committees of South Carolina, 3 March 1854, in Later Letters, no. 138.
12 John Stuart Mill, Political Economy vol. 1 (1848): 44.
13 ibid., 314.
20 William M. Dickson, “The Absolute Equality of all Men Before the Law; the Only True Basis of Reconstruction” (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and Co., 1865). Originally given as a speech at Oberlin College, Ohio, 3 October 1865.
23 Cummings, 41.
Herodotus

24 "Mill's Dissertations and Discussions, Vol. I," *North American Review* 100 (1865): 260. The second essay was a review of Thomas Carlyle's "The Slave Power," an article which was dedicated to Mill and articulated a pro-Union stance similar to Mill's position in "Contest."


26 *Idem.*


28 Bledsoe, 69.


35 "The Late Stuart Mill," *Nation* 16 (1873): 82.