

The Collected Essays of
GREGOR SEBBA

Truth, History, and the
Imagination

Edited by
Helen Sebba,
Aníbal A. Bueno, and
Hendrikus Boers

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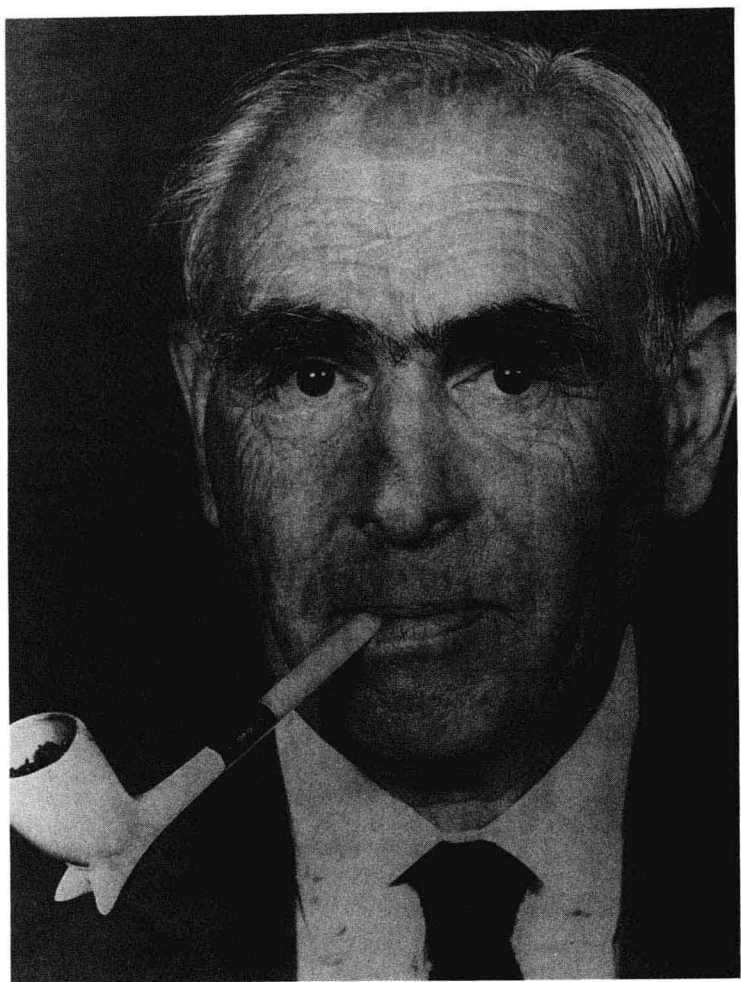
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Rilke's poems "Herbsttag," "Was wirst du tun, Gott, wenn ich sterbe?," "Gott spricht zu jedem nur, eh er ihn macht," "Archaischer Torso Apollos," "Spiegel: noch nie hat man wissend beschrieben," and part of his first Duino Elegy are reprinted with permission of Insel Verlag.

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The Collected Essays of Gregor Sebba



Foreword

by Richard Macksey

The mind renews itself in a verse,
A passage of music, a paragraph
By a right philosopher . . .

WALLACE STEVENS

"The Sail of Ulysses"

GREGOR SEBBA was a rare and inspiring teacher, a legendary conversationalist, a scholar of vast range and exceptional depths. He refused to be confined to an academic field or to respect the well-patrolled borders of disciplinary activities. Rigorous in his own thought, he resisted the false rigors of those who would confine freedom of inquiry within ever narrower conceptions of the "professional." At one time or another, and often in the same seminar or essay, he made startlingly original sorties into philosophy and the history of ideas, literary and historical studies, the criticism of art, architecture, and music, as well as economics, political science, and statistics. His humane learning also encompassed the more modest domestic arts of the garden and cuisine. And unlike many of his learned peers, he always cherished understanding above mere knowledge.

Sebba was a prize specimen of the cultural phenomenon that radically changed the course of intellectual life in America: the émigré scholar at large. The migration of scholars and artists from Hitler's Europe to the United States involved relatively small numbers compared with the earlier waves of transatlantic immigrants, but its impact on American science, arts, and institutions—its creative power—was

enormous. Like the earlier travelers to our shores, the twentieth-century émigré was able to bring little in the way of material possessions, but unlike the earlier immigrant, he carried with him, in the manner of that proto-exile Aeneas fleeing a city in flames, the emblems of his culture. This cultural baggage involved ways of thinking, feeling, and judging that were to set the new arrivals apart more decisively than their accents or their clothes. For the European émigrés, already shaped by a distinctive education, the question of cultural assimilation was much more complex than for the earlier, often unlettered immigrants who could buy into the received mythology of the "melting pot."

Cultural historians have studied the successive generations of travelers to America: from the earliest colonists in search of economic opportunity, religious freedom, and the possibilities of a reordered society, through those who followed responding to misfortunes at home (famines, political oppression, and racial pogroms). Traditionally these exiles in the New World have been seen as the source of both the variety and the vitality of American culture—a refuge periodically reinvigorated by new dreams and disasters. The model of the immigrant experience was expansively stated at the very beginnings of the Republic by Crèvecoeur, who spoke of the new arrival as "leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners" and receiving "new ones from the mode of life he has embraced." In this earliest and most optimistic version of the melting-pot myth, the author is speaking as an American *farmer*, and the promise is inextricably bound to the land. And yet the succeeding century and a half of transatlantic migrations, of both immigrants and émigrés, was to be supremely an urban phenomenon. Gregor Sebba, the sometime statistician of minorities and student of displacement, was fully aware of the anomalies in the received mythology. (On a more personal level, vigorously cosmopolitan himself, he preferred to observe the great American cities from a slight distance, and temperamentally, the idea of his own ethos "melting" in any receptacle whatever would have been totally repellent to him.)

As a social observer with a deep interest, both statistical and psychological, in questions of cultural displacement, Sebba was much more sensitive to these issues than most of his distinguished fellow émigrés. He recognized the significant differences between the situation of the immigrant and that of the émigré. The immigrant could embrace the certitudes and totems of contemporary society, often be-

coming more "American" than his neighbors. The émigré could never quite dispossess himself of European memories, of Goethe and Bach, to be sure, but also of failed political solutions and defeats. (During the interwar years, it was one of the ironies of popular culture that its major source of potent artifacts, Hollywood, was a battleground between the Americanized immigrants who controlled the "industry" and the émigré directors and their crews who made the films; the art of the latter group was a distinctly "adversarial" creation, working with familiar genres but spinning subversive "subtexts." Again, in the universities the émigrés had a profound effect on the quality and character of the research, but very little impact on the running of the institutions.) As a member of this extraordinary generation in exile, Gregor Sebba was an unusual specimen in several respects: He achieved most of his major work after emigrating (he was forty-two when he received his first academic appointment); he became totally fluent in his new language and culture; and he addressed peculiarly American problems with the trained eye of a social scientist and the historical sensibility of a classic humanist. In the first essay in this volume, for example, he is able to direct his discussion of symbol and myth to a shrewd and prophetic analysis of contemporary "political mythologies" surrounding the American presidency. And perhaps because he had to live through so much disorder during the first half of his life, he was preternaturally sensitive to the ordering power of the creative spirit, a position developed most explicitly in the essay "The Work of Art as a Cosmion," but one that binds together nearly all of his diverse interests.

Sebba was fond of quoting Schopenhauer's observation that the first forty years of our lives provide the text to which the following years will furnish the commentary. If this is so in his own case, the essays collected here—although covering more than thirty years of his thought—are all commentary. It may therefore be helpful to consider the existential "text" on which they comment.

Like Voegelin, I am a humanist scholar. If I were to define the term "humanist," I would center, not on the field of the humanities and not on "humanism" either, but on the pursuit of the patent and hidden interconnections that manifest the unity of the phenomenon of man.

GREGOR SEBBA

Sebba's life was deeply marked by the catastrophic disruptions that scarred the first half of the twentieth century and left the character of European life changed forever: the bloody conflict of 1914–1918, the great economic depression beginning in 1929, and the rise of Hitler with the devastation of the Second World War in its wake. The best source of facts about Sebba's cultural formation is the brief "Autobiographical Note" that appears in the posthumously published book *The Dream of Descartes*. There he observes: "For a humanist engaged in a study of the creative act, a full statement of background would have to cover the whole range of his life experience and studies, since this is what made him a humanist and gave him the knowledge of human personality needed for the task. I must confine myself to what I think has been decisive." What emerges from his succinct account of his early years is that the scenes of his childhood became battlefields, the institutions that shaped his mind were destroyed, economic and political conditions made an academic career ultimately impossible, and most of those colleagues who nourished his intellectual life—at least those who escaped destruction—were, like Gregor, driven into exile.

Gregor Sebba was born in the Baltic seaport of Libau, a Latvian town founded in 1263 by the Livonian Knights, the sometime capital of Courland, which was successively ruled by Lithuania, Poland, Prussia, Sweden, and Russia. He spent his childhood, however, in the South Tyrol. When Italy finally entered the Great War in the spring of 1915, he and his family were evacuated to Upper Austria. The defeat and collapse of the Habsburg Empire left its relict a scarcely viable entity, unstable and on the edge of bankruptcy; yet something of the old culture survived in the universities and coffeehouses. Sebba's family endured painfully reduced circumstances during the interwar years, but he managed a "practical education." Although his personal inclinations would have been to study philosophy and literature, constrained by poverty he turned to the law and to statistics. He had just completed his studies at Vienna and Innsbruck when yet another of the century's

great disruptions broke out, the world economic crisis of 1929 that prepared the way for Austria's eventual loss of independence and absorption into the Third Reich.

His basic studies in law at the University of Vienna (1924–1925) were followed by work in civil and canon law, economics, and political science at the University of Innsbruck (1925–1929), where he took the degree of Dr. rerum politicarum in 1927 and that of Dr. juris utriusque two years later. He also pursued postgraduate studies in statistics at Vienna (1929–1930) and began his academic career as a *Forschungsassistent* in charge of staff and publications at the university's Institute for Minority Statistics. This research appointment lasted but three years, when it was abolished during the budgetary crises of 1933, and with it all prospects of an academic career. He turned to journalism, serving for four years as an editor of *Wirtschaftliche Rundschau* in Vienna. This career, too, was ended by another blow from history, the triumph of the Nazi Anschluss; in the weeks following the annexation he was arrested by the Gestapo. As for so many of his generation, this marked the end of a world and the beginning of a new life as an exile.

What would seem to be a career constantly thwarted by personal and historical circumstances had, as Gregor himself observed, its own design. "The unremitting task of understanding such times . . . forced me, like others of my generation, into ever widening study beyond early specialization. This, I think, is what made humanists out of so many of us." (Sebba was, as a former colleague remarked, "someone from whom you could cut three specialists.") The exigencies of his formation also perhaps account for what he called "the curious double track" of his scholarly career. He said that in the thorough study of Roman, canon, and medieval law he found a solid historical foundation and that criminal law taught him "what proof is—something that will stand up in court." The cultural world of Austria between the wars was inevitably richer in a sense of the imperial past than in grounds to hope for the future. Sebba's abiding interest in another troubled time, the seventeenth century, may perhaps be traced back to his affinity for the monuments of Baroque architecture that were still part of the Austrian scene. Equally important to his intellectual development were the extramural organizations in which he played such an active role as a young man in Vienna: the Austrian Political Society, of which he was secretary-general (1931–1934), and the University Section of the Austrian League of Nations Association, which he chaired (1930–1935).

For him the most significant of these associations, however, was the private research group he founded in 1931, the Austrian Sociological Research Circle. In a city of "circles," this informal gathering of scholars, most of them young but some from the older generation, who covered the political and philosophic spectrum of Vienna, was his "open university." There he began to read papers and to struggle with his lifelong attempt to locate art's creative source. His life during the last years of old Vienna also brought him in contact with a wide range of creative minds—poets, artists, musicians, and architects, as well as industrialists, bankers, and statesmen, and what Karl Mannheim called "the floating intelligentsia." From these various encounters he drew many of his examples of human creativeness. He left Vienna with little luggage but with a solid education, a vital sense of the life of the mind, and a commitment to the vocation he was proud to identify, in dark times, as humanism. Perhaps most precious of all, he carried with him a capacity wanting in many of his gifted contemporaries for meeting each new cultural discovery with the freshness of youth, so that he seemed to live his life according to Goethe's difficult precept: "Mußt immer tun wie neugeboren" ("Act always as if newly born").

As a "displaced person" (a category that always fascinated Sebba) in a world at war, he found that his language skills and adaptability opened the way to a career in military intelligence. His war service covered the entire six years of the conflict (1939–45), first in the British army, later in the U.S. Office of Strategic Services. In 1941 he became a cofounder of Austrian Action, an organization that opened the way for Austrian émigrés in the United States to serve in the resistance to Hitler. He was inducted into the U.S. Army and became an American citizen in 1943. He had the great good fortune, in 1940, to marry Helen Townend, a distinguished translator and the principal editor of this volume; she became his collaborator in every sense of the word and may be the most important key to Gregor's remarkable facility in a new language. She made a home for him and their two sons and, during their university years, also made their home a place of unfailing hospitality and intellectual refreshment attested to by several generations of grateful students.

Sebba did not manage to resume his long-interrupted academic career until January, 1947, when he accepted an appointment to teach economics and statistics at the University of Georgia. While most of the European intellectuals of his generation migrated to the major

American cities (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston), often forming self-contained émigré communities, he chose a less familiar terrain. Like his friend and mentor Eric Voegelin, he headed south—in Gregor's case to a quiet university town, Athens, in a state that was only emerging from an agrarian to an industrial economy. With a deceptively scientific air, he remarked, "I wanted to spend a few years in the South, which I considered to be a laboratory where the problems of the postwar era could be studied *in nuce*." This Georgian detour of "a few years" was to occupy him for the rest of a long and active life. He spent twelve of the years (1947–1959) at the University of Georgia as professor of economics and chairman of statistics. During this time he did a good deal of work on southern regional economics and a pioneer study of the displaced-person problem from the viewpoint of the absorption of immigrants and the psychology of survivors. At the same time, his sense of justice drew him into a confrontation with the legacy of the South's "peculiar institution" and the question of race relations. One record of this encounter is his introduction to *Georgia Studies*, a volume of essays he edited; the author, Robert Preston Brooks, was a much older colleague who had been the first Rhodes Scholar from the state of Georgia. Brooks was probably best known for his study *The Agrarian Revolution in Georgia* (1914), an elegy for the passing of the plantation system, and he had served for many years as the dean of the Business School. The introduction must have been a bit of a puzzle to the faculty of the Business School, since it ranges widely in its references—from Plato to Goethe and Schopenhauer, from William James to Frobenius and Gunnar Myrdal. While honoring Brooks's contributions to regional economics and to the university he served for many years, the introduction addresses directly the anatomy of bias in the dominant class of the "New South," the long shadow of the defeat of 1865. Taking his stand with Myrdal as a critic from across the Atlantic, Sebba remarks, "The European observer can readily find many examples of similar unforgetfulness in recent European history." His examples were precisely those that, having poisoned the European community for decades, had led to the catastrophe of two world wars. Later in the introduction, however, Sebba suggests, with considerable foresight, that the American South was showing signs that it could avoid what he saw as the disastrous route already being followed by South Africa.

It was during his years in Athens that he began in earnest the projects that were to engage him for the rest of his life. Thus, in 1949 he

had an idea about Descartes and his night of dreams that inaugurated a new era in philosophy, but before he started work on it, he felt that he should "review the literature." This led to a fifteen-year bibliographic detour and a great boon to all students of Descartes. Along the way, in 1961, he supplied the extensive Descartes chapter to the seventeenth-century volume of *A Critical Bibliography of French Literature*. (I remember the delight of that volume's editor, Nathan Edelman, that he had found the shrewdest and most learned Cartesian in the world teaching economics in Georgia.) The product of this excursion into bibliography finally appeared in 1964, the magisterial volume of more than five hundred pages soberly titled *Bibliographia Cartesiana: A Critical Guide to the Descartes Literature, 1800–1960*. But the original monograph, which studied the model of a great creative leap in the history of philosophy, remained an ongoing project, emerging occasionally in lectures and seminars. *The Dream of Descartes* ultimately appeared posthumously in 1987. At about the same period, early in his Georgia years, he published his first essay in English, "Goethe on Human Creativeness" (1950), which also returned to the sources of the creative imagination. This essay and its companion piece written almost two decades later, "Goethe's Autobiography: Truth or Fiction?"—both collected in this volume—are records of his continuing fascination with the poet who remained for Sebba the emblem of human creative power in all its variety.

In 1959 Sebba was recruited to serve as director of the recently formed Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts at Emory. After twelve years of teaching economics and statistics, the appointment to a post that seemed designed to liberate his own creative instincts came as a challenging opportunity. He accepted the challenge with the youthful enthusiasm of someone half his age. Aside from the inevitable administrative responsibilities, for which he had little patience, and the more serious business of directing dissertations, to which he gave unstintingly, he conceived the role of the institute as one of opening frontiers between departments and rethinking pedagogical pieties. Gregor and Helen Sebba's living room rapidly became the classroom, *Kaffeehaus*, and laboratory of ideas for a new educational force at Emory. He was fortunate in early finding students and colleagues to share his excitement. His own interdisciplinary seminar became a model for similar ventures, taught cooperatively, in a number of periods ranging from Homeric Greece to the Baroque. He devised ways to bend disciplinary

and departmental rigidities, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the students formed by these seminars go out to teaching posts around the country, where they could reshape the teaching of the humanities. Although his primary responsibility as a teacher was with the graduate program, he continued to take great pleasure in teaching a freshman seminar and organizing informal classes.

The years at Emory were fruitful to Sebba as an inspired teacher, at once unorthodox and rigorous; they also allowed him to exercise his genius as a collegial disturber of the peace and questioner of intellectual complacencies. They were rich in friendships, shared projects, and debates. Many of the essays in this volume date from this period, but they also resume topics that have their roots deep in the "text" of his career. And these same topics continued to concern him in the active years following his formal retirement in 1973.

For Sebba, the honors that meant most to him as a teacher and scholar were the dedications and books that came from those students and colleagues whose development he had influenced. His later years, before and after he was translated into emeritus status, were not, however, without honors of a more public sort. He received the Outstanding Teacher Award from Emory University in 1968 and the Thomas Jefferson Award, for outstanding service to the university, in 1970. During 1964–1965 he was a Fulbright Professor in Political Philosophy at the University of Munich, replacing Voegelin, who was lecturing in the United States; in 1968 he served as Danforth Lecturer at Morehouse College, a predominantly Afro-American institution with which he had close ties. Following his retirement at Emory in 1973, he also served as visiting professor of the humanities at the University of Florida. In 1983 the Institute of the Liberal Arts honored him with a festschrift appropriately titled *The Crisis in the Humanities: Interdisciplinary Responses*. But as in Rilke's "Autumn Day," there was always an urgency about the time of harvest, a need to return to the familiar books and the long-deferred projects.

Befiehl den letzten Früchten voll zu sein . . .

R. M. RILKE

Herbsttag

Gregor Sebba was a scholar of exceptional range, genuine learning, incisive wit, and often redemptive common sense. This collection allows

his readers to see both the range and unity of his work in some perspective. Many of his projects were deferred during a busy and generous teaching career; others stand in a certain isolation, and their admirers may be unfamiliar with the entire landscape of his thought. Thus his splendid *Bibliographia Cartesiana* is a monument of its kind, a comprehensive guide to 160 years of Descartes studies, masterfully organized, that can also be read for the sheer pleasure of the commentaries—many of them miniature essays summarizing and judging hundreds of works written in many languages and from many diverse philosophic perspectives. It is also a work of the imagination, a new type of practical tool for the philosophy student that combines the rigors of a thorough bibliography with a systematic analytical survey and a detailed analytical anatomy. But it is known primarily by historians of philosophy. Again, his long association with Eric Voegelin, dating back to prewar Vienna, led to a number of capital essays on the development of the political philosopher's thought; three of these essays are represented in this collection, but the pervasive importance of Voegelin in Sebba's own work can be read equally clearly in his discussions here of Greek tragedy and modern gnosticism. Sebba's contributions to intellectual history, well represented in this volume, are yet another instance of how his mature work combines elements of his European formation, in this case, *Kulturgeschichte*, with an energetic critical response to a very different scholarly "climate"—the American tradition of A. O. Lovejoy's history of ideas.

Considering the scope of his philosophic and literary studies, it is difficult to remember that Gregor Sebba spent a considerable part of his career teaching economics and statistics. His reputation as a teacher and vigorous intellectual catalyst during his years at the Emory Institute of the Liberal Arts is well known to all those seriously committed to interdisciplinary studies and the reform of higher education. But he did not feel that he had ever abandoned the concerns of the social sciences. In his "Autobiographical Note," he briefly illustrates the interrelatedness of what his French *confrères* choose to call *les sciences de l'homme*, which he in turn relates to his own "red thread" of the creative imagination: "Nonetheless, I continue to write and lecture in the field of the social sciences, especially in political philosophy. To me, this is a necessity. I cannot divorce the phenomenon of human creativity from its setting in history and society. Conversely, the study of the creative act in Rousseau, to give another example, has

led me to a quite different evaluation of the *Contrat Social* and the *Emile*, and a study of the *volonté générale*, done twenty-five years ago, became the key to an understanding of the complexities of this man's intellectual constitution."

The present collection consists of twenty essays, divided into four parts and a coda. The essays cover a period of three decades (1950–1981), but most date from the late 1960s and the 1970s; two have not been previously published, and two have been translated from the German. The editors give a helpful description of the major divisions and a summary of the essays, but their essential unity emerges in the reading. At first glance the book may seem to be a somewhat random collection of topics and occasions, touching aesthetics and the history of ideas, political theory, literature and art. A reading, however, quickly dispels this first impression. Their tone shifts with the occasions, ranging from closely argued essays in historiography and political philosophy to the pedagogical experiment of the Rilke readings, which give some sense of how Sebba could bring a text to life in the classroom. Although various in their address to an audience, all of the essays have the clear signature of their author's forceful personality. One could perhaps add a word about the author's "style," which is an integral function of his thought as well as his prose. The latter is a remarkable achievement for one not native to English—witty, supple, often aphoristic, sometimes colloquial, but always alert to the turns of his thought. (The same could not fairly be said of other great émigré scholars, such as Leo Spitzer and Theodor Adorno, who never completely liberated themselves from German syntax.) Unlike many other polyglot scholars, Sebba is also resolutely unpretentious in his address to the reader. These essays should reach a literate audience of nonspecialists, the potential humanists whom Sebba cherished and spent much of his life stimulating and educating. It is the record of an émigré sensibility given a new focus by a distinctively American experience; this experience is grounded in characteristically New World hopes: in the search for a community of general readers, in the ideal of an educational system capable of reforming itself, and in the vision of a culture capable of renewing itself.

In addition to the strong impress of an inquiring and thoughtful mind, there is indeed the "red thread" that runs through most of the essays, binding together topics as apparently diverse as Greek tragedy, Voegelin's concept of order in history, the arts of the Baroque, Goethe,

and modernist poetry. Sebba's concern, early and late, was with the social, psychological, and artistic dimensions of the human creative imagination, its rage for order and unflagging search for truth. Anyone who admired Sebba's work must regret that, in a very busy life, he did not have the time to write the long-contemplated book on this master topic. (Transcripts of some of his lectures on this topic were published posthumously in 1987, edited by Helen Sebba and Hendrikus Boers.) But it is heartening to see how clearly the shadow of this other, unwritten book emerges in his collected essays. His learning and his amazing curiosity are, in Coleridge's terms, *esemplastic*, tending toward a unification (an *Ineinsbildung*) of apparently disparate insights and topics. It is perhaps because of this strenuous interrelatedness that the formal division of the volume into discrete parts is merely a liminary convention.

The record of more than thirty years of scholarship, this volume has something to say to our time. Scholars and teachers of Sebba's range, intellectual vitality, and eloquence are rare in any generation. Since he published his essays in such a wide variety of journals over many years, the editors have performed a valuable service to a new generation of readers to collect them here, enriched by the unpublished and translated material. *Parts* of Gregor Sebba's work are well known to readers in different corners of the scholarly community: to historians of ideas, to *dix-septièmistes* and Cartesians, to political theorists and some literary critics. *The Collected Essays of Gregor Sebba: Truth, History, and the Imagination* ought to consolidate this potential audience in much the same way that the essays themselves consolidate their author's thoughts on the creative imagination. This is a rich and various collection that reflects some of the generosity and wisdom of Gregor Sebba the man. The book has a unifying impulse and something vitally important to say about the profession of the humanities, if we are not too deeply sunk in our academic foxholes to listen.