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THEORY AND PRACTICE IN
HISTORICAL STUDY: A REPORT
OF THE COMMITTEE ON
HISTORIOGRAPHY

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL
230 PARK AVENUE · NEW YORK 17

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The Social Science Research Council was organized in 1923 and formally incorporated in 1924. Its members are chosen from seven associated professional societies in the social sciences and from related disciplines. It is the purpose of the Council to plan and promote research in the social fields.

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FOREWORD

By MERLE CURTI

THE POINT of departure for the present volume was the memorandum, "Current Research in American History," prepared for the Social Science Research Council by Professor Roy F. Nichols. This memorandum provided the basis for a discussion of "Trends in Research in American History" at a conference held on November 8, 1942, at the New York office of the Social Science Research Council. At this meeting a group of historians and the members of the Committee on Problems and Policy of the Council considered some of the relations between historical studies and other fields in the social science area. The historians included Charles A. Beard, Crane Brinton, Merle Curti, Paul W. Gates, Louis Gottschalk, John A. Krout, Roy F. Nichols, Arthur M. Schlesinger and Richard H. Shryock. In view of the nature and importance of the problems considered at this conference, the Committee on Problems and Policy asked a smaller group of historians to explore further some of the issues raised at the November conference. This smaller group was subsequently constituted as the Committee on Historiography of the Social Science Research Council.

The Committee on Historiography, as a result of several conferences and an extensive correspondence, decided that it might best fulfil its obligations to the Council and to the historical profession by preparing a manual designed to help clarify thought about history and to aid historians in teaching and writing it. The committee encountered a great many problems in its labors. Many modifications of our plans were necessary from time to time.

The first part of the present volume was prepared by Mr. Beard at the request of the committee. In this essay the grounds for a reconsideration of historiography are set forth. Long before Mr. Beard was asked by the

Council to take part in the November, 1942 Conference and to serve on the Committee on Historiography, he had, of course, given serious consideration to the matters discussed in the introductory essay. The members of the committee on the whole adhere to the main tenets of the essay. The material and the ideas in it, whatever contributions the other members of the committee made in the discussions, must largely be credited to Mr. Beard.

The committee believed that a survey of some of the major influences, especially movements of thought, which have affected the study and writing of American history in the last three quarters of a century, would illustrate some of the issues raised in the introductory essay and help clarify thought about the nature of historical interpretation. Professor John Herman Randall, Jr. of Columbia University agreed to prepare such an essay in collaboration with Professor George Haines, IV of Connecticut College. This essay is the second chapter in the manual.

Hoping still further to clarify the nature of historical thought, the committee gave much consideration to the problem of "causality" in historical writing. It decided to include a case study of the treatment of "causality" in specific historical works. Professor Howard K. Beale of the University of North Carolina has prepared an analysis of the handling of "causal" factors in writings about the Civil War. This essay is the third chapter in the volume.

The committee assumed that every branch of knowledge presents or rests upon a number of propositions accepted by persons competent in such fields as valid in themselves and for application. It further assumed that advances in any given field of knowledge are made by devising hypotheses for further appraisal, exploration, testing, correction, and generalization. Being in agreement on the foregoing, the committee then sought to discover what propositions in historiography, if any, could be accepted by the members of the committee as valid, as useful for the advancement of learning, and as worthy of submission to the judgment of historians in general. After a great deal of discussion and preliminary work, Mr. Beard was requested, as a matter of procedure, to prepare a brief list of tentative propositions for consideration. This he consented to do. The committee discussed, criticized, and modified the original propositions. This list was then submitted to the members of the Social Science Research Council and to seventy historians, chiefly in the several fields of American history. These scholars were requested to indicate which of the propositions they could agree to, as they stood; which ones they could accept, with minor modifications; and which ones they felt compelled to reject entirely.

Two months after the Propositions had been thus submitted, replies from thirty-five historians had been received. Of these fifteen did not seem

to be opposed in any fundamental ways to the thought in the Propositions, although many took exception to the style and diction. Twelve were willing to accept several of the propositions, subject to modifications in style. Eight apparently rejected the propositions altogether or were so critical of them that they could in no sense fairly be said to be in even partial agreement. Many historians wrote lengthy comments. All these were interesting and many were very useful. The committee believes that this substantial body of comments is itself a significant document. It takes this opportunity to thank again the historians and other scholars who gave the benefit of their counsel.

In revising the propositions the committee took into account criticisms, both in detail and in general, wherever this was possible. In many instances, however, critical comments so canceled each other that it was impossible to make any substantial use of them. In addition to simplification of diction and expression, certain other changes were made, principally for the purpose of emphasizing the positive implications of the original propositions. In the work of revision Professor Cochran and Professor Gottschalk were especially helpful. Professor Gottschalk also consented to define some of the basic terms that had been used in the propositions. His definitions, modified in the light of comments and criticisms from fellow-committee members, precede the Propositions, which constitute Chapter V of the handbook.

From the very start terminology posed difficult problems for the committee. It was decided to attempt definitions of some of the most commonly used terms in relation to actual usages of these terms in representative historical writings, in relation to epistemological problems, and in relation to the other social studies. Professor Sidney Hook of New York University agreed to prepare such a glossary; and Mrs. Wallace K. Ferguson searched through a sample of writings on American history in an effort to determine exactly how a selected body of terms had been used. Mr. Beard, in a statement preceding Mr. Hook's definitions, explains how and why the original plan of the committee was modified. This statement, together with Mr. Hook's definitions, for which he alone is responsible, comprise Chapter IV of the report.

Finally, the committee decided that a selective list of articles and books on historiography and the philosophy of history would be useful. Mr. Ronald Thompson of the University of Chicago prepared the list, which concludes the report.

The committee makes no claim to having "settled" any of the issues with which it has dealt. It does believe, however, that it has contributed to a fuller understanding of certain methodological problems in the writing of history. It hopes that its report will prove helpful to graduate students of history, to lay writers of history, and to the profession itself.

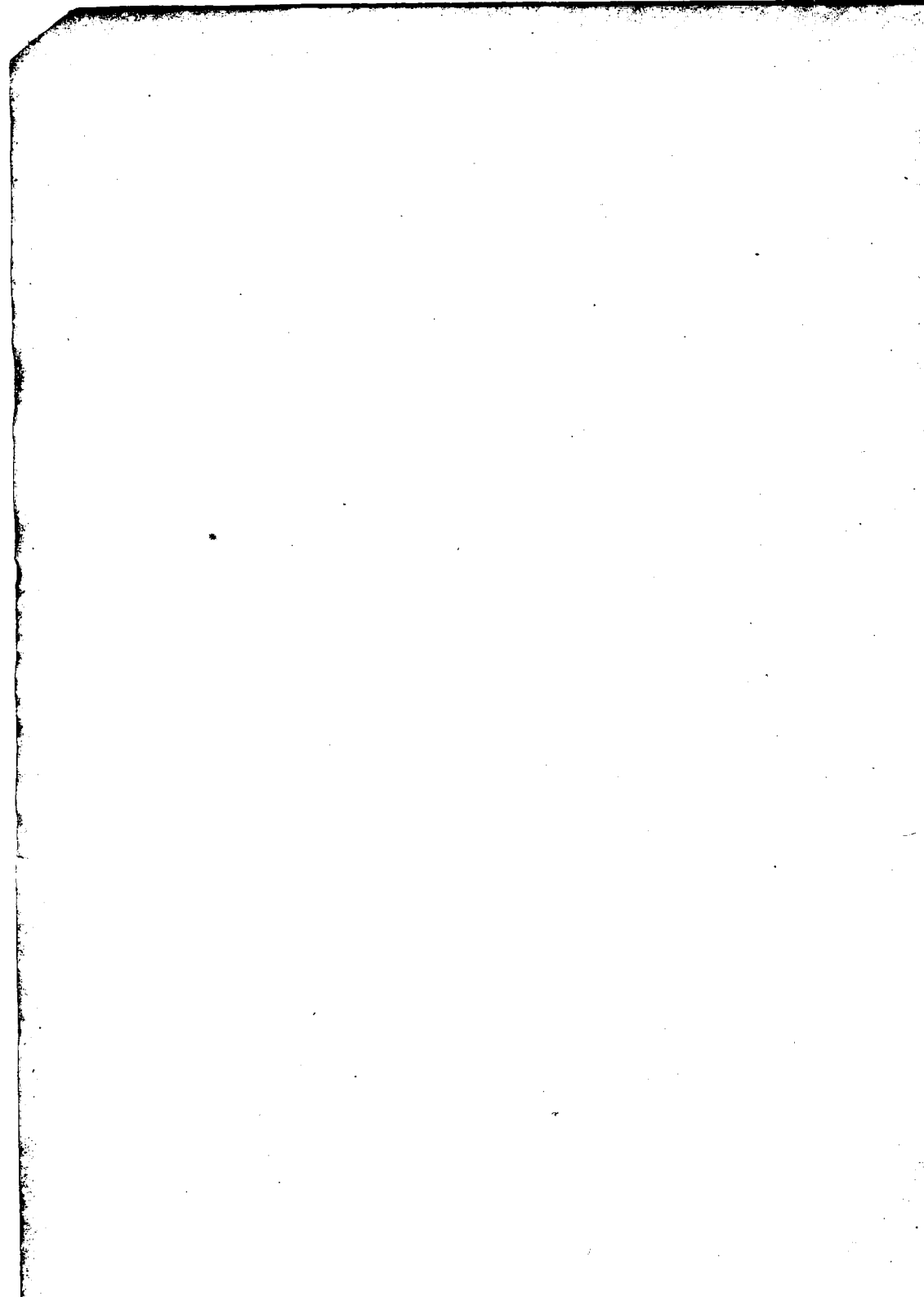
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CHAPTER I

GROUNDS FOR A RECONSIDERATION
OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

By CHARLES A. BEARD



IF A DESIRE to advance learning or increase precision of knowledge requires any justification, practical as well as theoretical grounds may be put forward to warrant a plea for a reconsideration of historiography—the business of studying, thinking about, and writing about history. Practical persons—academic and lay—concerned primarily with public or private affairs and absorbed in “the instant need of things,” are, to be sure, likely to question at once the truth or relevance of this contention. By such “practitioners” history is often, if not commonly, regarded as a kind of old almanac or as an ancient, if sometimes amusing, chronicle, without utility or pertinence in framing and executing policies for the conduct of affairs, public or private.

When leaders in politics, business, labor, agriculture, or other activities deemed “practical,” set about forming programs for action they seldom, if ever, think of devoting long weeks and months to the study of history as possibly germane to their procedure. On the contrary, when in the presence of a problem to be handled, they are inclined to employ their impressions derived from current experiences in such affairs; and, if supplements are regarded as desirable, to make use of treatises on law, economics, government, and foreign affairs, or other special works presumably directed to practical ends. To practitioners in general the idea of having recourse to history in a search for firm guidance to effective action would therefore seem to be a waste of time if not absurd.

Yet in the speeches and declarations made by articulate persons among practitioners—economists, reformers, politicians, business men, labor leaders, for instance—and in the newspapers and journals published for their information and satisfaction appeals to “history” occur with striking frequency. The word flows with ease from the pens of publicists, editors, columnists, and other writers for the general public; it crops up in the periods of orators, radio commentators, and special pleaders engaged in advancing practical interests, or for that matter advocating impractical, even dangerous, delusions. History is indeed often treated as the court

of last resort by such instructors of the public when they are impressed by the need of "proving" the validity of their propositions, dogmas, and assertions. Men and women who could not demonstrate the simplest proposition in mathematics, chemistry, or physics, or pass a high school examination in history feel perfectly competent to demonstrate the soundness of any public or private policy they espouse by making reference to history, or at least feel competent enough to use history in efforts to support that soundness.

Among the phrases which appear in the speeches and writings of or for practitioners, the following are so common as to be clichés:

All history proves.

The lesson of history is plain.

History demonstrates.

History shows.

History teaches.

History affirms.

History confirms.

History repeats itself.

History makes it clear.

An understanding of history settles the question.

All that belongs to ancient history.

If history is taken as our guide.

The verdict of history has been pronounced in our favor.

His place in history is secure.

The verdict of history is against any such folly.

The truth of history corroborates.

History admits no such contention.

Let us turn to history and see.

The history of that matter is definitely closed.

All history up to the present has been the history of class struggles.

American history must be taught in the schools.

The appeals of publicists to history in short form are frequently supplemented by efforts on their part to "historicize" long arguments for one cause or another; that is, to make what purports to be more or less elaborate statements of historical facts, real or alleged, in a resolve to sustain in this fashion the invincibility of their assertions and contentions.

Although there is no way of measuring the influence of historicizations on public opinion, the immense circulation they attain seems to indicate that laborious students of history probably have less influence in national life than men of science had, let us say, in the New England of Cotton Mather. Great applause is given to works which purport to be authenticated by references to history but in fact bear about the same relation to historical knowledge that astrology bears to astronomy.

Thus recent and current experiences present to workers in historiography a dilemma pertaining to the nature and uses of their work. History is treated as having little or no relation to the conduct of practical affairs and yet is constantly employed in efforts to validate the gravest policies, proposals, contentions, and dogmas advanced for adoption in respect of domestic and foreign affairs. Either historians have failed in giving precision, limitations, and social significance to their work or, by their writings, have lent countenance to the idea that almost any pressing public question can be indefeasibly answered by citations or illustrations selected from historical writings. History can scarcely be at the same time a useless old almanac and the ultimate source of knowledge and "laws" for demonstrating the invincible validity of policies proposed or already in practice.

Here then is a contradiction in contemporary thought which involves nothing less than the fundamentals of historiography in relation to practical affairs of the gravest import. On this ground alone a call for the reconsideration of historiography appears to have ample justification wholly apart from the love of knowledge in itself or the advancement of learning for its own sake.

Reasons involving a still wider reach of philosophic understanding, and yet with a bearing on practical affairs, also justify such a reconsideration. The Western world has long been at a crisis in thought and learning, as well as in practice—the most widespread and tumultuous crisis of the kind since the beginning of recorded history. This is a contention which scarcely needs a supporting argument. The state of things human around the globe demonstrates the soundness of the proposition. If it be urged that the calamities from which mankind suffers are really due to "economic maladjustments," it can hardly be denied that these maladjustments have occurred *in* history-as-actuality¹ and have, in some measure at least, grown out of defects in practical knowledge of history and out of incapacity for thinking about ways and means of preventing them or overcoming them. And if we are to mitigate or overcome them, effective intellectual operations of some kind must precede or accompany effective action in respect of

¹ Owing to the loose uses of the term "history" it is necessary in the interest of precision to make preliminary definitions of terms. Otherwise confusion may be confounded. In these pages history-as-actuality means all that has been felt, thought, imagined, said, and done by human beings as such and in relation to one another and to their environment since the beginning of mankind's operations on this planet. *Written-history* is a systematic or fragmentary narration or account purporting to deal with all or part of this history-as-actuality. *History-as-record* consists of the documents and memorials pertaining to history-as-actuality on which written-history is or should be based. Of course for recent history, a writer may use in part his own experiences and observations and oral statements by his contemporaries which he has heard and remembered or written down. Unless these distinctions are made clear by the context they should be explicitly set forth whenever the word "history" is used.

them, unless forsooth action is to be taken thoughtlessly, on impulsive opinions alone.

Since this crisis in thought has occurred *in* and is an aspect of history-as-actuality, then in the nature of things efforts to deal with it in terms of the realities out of which it came involve knowledge of and interpretations of this history. In every attempt to "explain" how we have come into the present state of things, recourse is had, even by persons wholly uneducated, to events, ideas, interests, and personalities of history-as-actuality recent in time. All public policies and personal designs framed with a view to bringing about an ideal or better state of things either present interpretations of history-as-actuality or are based on assumptions, explicit or tacit, respecting the nature of that actuality, past, present, and in the process of becoming. Broad and sweeping as this generalization appears, it is, I believe, incontrovertible and presents one of the supreme intellectual challenges of our time.

Even in times called "normal" similar reliances on interpretations of history-as-actuality occur. Such times are in fact only "epochs" or "stages" of history, general or local or regional. They are epochs characterized by peace or relative peace, in which economy is fairly prosperous or stable, and governments, besides being stable, are less active than in wartime and intervene less in what is called "the natural course" of private affairs—the economic and other undertakings of individuals and concerns.

The idea of "the natural (or normal) course" in human affairs is itself an interpretation of history. By its very terms it implies that such a course is as predominant or general in history as processes are in physical nature and that if broken or interrupted it will or can be recovered or restored, as physical nature tends to overcome aberrations or eccentricities. It assumes furthermore that such a course in human affairs is natural, without inquiring whether *all* nature is taken into account, and that other courses are unnatural, without wondering how and why a part or period of history can be "natural," that is, nature-like, and another part or period can be "unnatural." Here is a dualism in history which arbitrarily breaks the interrelations of events, ideas, interests, and personalities known to exist in history-as-actuality. In addition, it raises one of the most fundamental of historical questions: Does history repeat itself, so that the state of affairs prevailing in some past epoch—as distinguished from merely analogous or similar conditions—will be or may be restored or recovered?

Under the sway of the idea of the normal or the natural—an idea essentially historical—public and private policies are frequently based on the assumption that there will be a return to former conditions or that given actions can bring it about. Statesmen assume that if they act in a particular manner or refrain from action, the return they desire will occur

in history to come. Directors of private economic affairs likewise make their calculations on the assumption that the course of history in the past has in fact disclosed, or has permitted, such exact returns, and that the future course—a continuation of the past and present flow—will be or may be made in conformity to expectations. It has been said, even with justification, that military men generally base the beginning of every new war on the experiences of the last war rather than on an exploration of the new potentials or on Napoleon's maxim of "act and then see" (on s'engage et alors on voit).

It appears, therefore, that the idea of history which bulks large in discourses and writings of practitioners and their spokesmen enters also into the daily calculations for action in "normal" as well as "critical" times. Hence, all branches of learning that deal with practice come into any comprehensive consideration of history-as-actuality, and of the nature and uses of written-history.

Indeed all the humanistic sciences—that is, organized bodies of knowledge and thought pertaining to human affairs—including historiography and the social sciences, whether concerned with theory or practice, are a part of history-as-actuality and rest upon assumptions respecting the nature of that history.² It is true that workers and writers in these sciences—economics, politics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, ethics, esthetics, etc.—may show little interest in history as such, may indeed claim to discard written-history as irrelevant or useless. Yet all the data of all these humanistic sciences are selected from the data of human experience in time and space, the actuality called history; and the humanistic sciences certainly consist of abstractions drawn from knowledge of phases of human life as lived in history—particular phases such as economic, political, esthetic, or ethical interests and activities—and in turn these sciences become aspects of history-as-actuality.

Great thinkers in the humanistic sciences employ abstractions drawn from knowledge of history-as-actuality and thus covering less than the totality of human life in its time-span. In analyzing, selecting, and organizing their data, they make these abstractions serve their purposes as constructs or fictions³ based on emphasized particularities, or phases, of

² Such assumptions, for example, presuppose that things will continue very much as they are, that some former state of affairs will be more or less restored, or that one or more of certain current tendencies will become dominant through change. In any case here appears a theory of a continuum of some kind, a rejection of the idea that history-as-actuality is a senseless chaos of unrelated events, and a penchant for the old or the new which enters into the selection and ordering of "facts" and "dicta" for presentation as economics, sociology, political science, etc.

³ "*Fictio* means, in the first place, an activity of *ingere*, that is to say, of constructing, forming, giving shape, elaborating, presenting, artistically fashioning; conceiving, thinking, imagining, assuming, planning, devising, inventing. Secondly, it refers to the

history-as-actuality. By making use of such constructs or fictions they advance their respective sciences.

For example, Adam Smith was deeply impressed by the existence of moral sentiments in history. He wrote a book on the subject. Yet when he came to formulating his influential work on *The Wealth of Nations*, he put moral sentiments aside and created the abstraction known as "the economic man" to guide him in his study and writing. In adopting this fiction, Smith evidently assumed that moral sentiments and other manifestations of human history could be taken for granted, would remain more or less constant or at all events would not vitiate the correctness of his economic reasoning and conclusions. He drew upon knowledge of history-as-actuality and his observations of history in the making around him for the data he employed, for information respecting the policies he deplored or approved, and for illustrations of the policies he condemned or advocated. His work was an expression of history-as-actuality and of thought about it in his own age, and his powerful polemic entered into the shaping of history.

The fiction of the economic man was highly useful for many purposes in examining and predicting the behavior of human beings in relation to the production and distribution of wealth. It is still highly useful. Without it we should know a great deal less than we do about the nature of human affairs and we should not be as well equipped to deal with many situations of life, large and small.

But as Adam Smith proceeded he almost became a victim of his own fiction. When he confronted the issue of justifying his emphasis on the economic man and explaining how it came about that general good resulted from the avid pursuit of material interests by acquisitive individuals, Smith lamely referred to the "invisible hand," to some mysterious providence which turns individual greed into collective beneficence. Here he introduced something besides the economic man and sought to escape the moral question that he himself had raised. Here, in effect, he made a fundamental interpretation respecting the nature of all history-as-actuality in which economic men operate.

"The political man"—likewise an abstraction from history—is an overarching fiction employed by political scientists and is useful to them in forming categories, framing maxims and axioms, and attempting predictions respecting political behavior. It also rests upon assumptions concerning the nature of history-as-actuality, the changing contexture or relation-

product of these activities, the fictional assumption, fabrication, creation, the imagined case." Students and practitioners in law and natural science openly make use of fictions. In law "an act of God" is a convenient fiction. For natural science, the infinite extension of space and the infinite divisibility of matter are fictions. Indeed matter itself is a fiction. Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As if'* (New York, 1924), 81.

ships in which political behavior arises, takes forms, and changes. Like economics, political science draws upon knowledge of history recent or distant for its data for classification, deduction, and illustration.

The ancillary abstractions or fictions of political science, such as democracy, aristocracy, monarchy, dictatorship, and oligarchy, if stripped of the concreteness of historical content, are in truth meaningless and useless to common sense and for practice. As Croce has said of philosophy, so it may be said of political science that, "pursued for its own sake and outside historical knowledge, [it] is only to be found as a profession among others by which man earns his living, and as such is worth little because it has been removed from its live source whence it arose and in which it can renew itself."⁴

It is generally agreed that the axioms and arguments of the one powerful work on political science produced in the United States, *The Federalist*, are anchored in studies of history and directed to concrete ends. Its authors are often disingenuous, if not worse, in pleading their case. They emphasize and they conceal; such indeed is the habit of human beings seeking to inform, persuade, and inspire to action. But they never depart so far from concreteness as to disappear in the fogginess of abstractions devoid of historical content. Besides, *The Federalist* has one quality generally lacking in academic political writings. It has style, that is, the ringing verve of realistic thought directed toward the end of action in fulfilment of a great purpose openly avowed. It is a polemic, of course, but that does not necessarily detract from its science. Nearly all the influential writings in political philosophy or political theory, so called, are polemics directed to ends.

Useful as a fiction or abstraction, like the economic man or the political man, is or may be for limited and practical purposes, it becomes harmful, as Havelock Ellis has said, "when we regard it as hypothesis and therefore possibly true." Certainly great harm was done when writers of small caliber treated the fiction of the economic man as possibly true or as wholly and positively true and shut their eyes and minds to other aspects of history. In another way, Adam Smith himself did harm when, instead of facing boldly the question of the general good, he resorted to a mystical effusion—"the invisible hand."

The crowning weakness of Smith's work lay in his assumptions concerning the nature of all history-as-actuality and historical thought; in his failure to reckon with other aspects of history, with the creative and unique as well as routine activities of mankind, with the impacts of other than economic propensities upon the operations of the economic man. It was in fact the introduction of historical economics and the resort to the study of the history of specific economic activities, toward the end of the

⁴ Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (London, 1941), 138-139.