The Need For a Cultural Comprehension of Political Behavior

Politics is a phenomenon of society and can be properly understood only in terms of society. This statement is obviously a commonplace, yet it is one whose full implications have been explored only intermittently and capriciously by the writers of political history. Politics has long been accepted as the spinal cord of history—as the central trunk around which the developments of economics, culture, and thought may conveniently arrange themselves. But historians have not always understood to what extent this process should be a two-way street. Economics, culture, and thought can illuminate politics as much as politics can illuminate the rest of history. Indeed, without this illumination, political history becomes a tedious and sterile discipline, committed to the pursuit of superficialities. With it, political history may throw great and valuable light on the behavior of man.

I

Change is the essence of history. A static society would need no history, for it would feel no discrepancy between present and past. But man cannot long endure a static society. Anxiety and discontent flay him into a constant search for innovation. The human world, in consequence, has been basically an unstable world. Our own generation in its torment over having split the atom, should not forget that previous generations had split everything short of the atom.

Man has his natural tensions within him; and these are eternally aggravated by the changes in the world he never made. Humanity has consequently suffered a succession of new ways of life, fueled by science, technology, and discontent; and each transformation has produced new hopes and fears. Intellectual history is a study of these hopes and fears. One finds them reflected in every form of expression
—from pure metaphysics to the political oration, from poetry to the comic strip. Politics, in one of its aspects, is the resolution of these anxieties within the framework of actual society; it is the domestica-
tion of hopes and the subordination of fears in the interests of a com-
munity of citizens living together under law. Thus political and intel-
lectual history are properly inseparable.

But the nineteenth century, whose notions of history reflected its own essential placidity, kept political history in a separate compart-
ment. In an age of certitude, it was possible to assume agreement on
the fundamentals of life and to describe politics without reference to
these fundamentals. The habit never began of construing politics in
the light of a totality of social and psychological forces which few
had bothered to investigate. The nineteenth century gave political
history its canons; and the result was political history written in its
own terms—in terms of parliaments, laws, administrations and cabi-
net crises. It came to be assumed that these terms exhausted, not
only political behavior, but the main significance of history.

The nineteenth century conception of political history was based
on the nineteenth century optimism about man—man as rational,
perfectible, borne along on the tide of irresistible progress. Yet even
the nineteenth century had its underground movements—its doubt-
ers and skeptics, its characters shaken by nightmares which their
respectable contemporaries dismissed as bad dreams but which we
have come to see as often only too exact probings into reality. These
men, from a dozen different viewpoints, built up a critique of the
official optimism. The twentieth century has demonstrated in grim
detail how much more correct the critique was than the optimism.

Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Hawthorne, Baudelaire plumbed the
human soul and uncovered great black expanses which conventional
history left out of account. Marx, constructing his massive critique
of capitalism in terms of history, revolutionized, if not the world,
at least the ways of thinking about it. Nietzsche and Bergson disclo-
shed the creative power of the human will and its supremacy over
the intellect.

And in our own century, Freud, systematizing the explorations
into the human unconscious, has added a new dimension to human
understanding. Sorel has demonstrated the political potency of the
myth and of the act. Whitehead has exposed as illusion the simplici-
ties of scientism. Michels has demonstrated the corrupting influences of organization. Pareto has meticulously analyzed the relations of logic to behavior. Elton Mayo has uncovered deeper sources of insecurity in livelihood. Mannheim has formulated the case for the social origins of knowledge. Niebuhr has shown the shallowness of a liberalism based on illusions of reason. Koestler, Malraux, and Silone have emphasized the complexity and weakness of man and the fallibility of infallibility. And the Nazis and the Communists meanwhile have demonstrated in implacable practice that the worst one could say about human obsession with power and with evil would fall short of the actualities of totalitarian behavior.

Thus came the decline and fall of "political man" as he figured in nineteenth century political history. In his place the twentieth century developed (or rather revived) the tragic conception of man—man as weak and fallible, able to perceive the good but not often to strive steadily toward it, driven by irrational forces beyond his control, doomed to frustration. In the light of this conception of man, nineteenth century political history seemed empty and superficial; it left out most of the main issues. The demand arose for a conception of history adequate to the more complex conception of man.

The revolt began with the brilliant and essential crusade for the New History, cracking open the seams and letting light and fresh air into the writing of history. It was a movement of renewal, and it permeated all aspects of the discipline. Most valuable of all was the discovery of social and intellectual history and the patient attempts to reconstruct past climates of opinion and behavior in all their concreteness.

At first, the New History, having originated in a revolt against the conception of history as past politics, tended to repudiate political history altogether. But now that the new tools of social and intellectual history have been proved in practice, we see that they can contribute to a revitalization of political history itself. These tools, in conjunction with the insights of the underground thinkers and with the terrible events of contemporary history, have forced upon us a new conception of politics and of its relationships to the tensions of existence. We need a new political history—one that will answer what this century considers the basic questions about man.
II

Let us recapitulate briefly. The twentieth century looks out upon a world in constant flux. The flux reacts upon the anxieties within man, who is in eternal pursuit of some means of accommodation and resolution. Thus adjustment becomes a key to human behavior (and, as Kenneth Burke has reminded us, rejection of an idea or a society may be as secure a form of adjustment as acceptance). Now a major aspect of man's adjustment is his relation to the society in which he lives. This is the area of politics.

If politics is the realm, so to speak, of social adjustment, what are the forces that shape political behavior? We believe now that these forces are more complex and covert than nineteenth century orthodoxy supposed. Since adjustment is the great human necessity, and since the gift of reason has condemned man to the necessity of making things plausible to himself, we see immediately that ideas play an indispensable role in adjusting man to his world. The function of ideas, in other words, is to fill human needs (though their survival may involve many other factors).

All politics in a sense is ideas—that is, conceptions must flicker, however briefly or emptily, through the mind of a statesman before he makes a significant decision. The first requirement of the study of political behavior, then, is to get some notion of the character of political ideas—it is to reunite political and intellectual history.

The breakdown of fixed norms and values over the last three centuries has sharpened the historian's awareness of the diverse and surprising factors which issue in political thought and action. We never question the ground we walk on until it starts to break up under our feet; then we suddenly recognize how contingent our existence was upon conditions we had never considered before. So the disintegration of certitude has resulted in a critical analysis of thought, in a willingness to recognize frankly and fully the concealed origins, interests, and functions of ideas, and then to construct a system which will take the subconscious factors into conscious account.

The recognition of the concealed interests of ideas came very early in practical politics. The Founding Fathers, for example, had a sturdy sense of the extent to which political slogans and maneuvers masked the tactics of special interest groups. But the "unmasking"
of political ideas was the special triumph of the underground thinkers. Marx’s superb analysis of the ever-reverberating role of economic interests focused attention on one aspect of the unmasking. Sorel pointed out that every great social movement generates its myth—the “body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations” of the movement; the social myths are “not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act.” Pareto’s analysis of “derivations” provides other insights into the nature of political ideas. Karl Mannheim has made the illuminating distinction between “ideologies”—ideas which direct activity toward the maintenance of the existing order—and “utopias”—ideas which direct activity toward the transformation of the existing order. Psychologists and novelists have reminded us that political behavior has its origin in the psychic history of the individual as well as in his economic environment.

As people became more aware of the artificial and secondary elements in political ideas, the technique of “unmasking” and thereby discrediting the other man’s ideas became a familiar political weapon. But unmasking could not remain simply a weapon, because it applied to the red slayer as well as to the slain. “The materialistic conception of history,” Max Weber pointed out, “is not to be compared to a cab that one can enter or alight from at will, for once they enter it, even the revolutionaries themselves are not free to leave it.” Like nations using a new weapon in war, everyone eventually possesses the secret and engages in an unhappy period of mutual devastation. Today, as Mannheim reminds us, “we have reached a stage in which this weapon of the reciprocal unmasking and laying bare of the unconscious sources of intellectual existence has become the property not of one group among many but all of them.” The destruction of confidence in one type of partisan political thinking has spread its contagion until we see a gradual ebbing of confidence in human thought in general.

Yet this breakdown provides both a challenge and an opportunity. The modern historian has been given a formidable armory of weapons with which to attack the problem of political ideas. We know better today where we stand, and how insecure our footing is. What we must do is to systematize doubts—to bring all the evanescent and ambiguous factors within the range of clear analysis. For a political
age, this becomes peculiarly the obligation of that field where political history and intellectual history meet.

III

Where then has the critical analysis of thought left us? What questions does it ask of history? What clues and insights does it provide for the political historian?

1. Ideas are an inseparable part of human activity. They are as natural as other forms of excretion and play their role in all human behavior, including politics. One of the problems of political history is to isolate and define ideas at the point where a statesman is about to translate them into public policy. Moreover, "unmasking" ideas is a universal weapon; everyone has his subterranean motives. You can never assume that Jefferson acts out of lofty disinterestedness and Hamilton out of wicked selfishness.

2. Nonlogical elements are more basic than logical in the formation of ideas. Marx has shown that most modes of thought cannot be adequately understood without reference to concealed economic interests. Mannheim has similarly shown the indispensability of reference of ideas to their social origins, Sorel and Pareto to broad psychological and temperamental factors, Freud to the private past of the individual.

3. Ideas become politically influential when they express, reflect, affirm, support, fulfill human needs and insecurities felt on a large scale. These needs and insecurities are often economic, but not always—this is the fallacy of the doctrinaire economic interpretation. They may often be as much psychological in their origin—as in the widespread anxieties created by the overturn of old patterns of life and by the compulsions of new work disciplines which accompanied the spread of industrialism. People on the whole act to soothe inner uncertainties, not in direct pursuit of economic ends.

4. Yet the structure and formulation of ideas are exceedingly important. In their recoil from the nineteenth century, some thinkers have tended to abandon all faith in reason, all concern with logic. Because ideas are in some of their aspects weapons, we need not necessarily rush to the totalitarian extreme and assume that ideas are only weapons. Once an idea is widely accepted, its very logical
structure will help determine future developments. People will explore its premises, unfold its potentialities, act on its concealed assumptions. Thus the formulation contains directives for subsequent activities; it is a strategic plan which suggests one set of tactical possibilities and excludes another set. We are still wrestling today with the implications of, say, the Bill of Rights.

5. There is no methodological magic for the historian. The cult of science has inevitably led to the practice in other fields of pseudo-scientific rites which are supposed to endow the devotees with the prestige of the scientist himself. Thus we have the development of such fields as "sociology" and "social anthropology" where impressive new vocabularies and meaningless invocations of statistics are too often presumed to yield conclusive results. But system in the social sciences and humanities is never a substitute for insight; and the most important part of the raw material of history is not yet susceptible to quantitative measurement. Every literate historian must be familiar with the great sociologists—Weber, Pareto, and the like. But the contributions of these penetrating thinkers generally turn out to depend much less on their systems than on factors of personal genius so subtle and intimate that no system can ever catch them. The attempts of lesser minds to turn social analysis into a science is a kind of verbal totemism, bearing much the same relation to science as alchemy bore to chemistry. Historians must face the sad fact that theirs is essentially an art—as personal as the painter's intuition or the doctor's diagnosis, and, like both, dependent on innate capacities operating in conjunction with wide, firsthand experience.

IV

The first necessity is to reunite political and intellectual history—to infuse the dry matter of politics with the vigor of ideas. But ideas themselves, we have seen, are the end product of intricate social and psychological conditioning. For this reason, we must inspect the carriers of ideas. Just as political history has always paid special attention to politicians, so intellectual history has paid special attention to intellectuals, and the combination must expect to give heed to both.

If politics is largely the business of accommodating political institutions to the imperatives of change, then the intellectuals are the
group in society most sensitive to these imperatives. In the old days miners took caged canaries with them into the deepest tunnels, because the birds could detect the subtle poisonous gases before they were obvious to the crude human nostril. The intellectual, in more senses than one, is the caged canary of society. His vocation is imagination and reverie, observation and analysis. The profound pressures for change impinge themselves on the radar-like antennae of the artist while the planes are still on the horizon and long before they have loosed their bombs on society. The frustration of the intellectuals is a symptom of impending social disequilibrium.

We thus have the phenomenon which historians of revolution have termed the "desertion of the intellectuals." This is the stage in society when the artists, the writers, the intellectuals in general no longer find enough sustenance in the established order to feel much loyalty to it. They are filled with a pervading sense at once of alienation and of longing, which, one way or another, controls their work, directly if they are political writers, obliquely and at many removes if they are poets.

The age of Jackson was clearly one such period of desertion. The growing impersonality of economic life, driving people and classes apart, meant that individuals got decreasing emotional and psychological nourishment from work and livelihood. The anxieties incited and released by industrialism and its disruption of established patterns consequently played upon individuals suddenly deprived of familiar securities. The result was a deep undercurrent of frustration and alienation. It is no wonder, then, that America for all its political and economic robustness in the first half of the nineteenth century should have produced as among its characteristic writers such haunted, tortured, and unhappy souls as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe.

It is no wonder, too, that Jackson's presidency should have enlisted the political loyalties of so many intellectuals. Yet this fact has never been noted until recently; and the failure to note it has deprived historians of essential clues to the meaning of Jacksonian democracy. This disregard made possible, for example, the survival of the Whig-Republican myth of Jacksonianism as the revolt of the untutored and unscrubbed frontier. It further obscured the essential relation of Jacksonian democracy to forces of change pulsating fully
as much or more in the eastern United States as in the backwoods. It resulted in a foreshortened and inadequate version of one of the great and complex epochs of transition in our history.

The political historian, then, must note the behavior of the intellectuals as one of the clues he must follow. He will discover in almost any period a much closer relationship between intellectuals and politicians than the conventional political history has cared to mention. Both groups are responding to the same social tensions; and, just as the politician must think before he can act, so the intellectual desires action lest his ideas languish in futility. The political order which estranges the intellectual and drives him into cynicism or into repudiation is one doomed to disintegration and defeat. The political order which can renew his allegiance is one which has met somehow the broad tensions which the intellectual is only the first in society to feel.

It should be added perhaps that the intellectual often fails to report accurately or to analyze sensibly the vague discontents which separate him from the existing order. Both his initial discontent and his subsequent vagueness have brought him into disrepute. But the political historian is certainly not supposed to believe everything the intellectual says. He must understand, however, that the intellectual's behavior has significance as a means of taking the temperature of society. He must note the degree of satisfaction or of discontent, the issues which preoccupy him and the images which obsess him; and, if he notes these things properly, he will discover facts of the most direct bearing upon the problems of the politicians and without which politics will have limited meaning. The intellectual is the microscope through which the ailments of society can be brought into focus. Politics is a rough-and-ready attempt to heal these ailments.

V

We have concluded that political history is a record and analysis of man's effort to resolve the problems of change within the social framework, that it is concerned with problems of process and change, of consent, confidence, and alienation, as the origin and distribution of power, and that the role of ideas and the behavior of intellectuals supply invaluable clues in the historian's effort.
From this standpoint, the new political history can undertake a useful revaluation of the American past. Given a situation of drastic economic and technological transformation, like the spread of industrialism to America in the nineteenth century, we see that it is the primary job of political thought and behavior to accommodate the old political institutions to the new economic order. Yet, in its nature, this process of accommodation cannot be narrowly construed. The political historian must concern himself with all the factors producing consent. He will discover that religious thought plays a vital role in making terms with the scientific and naturalist habits of thought which come in the wake of industrialism. He will discover that literature and art help resolve the inner tensions and perplexities produced in the most sensitive minds by the abrupt transition from the old to the new, and that popular entertainment and literary trash may help do the same for cruder sensibilities. And he will discover, above all, that politics in the legislative and electoral sense, when approached in terms of the richness and complexity of the intellectual changes, will gain a new freshness and a new character.

The sterility of past political history of nineteenth century America, for example, can be traced in part to the failure to perceive certain basic factors of change. The pervading effect of the new industrialism during this period was to create a growing impersonality in economic relationships. The businessman began to feel less personal responsibility to his labor force and to his customers. The very factor of size made the old personal ties impossible, and the increasing specialization of labor and enlargement of distribution meant that business relations were no longer among friends but were now among strangers.

Thus the same ethical code no longer governed both business and personal affairs, and the gap between business and personal ethics grew alarmingly. The corporation appeared as a device to attenuate responsibility and institutionalize impersonality. A corporation, in the slang of the day, had neither a body to be kicked nor a soul to be damned. “Individuals,” someone observed, “are always open to impressions of generosity. But corporations being destitute of individual responsibility are destitute of hearts and souls to feel for the wrongs and sufferings of others.”

In a social order where a personal code could control economic
relationships, the role of government was insignificant. Thus Jefferson, contemplating his nation of small freeholders and virtuous mechanics, united by sturdy independence, high moral feeling, and the ownership of property, could only conclude that government to be best which governed least.

The breakdown of the personal code transformed the situation. It exposed employees and customers to the cold mercies of powers which no longer responded to an individual sense of responsibility or justice. When the economy had become too complex to admit of much personal responsibility, when ownership had become attenuated and liability limited and diffused, when impersonality began to dominate the system and produce irresponsibility, when, in short, economic life began to throw off the control of personal scruple, then government had to extend its function in order to preserve the ties which hold society together. The history of the growth of government power is thus a history of growing ineffectiveness of the private conscience as a means of social control. With private conscience powerless, the only alternative to tyranny or anarchy was the growth of the public conscience, and the natural expression of the public conscience was the democratic government. Its role is to step in to prevent the business community from tearing society apart in its pursuit of private profit.

This, briefly, was the predicament of American capitalism. It is the issue indeed, which has underlain a considerable part of American political history, except for the interruptions of slavery and civil war. It is in these terms, I believe, that political history of the age of Jackson or of Roosevelt must be understood. And in these terms political behavior assumes a new perspective.

A study of the New Deal, for example, in terms exclusively of its political methods, its legislative achievements, and its economic results might well miss the principal historical significance of the Roosevelt administration. The essentials lie perhaps along none of these lines. In 1933, the United States had suffered a crisis of confidence, a failure of nerve. The farmers were exasperated to a point of violence and revolt; the business community was in a state of panic, pleading for salvation from government; labor was disorganized and impotent; intellectuals were clutching at Communism or Fascism. The prevailing failure of nerve was expressed in a dozen
fields—in the retreat from the world in foreign policy; in the eco-
omic argument that America had reached its maturity and verged
on senescence; in the nervous cynicism of popular art in films and
theater; in the literary escape to the American past.

The great achievement of Roosevelt was to cure the failure of
nerve. The New Deal took a broken and despairing land and gave it
new confidence in itself. Its shortcomings (and they were many and
serious) vanish in the general perspective of its supreme success—
that is, in the restoration of America as a fighting faith, and in the
restoration of democracy as a workable way of life. A political his-
tory of the 1930's must be written in these dimensions if it is to
have vitality and meaning; and the new dimensions add a fascina-
tion and significance to the maneuvers and objectives of politics
itself.

Let us push this subject a trifle further. If restoration of faith was
the grand political objective of Roosevelt, if he sought to show the
American people that they could prevent the engine of capitalism
from careening madly off the track and down the precipice, we are
entitled to survey all the resources the New Deal employed. We see
quickly that legislative measures and administrative action com-
prise only a part of the movement. We see further that Roosevelt’s
great project could succeed only if it enlisted the support of one vital
section of the community—the intellectuals. At this point, we realize
that the disgruntlement of the intellectuals was a basic factor in the
failure of nerve which followed the Great Depression.

The role of the intellectuals in the restoration of confidence is
clearly worth study. A preliminary glance shows the extent to which
the basic emotional and literary problem for most intellectuals in the
1930's was the individual. The twenties, with their mass production
and their standardization, had already initiated misgivings about
the survival of the individual in America—or anywhere, except
perhaps on the Left Bank of Paris or in the exotic surroundings of
the Balearics or Mexico. Then came the depression, unemployment,
soup kitchens, bread lines, all degrading the individual into a gray
and undifferentiated mass. This process of obliterating the indi-
vidual created problems for the artist as well as for the politician.

Some reacted by accepting the situation and exulting in it. The
individual was a bar to progress anyway, they said, and deserves to
die—what the future needs is a collectivity. The welfare of the mass compensates for individual frustrations. This mood was attractive for awhile, until the Moscow trials raised the questions whether justice was not essential to a good society and whether justice could ever be construed except in individual terms.

Even during the vogue of proletarianism—which was at best a conscientious discipline for American writers rather than a spontaneous prompting of the soul—one can discern an involuntary defense of individualism wherever it could be found. This defense had to concentrate on those areas of contemporary society where the individual stood alone opposed to tremendous odds—thus the short stories of Hemingway, with Ole Anderson lying on the bed, his face to the wall, hopelessly awaiting the killers, the anonymous forces hunting him to his death; thus, in part, surely, the fascination of the gangster films, where the desperation of Bogart or the snarl of Cagney summarized the universal predicament of man. Or it may be as well a comic defiance, which at once discloses the futility of society and the futility of trying to resist it—Charlie Chaplin’s endless quest toward understanding and acceptance; W. C. Field’s blustering attempt to stare down the nonsense surrounding him; the anarchy created by the Marx Brothers in taking society seriously and unravelling its logical consequences.

The fantasies of an age operate on all levels of imagination, from the most serious art to the cheapest comic book. But they are the disordered reflections—whether somber or ridiculous, melodramatic or tragic—of real and objective problems. Where you have a widespread mass longing for recognition of their own individuality, this longing may well find outlet in the glorification of persons circumventing or satirizing or resisting the organized hostility of a world they never made.

And the real, objective problems underlying the fantasies are problems which, on another plane, must be tackled by the politician. Thus Fascism is plainly the nihilistic conspiracy against the individual, and Communism the attempt to replace the individual by a collective ethic in which he plays a negligible part. In this context the New Deal was an uncertain, faltering attempt to restore a society where the individual would be liberated from the grip of an impersonal, inaccessible, and irresponsible capitalism and given a share
once again in the determination of his own destiny. Because the intellectuals perceived this essence of the New Deal, they gave Roosevelt their support and loyalty.

VI

Can one systematize this picture and classify, say, the sources and techniques which political history must employ if it is to play the broad cultural role? I must warn again against the fallacy of systems and classification. Abstract schematization can never take the place of experience and of the intuitions derived from experience. Social sciences are sciences in name only; and, the more pompous their pretensions, on the whole, the more futile their achievements.

Fundamentally, political history must achieve an intellectual, psychological, and literary consciousness. Such a consciousness cannot be taught by formula—though formulas may be useful in refuting the fallacy that, because intellectual and psychological factors are hard to pin down, they should therefore be ignored. Such a consciousness can probably come only from an immersion in the sources and a consequent instinct for the problems. It cannot, of course, be a license for invention and romanticization. Yet it must be a part of the historian's effort; it must control the techniques he uses and the raw materials he seeks.

What sources and techniques, then, would assist in enlarging and enriching the historian's conception of political history?

1. Intellectual history. The crucial importance of intellectual history in illuminating the movements of politics should be clear by now. The behavior of intellectuals can throw important light on the motives and urgencies of political behavior; and, in seeking to understand the behavior of intellectuals, one may be sure that almost every form of expression is likely to yield insights into the basic anxieties. The type of analysis employed in intellectual history absorbs the best insights of the social psychologists and sociologists. The political historian should always read the complex poets of his epoch, for example, because they are trying in a mood of high seriousness to grasp and express the bewildering contradictions with which society assaults them. A contemporary historian may learn more from T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* than from a bushel of statistics proving what he
already knows to be true. Theology may present crucial problems of the age from another and equally fruitful angle. Merely because thought is abstract in form or obscure in expression does not mean that it may not deal valuably with the most concrete of problems. A crisis which requires drastic political action is one which has probably shaken society from top to bottom and affected all styles of thought.

2. Biography. I do not wish to revive ancient arguments about the role of the Great Man in history. Obviously circumstances are more decisive than people. But circumstances work through people; and a close analysis of the people may throw important light on the composition and force of the circumstance. Politicians, like everyone else and more perhaps than most, reflect certain dominant tendencies of their age. A great deal may be learned about the age through a detailed biographical study of the politician—particularly of his ideas and the books he read, or of the ideas of the people who advised him and of the books they read. If we wish to follow ideas from abstract formulation into concrete political decision, we must follow them through people. This pursuit of political ideas should be joined to an attempt to project the man and his place in history—to restore characterization to the writing of history.

3. Cultural history. A people’s tastes betray a good deal about its hopes and premonitions. Films, as Dr. Siegfried Kracauer has suggested, are collective products designed for anonymous multitudes and tailored for mass desires, and they are likely to contain in spite of themselves some of the dominant psychological dispositions of the day. Even trash may have its hidden treasures. George Orwell in a brilliant essay has shown what we can learn from boy’s weeklies. No reader of the comic strips can miss the significance of Orphan Annie’s crusade against government and labor or Joe Palooka’s vindication of the Bill of Rights; and, while the significance of Dogpatch and its eccentric inhabitants may be harder to grasp, one can be assured that Li’l Abner’s enormous popularity is no accident.

4. Social history. The development of the techniques and resources of social history has been the most striking historiographical advance in the last generation. It is one which political historians have utilized more than they have the preceding disciplines. But they can utilize it more, both as a way of getting at basic social ten-
sions, and as a way of apprehending the social totality which alone can give their political writings substance and depth.

5. Economic history. Classical economics was static and fairly unhelpful in its application to history; but the development of Marxism by Lenin and Hilferding, the cyclical studies of economists like Schumpeter, the new economics of Keynes and the political geography of Turner and Mahan have enormously increased the relevance of economic analysis to history. Because political problems are, at bottom, so largely economic problems, the new weapons of economics may be of great value to the political historian; and, to a degree, they have been used by him.

VII

Removed from its narrow basis in the action of legislatures and the crises of cabinets, set in a broad cultural context, and based on the twentieth century conception of man, political history, I believe, gains new strength. Cross-fertilization with intellectual history, biography, cultural history, social history, economic history will yield highly fruitful results for political studies. Otherwise political history will perish—it will attract no students in the universities, no practitioners in the profession, no readers in the population.

This does not mean that political history should resign itself to absorption by the related disciplines. Politics provides a unique subject matter, and political history must devote itself primarily to a full elucidation of the motives and consequences of political change. The point is rather that "full elucidation" is impossible unless the conception of political history is expanded far beyond its nineteenth century limits.

But once political history is adequately refreshed by its neighboring disciplines, once it is armed with modern insights and modern methodological weapons, it may venture boldly into the world again. We discussed earlier the contemporary breakdown of confidence in human thought in general. A theory of politics adequate to the complexities of human experience may assist in the recovery of that confidence; and such a theory requires a firm understanding of political history.

Let us not delude ourselves, however. A theory of politics alone cannot save us. History cannot save us. We must confront today,
indeed, the imminent possibility that the writing of history is near its end in the world. History is a function of a free society, which alone dares to face up to its past. The record shows what happens to the writing of history in Fascist and Communist states—what even a reactionary business government in this country might do to the writing of history. All the talk about a need for a cultural comprehension of political behavior is useless if meanwhile we neglect the actions which are necessary to safeguard the foundations of free society.

But if we really had a cultural comprehension of politics, we would take the necessary actions swiftly and effectively. So perhaps the talk is not in vain.

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AGENDA

For Discussion of Mr. Schlesinger's Paper

Mr. Schlesinger analyzes the need for a social-cultural approach to political history, with particular reference to the interrelations of intellectual and political developments. The first part of the discussion will be devoted to the following points in the analysis, or to such other statements therein as Mr. Schlesinger may wish to emphasize. Subsequently, it is hoped that conferees will present their own views on the subject, without any necessary reference to the outline which follows:

1. The social-intellectual approach has "been explored only intermittently and capriciously by political historians." Query: Are these adjectives applied to historians as individuals, or as a group, or both?

2. The nineteenth century isolated the political and neglected the other aspects of history. Query: What is meant here by "the nineteenth century"—literary men? professional historians? all historians?

3. The "new history," inspired by a wider knowledge of human behavior, reacted to the other extreme by repudiating political studies. The latter now need to be revived in synthesis with the "new history." Query: Are the new leads in preparing this synthesis, e.g., those offered by Marx, Pareto, Freud, themselves subject to demonstration, or is their use simply a matter of the historian's philosophic taste?

4. The political historian must, therefore, achieve an intellectual, psychological, and literary sense, which probably can result only from source knowledge and "a consequent instinct for the problems."
But this sense should not be a license for invention and romance. *Query:* Is there some danger that it will be?

5. History is essentially an art, "as personal as... the doctor's diagnosis." Its chief raw materials are immeasurable. Therefore it can be little helped by sociology, in which "meaningless invocations of statistics are too often presumed to yield conclusive results." "Social sciences" are sciences in name only. *Query:* If history is a personal art, what of "objectivity?" And if social sciences are not real sciences, what concept of "real science" is implicit here?

6. The political historian must utilize (a) intellectual history, reading poets and theologians; (b) biography, relating individuals to circumstances, and "restoring characterizations to the writing of history"; (c) cultural history, including the comics; (d) social history for the total picture; (e) economic history, for "the new weapons of economists may be of great value to the political historian." *Query:* Will the same breadth of interests be necessary among other specialists, e.g., among economic historians? art historians, etc.?

7. But at the same time, political history and its "unique subject matter" should not be last in related disciplines.

8. With regard to the relations of political history with intellectual history in particular, the latter deals with the expression of man's hopes and fears, the former with their resolution within actual social practice. Hence they are properly inseparable.

9. In dealing with intellectual history, the political historian can learn from latter-day analyses of thought that:

(a) Nonlogical elements are more basic than logical, in forming ideas.

(b) Ideas became politically influential when they relate to widely-felt needs.

(c) There is also a logical structure inherent in ideas, which influences their development.

10. Intellectual history must deal with the intellectuals. Their frustrations are clues to impending social disequilibrium. They therefore welcome change and tend to support radical political movements. Their connection with these has been closer than is usually assumed. *Query:* Are there not also intellectuals on the right?

11. The interrelation of ideas and politics is well illustrated in the history of "government intervention." With industrialization, the private conscience could no longer control an impersonal society; hence the need for governmental expression of a public conscience. In such a contest, such concepts as "faith" and "consent" became meaningful for political history; and the relation of these ideas can be more exactly defined.

12. To give another illustration of interrelations, the main achievement of New Deal political actions was a psychological one—to "cure the failure of nerve," to restore national self-confidence.
13. The intellectual perceived in the New Deal an effort to defend individualism simultaneously against Fascism, Communism, and an irresponsible capitalism. **Query:** All intellectuals?

14. No history will survive, if every effort is not made to preserve a free society, in which alone history can be written. **Query:** Does this mean that no “objective” history can be written in other types of society?

The Real Nature of Man*

The third session like the other two found the conferees selective in their point of attack. They concentrated particularly on one of Mr. Schlesinger’s fundamental concepts, namely, that present practices in political history are unsatisfying because they are “based upon a conception of man which is no longer consistent with our experience and views in the middle of the twentieth century. That conception of man is one which emerged from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.” Consequently, the hitherto prevailing optimism of the previous centuries should be replaced with a more tragic or realistic view of human nature.

Mr. Schlesinger was pictured as posed on the “horns of a terrible dilemma.” If we are to abandon the eighteenth century concept of man as essentially rational and capable of making reasonable social choices, then we must accept the concept of irrationality, of man incapable of order and liberty. Democracy must be cast aside as unworkable if the optimistic view of man is abandoned and we are thrown into the arms of some form of order-producing totalitarianism. The conference was warned against the influence of tired and disillusioned European intellectuals who were accepting bondage in return for order. To this Mr. Schlesinger countered that such an alternative was not necessary. In his view, the twentieth century concept need not perforce lead to totalitarianism; it but revives the Christian concept of man as voiced by St. Augustine. It reveals again the insight of Christianity into the nature, the limitations, the weaknesses and the faith and strength of men.

Others expressed doubt as to the advisability of trying to write the history of so optimistic a century as the nineteenth in terms of twentieth century pessimism. The twentieth century psychology is valuable rather because it throws light upon the irrational aspects of group and individual behavior. Greater knowledge of human complexes makes it possible to write realistically in terms of fears and frustrations in a fashion not possible a half century ago.

Naturally all this discussion revived the echoes of the relevance debate of the previous day. Those who were not particularly impressed by the idea that the present must dominate writing about the past emphasized continuity in history, the history which they viewed as a seamless web or an everflowing stream.

*Synopsis of discussion of Mr. Schlesinger’s paper.*