論 文

Toward the Impersonality of History: Science and Inductive Reasoning in 19th-Century American Historiography

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Here is a classic paradox about American history: why were the early national to 19th-century Americans so interested in history, if they were the people bound with the common future, not the common past? If, as Henry Steele Commager said, "the New World was the worst possible market to which you could carry this shop-worn bric-a-brac of Prescription and Tradition," how is it possible to account for their strong interest in history, which had produced a number of historical writings since the independence?[1] One possible answer to this question is that their conception of history was as revolutionarily unconventional as that of social structure. Theirs was not an interest in the past itself, but rather the sterilization, if not outright negation or erasure, of the past. The present essay is a brief attempt at the explication of such a peculiar development of American historiography during the 19th century. The main feature of American historical writings, I argue, was twofold then: descriptive timelessness and passion for science. As for the former, I elsewhere discussed the atemporality or ahistoricity of some major historical writings of the day, but my chief focus in this essay is upon the tendency of scientification in American historiography.[2] With its democratic appreciation of individual particularity, the newly independent nation nurtured the scientific or inductive inclination in its historical representation, which, by the end of the 19th century, ended up in a surprisingly impersonal, inhuman and somehow apocalyptic vision of history.

Historiography has not been a fixed or monolithic endeavor to represent the past, but involved a continual generic development in form and method, and by extension, a series of self-reflective questions of its own nature: what can legitimately constitute history, or more simply, what is history? As far as American historiography was concerned, history was first a record of the divine design unfolded, as the New World settlement itself was a typological reenactment of the sacred plan. And then the late 18th century witnessed the secularization and humanization of history, which set itself apart from Puritan's prophetic history. The subsequent century was propelled by increasingly enlightened rationality, and historiography came to put more emphasis on individual facts, not on a ready-made narrative matrix. In terms of methodology, this was not just a shift in focus but a revolutionary restructuring of the genre itself. Having ceased to be examples of a preset principle, historical facts now provided raw data or evidence for a new generalization, and in this sense, American

historiography from the early national era to the mid 19th century succeeded in remodeling itself into a field of scientific analysis.

The development of historiography thus trod a path from religion to science, deduction to induction, and an a *priori* scenario to *a posteriori* individual experiences. The focus was now on the individuals as the primary agents of history, and the method centered around the way to induce general principles of historical causation from them. What kind of individuals could possibly drive the engine of history then? The first choice was so-called great men, heroic individuals in history. Evidently, human history is punctuated with the comings and goings of singular talents, whose influence pervades across ages and cultures, and that is why they are great. Historians have produced one biography of a great man after another, and the genre occupies a reasonably conspicuous place among the whole historical writings. And yet, the Great Man theory of history is just a few steps away from providential history; it only replaces God with great men, who are far aloof and exceptional among the prevailing mediocrity. History should be restored to common men, if it is to record the collective and systemic development of the social organism. In the American context, this is very true to its democratic constitution. While Thomas Carlyle consecrated great men in his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), Ralph Waldo Emerson employed the same biographical format to style them as "representative" of the general population in his *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (1850). As American historiography was fledged into a scientific discipline, it was emphatically empirical and inductive, stuck to the individual facts and individual common men.[3]

Jared Sparks, the first professor of history at Harvard College (1839-49, and then the College president, 1849-53), detailed the scientific rationale of historiography in his unpublished memoranda. Sparks was the one who most earnestly hunted for scattered documents and created an extensive database of historical facts for his days. Although he himself failed to improve that collection of historical knowledge to the full, his strenuous efforts at establishing the science of history -- or what he preferred to call "philosophical history" -- in the early American academia were more than enough to entitle him as a chief spokesman of the nascent discipline.[4] What was most important in historical writings was, Sparks contended, "*elementary principles*, deduced from facts of a certain class," or in other words, "The moving springs of the whole, residing in the condition and spirit of the people, their form of government, political maxims, laws and local habits; and also the effects of great movements and changes on the happiness of the people, the security of their rights, and national prosperity" (Sparks, b n. pag.). The task of a historian was then to extract the fundamental laws that regulate society in its various stages of development, and to do that, he (or she) had to go over tons of raw data concerning not just major historical events but

the people's moral, intellectual, and political character. Sparks went on to claim the legitimacy of history as a science of collective mentality.

> History, in this view, is another name for the science of mental philosophy, in its most practical and comprehensive sense. It brings us by analysis to the ends at which the metaphysician arrives by synthesis. The latter assumes certain first principles, and constructs from them the fabric of the human mind; the former analyses [*sic*] actions, and traces them up to their causes, linking one to the other in an unbroken chain. (Sparks, b n. pag.)

While metaphysics works by deduction from "certain first principles," history traces human affairs up to certain first causes by induction. Essentially, this was the same method as had been pursued in other natural sciences since the rise of Baconian inductive reasoning. As regards the methodology of historiography, Sparks's arguments constantly recurred to the same point, that is, collecting, classifying, and ordering materials into a unified whole: "the task of plodding his way through all the materials, printed and in manuscript, and digesting them into a united, continuous, lucid, and philosophical whole, bearing the shape, and containing the substance of genuine history" (Sparks, a 121).

As an emergent academic discipline, historical studies of the day had every reason to define itself as science, but historically considered, history and modern empirical sciences were rather of the same family in the first place. As Sparks admitted for himself, the term history was such a comprehensive catchall as to embrace both physical nature and human affairs within its range: "In its general sense, the word history has a very extensive application. It embraces the whole compass of knowledge. Every record of facts is a history. Hence we have histories of the various departments of nature, including the physical sciences; of the acts, discoveries, and inventions of men, and of their progress in religion, morals, literature, arts, and government" (Sparks, b n. pag.). We usually assume history to be a story of social or political development and thus anthropocentric in its nature, so it might be difficult to understand why "every record of facts" could be a history. But only remember there is another sort of history, i.e., natural history, which is now reduced to a feeble tradition, but in its own day, around the mid 18th century, established ascendancy among the whole intellectual activities as a precursor of present-day scientific disciplines, such as botany, zoology, geology, and ethnology. Lately, much scholarly attention has been directed to the importance of natural history in the early national American intellectual life, but at this moment suffice it to note that there was no clear line distinguishing between natural history and human history, as was implied in Sparks's remark.[5] Or it might be still better to cite famous lines from

Emerson's *Nature* (1836): "All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren, like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life" (Emerson, 21). Contemporary people would have found nothing strange in this juxtaposition of the two histories.

Whether in human history or in natural history, the point lay in the collection, description, and classification of empirical facts. As recent studies of Western epistemology have pointed out, early modern history or, to be exact, *historia* referred to the descriptive knowledge of particulars. Unlike the Aristotelean interest in universal and common experiences, history then bore on unmediated unique observations with little, if any, implication in temporality, and its effect was to excerpt and fragment human experience into decontextualized facts. Originally, this descriptive nature branded history as an inferior way of knowing, a mere purveyor of particular samples for higher philosophical abstractions, and yet it was to be reevaluated later because of its very theory-free objectivity, which constituted an essential part of inductive sciences. By the early 17th century history gained a diachronic dimension and eventually reformed itself into systematic narrativization through the 18th to 19th century, but the generic similarity between history and modern empirical sciences was still to linger on. This taken into account, history could quite reasonably aspire to be a science, as it did in 19th-century American historiography.[6]

The scientific tendency of American historical writings culminated around the late 19th to early 20th century in Henry Adams's philosophy of history. His historiographical masterpiece was undoubtedly *History of the United States during the Administration of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison* (9 vols., 1889-1891), but more relevant to the purpose of this essay were his disquisitions on the nature of history, such as *A Letter to American Teachers of History* (1910) and *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (1919), in which Adams theorized the general flow of human history in accordance with the second law of thermodynamics.[7] After shaking off the typological framework, American historians had been groping for alternative modes of historical narrative and trying a number of scientific generalizations, such as natural history, geography, cartography, geology and, as the second half of the 19th century rolled on, the Darwinian theory of evolution, which finally prevailed as a de facto standard for historical writings.[8] Adams took yet another step forward to put human history under the even more scientific, impersonal, and merciless power of nature. Physicist historian, that was what he was.

For Adams, society was an organism which strictly followed the laws of nature, and social history was an organic process governed by the second law of thermodynamics. Also known as the law of dissipation or the principle of entropy, the main postulate of this scientific theory was that the intensity of energy would be lost constantly into a static equilibrium.

Metaphorically speaking, the mountain is getting lower and lower, while the valley is silted up gradually to the ground level, and the world grows more and more flattened out. Adams applied this axiom to the course of human history, and predictably enough, his history took on a pessimistic hue. As history established itself as science, its vision foretold of the inevitable world's end, a complete stasis.

> Thus, it seemed, that whatever the universities thought or taught, the physicists regarded society as an organism in the only respect which seriously concerned historians: -- it would die! If life was to disappear, the form of Vital Energy known as Social Energy, must also, presumably, go to increase the Entropy of the Universe, thus proving -- at least to the degree necessary and sufficient to produce conviction in historians, -- that History was a Science. (Adams, b 13)

The evolutionary theory, Adams contended, offered only an illusory promise of human progress, while the thermodynamic law provided a truer perspective on history. For, "the law is already enforced in every field excepting that of human history, and even human history has not wholly escaped. In physics it rules with uncontested sway. In physiology, the old army of Evolutionists have suffered defections so serious that no discipline remains" (Adams, b 21). The tyranny of the thermodynamic law of dissipation was so strong that historians were unable to ignore it any longer. The problem was, if they applied it to history, it meant they had to presuppose the decomposition of the world as a necessary condition of historiography. The universal tendency toward the dissipation of energy then would end up making the world unfit for human habitation, and historians had to "define his profession as the science of human degradation" (Adams, b 58). It certainly would have been a scandal for right-minded society.

Ironically, thermodynamic history worked as its own undoing: "the triumph of this teaching is the ultimate degradation of the energy that is taught, -- of the teacher as well as of the pupil and the universe, -- and the more complete victory, the more rapid his degradation" (Adams, b 70). Although Adams published his idea of thermodynamic history late in his literary career, his major historical works already had been pregnant with its self-cancelling effect. His history of early national American society focused upon the era when the Federalist centralization gradually lost its grip and democratic and localist principles were rapidly pervading the country. Indeed his protagonists were outstanding national heroes, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, but they were self-abnegating champions of popular democracy, or to be exact, presidents restricting their own governmental power to the minimum and ensuring the people's power as much as possible. According to Adams's theory,

Jeffersonian democracy was an epitome of the dissipative tendency of history, which before long brought over Jacksonian market individualism, or in other words, the rise of the masses. The idea of individual liberty and social equality shone brilliantly in human history and found an advocate in an equally brilliant figure like Jefferson, but the idea itself cancelled the very notion of brilliancy and implied a flatted-out, impersonal, and what the Federalist opponents would call, mobocratic model of society. Adams's historical accounts elaborated on this dilemma of national power in the age of distribution (or dissipation) of power. That was why he highlighted the paradoxical moments of American democracy, one of which was dramatized in Jefferson's first inaugural address, "We are all Republicans -- we are all Federalists."[9] And of course, the paradox of democratic government was much the same as that of scientific history. Both were an attempt at overall unification constantly undermined by its own emphasis on promiscuous commonality or miscellaneous individual facts.

What was lost in the modern scientification of history was the "face" of history. In Puritan prophetic history, the individuals were faceless and anonymous as well, for sure, but at least it was marked with the Godhead, written in the name of God. As enlightened rationality spread over, the divine agent was expelled out of the field of human history, and heroic individuals were throned as its new faces. And finally in the era of empirical science and democratic leveling, great men also gave up their controlling power, and it was the common everyman in turn that steered the course of history, while its workings were explained in terms of the impersonal and merciless laws of nature. Now history lost its actor's name or face completely; anonymity and impersonality dominated over it.

> In short, the social Organism, in the recent views of history, is the cause, creator, and end of the Man, who exists only as a passing representative of it, without rights or functions except what it imposes. As an Organism society has always been peculiarly subject to Degradation of Energy, and alike the historians and the physicists invariably stretch Kelvin's law over the all organized matter whatever. (Adams, b 126)

In the most scientific form of history, the individual had nothing specific and unique to oneself, but was only a single unit of the "social Organism."

Whether it looked paradoxical or not, Adams's theory of scientific history grew more and more erratic and metaphysical as he edged toward its logical conclusion. The world's energy would be dissipated slowly but steadily, Adams claimed, and the day would come when everything stops and motion itself ends. Then, in his vision, there would arrive the ultimate serenity of all-leveling solution. "This solvent, then, -- this ultimate motion which absorbs all

other forms of motion is an ultimate equilibrium, -- this ethereal current of Thought, -- is conceived as existing, like ice on a mountain range, and trickling from every pore of rock, in innumerable rills, uniting always into larger channels, and always dissolving whatever it meets, until at last it reaches equilibrium in the ocean of ultimate solution" (Adams, b 145-46). Who could have expected the revival of metaphysics or apocalyptic kingdom come after all the rigid adherence to physical science? The scientific aspiration of history had been motivated by its overt desire to break away from the typological worldview, and now at last far removed from religious dogma, human history again submitted itself to a much more impersonal and metaphysical abstraction.

The wheel of historiographical trends came full circle, and it was only natural that yet another mode of history pulled it down to a more human and personal level again. This time, the agent was José Ortega y Gasset. By way of conclusion of this essay on the disciplinary development of modern scientific history, we may as well take a brief look into Ortega's vitalist history, an antithesis to physicist history such as Adams's, as well as to history of the masses, that impersonal chunk of men. According to Ortega, the modern system of epistemological frameworks from the late 16th century to the early 20th century was characterized by the faith in scientific reason, especially that of physico-mathematical science, and historiography had been under its discursive influence. And yet, after its long reign, scientific reason was now in danger and proved ineffective for the explication of human affairs. For, Ortega insisted, human life was more than a necessary chain of causes and effects as scientific theories were likely to suggest, but there was an original and creative "incitement" in human life, individual or collective, and that was never to be reduced to scientific causation (Ortega, 21). In this sense, "man is not a thing but an aspiration, the aspiration to be this or that"; or man is "a drama, if anything, an unending struggle to be what I have to be" (Ortega, 113). Scientific reason was impotent against that supremely free and exuberant energy, and historical or narrative reason took its place in the study of human life.

> In short, the reasoning, the *reason*, that throws light here [on the human element] consists in a narration. Alongside pure physico-mathematical reason there is, then, a narrative reason. To comprehend anything human, be it personal or collective, one must tell its history. (Ortega, 214)

Admittedly, Ortega's historical vitalism had its own problem. In his schematization, the original voluntary impulse was often lost sight of in modern times, and people reduced themselves to the unmotivated masses. No matter how earnestly he advocated vitalist history,

or rather because he did so with all the more intensity, it always sounded like an elitist's jeremiad. He could superbly theorize the mechanism of what he termed the masses, but in actuality, wouldn't delve deep into them, just as Adams explained them away as the impersonal units of the social organism. It was yet to be doubted how seriously he oriented himself toward the people's drama.

One thing is for sure, however. The development of modern historiography has been taking place between individualist and collectivist, personal and impersonal, narrative and scientific, or vitalist and necessitarian views of human affairs. In American context, as Ortega predicted, the Adamsian physicist historiography came to an impasse, wholly neglected by the later generations, who now favor narrative history, as is exemplified in works by Natalie Zemon Davis, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, James Goodman, and Simon Schama to name a few.[10] Indeed the thermodynamic vision of history was an intellectual anomaly, but it is important to remember that people once used to explain the course of history in strict accordance with scientific laws and that historians may possibly revert to the passion for science in the future. The history of historiography will perpetuate itself coming back and forth between the two ends of historical consciousness. The dilemma of free will and determinism has been and will remain to be a historian's chief anxiety.

Notes

1. Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (1978; London: Phoenix Press, 2000): 202.
2. The present essay is a part of the concluding section for what I am going to submit as a doctoral dissertation, the main thesis of which is about the development of American historiography roughly from the post-Revolutionary era to the mid 19th century. Part of its discussions has been already published in literary journals and books, in which my interest centered on the natural historical atemporality and scientific inclination of early American historiography. Some of the titles are listed below in "Works Cited." I am so happy to acknowledge Professor Yoichi Mizutani's warm encouragement since I assumed my present position at Kochi Women's University.
3. I discuss the rise of the individual in historiography in my forthcoming essay, Yamaguchi, "The Elasticity of the Individual: Early American Historiography and Emerson's Philosophy of History," *Seijo English Monographs* 42 (February 2010): 1-23. And also I examined the metaphor of steam engine and its influence upon Carlyle's heroic historiography in Yamaguchi, "Dynamic Force or Mechanic Energy? : A Study of "Power" in Thomas Carlyle's Theory of Hero-Worship," *Bulletin of Kochi Women's University* 55

(March 2006): 9-18.

4 . As for Sparks's document hunting and historiographical compilations, see Yamaguchi, "The Agony of Professor Sparks: A Study of Historiographical Enterprises in Early Nineteenth-Century America," Hiroko Washizu and Takeshi Morita, eds., *In Context: Epistemological Frameworks and Literary Texts* (Tsukuba: Research Society of Literature and Epistemological Frameworks, 2003): 285-305 [*Written in Japanese]. Sparks's history was what was loosely termed documentary history, whose features were its dogged objectivity and forbiddingly bulky tome. The 19th-century American historians were known as their obsessive passion for documents, which was labeled "the cult of facts." Cited below is Sparks's principle of document hunting.

> An historical work will be valuable, in proportion as the author draws his materials from the *original sources*. Authorities at second hand may be erroneous, or at least tinged with the opinions of the writer, or in some degree perverted by his manner of viewing subjects. Official documents, reports, letters, and records of public proceedings are the best sources. Private letters of the principal actors, written at the time of the events, will often explain causes, which are not obvious, and may generally be relied on for facts. (Sparks, c 343)

5 . See, for example, Pamela Regis, *Describing Early America: Bartram, Jefferson, Crèvecœur and the Influence of Natural History* (1992; Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999) and Christoph Irmscher, *The Poetics of Natural History: From John Bartram to William James* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1999).

6 . As for the descriptive nature of early modern history and its later development into systematic narrativization, the following anthology of science studies is most illuminating: Gianna Pomata and Nancy G. Siraisi, eds., *Historia: Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005). Each essay in this book illustrates the descriptiveness of *historia* in a variety of contexts of intellectual pursuits, such as medicine, physics, philology, and of course, natural history; but among others, Pomata and Siraisi's "Introduction" and Donald R. Kelley's "Between History and System" offer an historical overview of the importance of *historia* in early modern learning and thus serve as a good introduction to the issue as a whole. As a purveyor of particular evidence for empirical sciences, *historia* was a major manufacturer of what Mary Poovey calls the "modern fact," a "nugget of experience detached from theory." Poovey's account of the development of the "modern fact" -- from just an example of some preset principle to evidence for a new generalization -- was very helpful for us to understand the implications of *historia* in

modern scientific disciplines. See Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the atemporal meaning of history as follows:

> A systematic account (without reference to time) of a set of natural phenomena, as those connected with a country, some division of nature or group of natural objects, a species of animals or plants, etc. Now rare, exc. in natural history. [In this sense following the similar use of □στορία by Aristotle and other Greek writers, and of historia by Pliny.]

7. In 1910, Adams printed and distributed *A Letter to American Teachers of History* to university libraries and professors to propose his thermodynamic theory of history. *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* was published posthumously in 1919 as an anthology of Adams's theoretical works on physicist historiography, including "The Tendency of History" (a 1894 letter to the American Historical Association), "A Letter to American Teachers of History," "The Rule of Phase Applied to History" (1909), and Brooks Adams's biographical note. A bit confusingly, the contents of *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* was also published under the title of *The Tendency of History* in the same year, although Brooks Adams's memoir was slashed off the text. For convenience's sake, I use *The Tendency of History* in this essay.
8. As for the relationship between American historiography, natural history and geography, see Yamaguchi, "The Traveling Historian: Spatiality and Memories of Landscape in Francis Parkman's Historiography," Hiroko Washizu and Yoichiro Miyamoto, eds., *Chi-no-hanto: Literature and Epistemological Frameworks* (Tokyo: Yushokan, 2007): 77-103 [*Written in Japanese]; Yamaguchi, "American Geographico-History: Visibility and Timelessness of Emma Willard's Progressive Maps and History in Perspective," *Review of American Literature* 20 (July 2007): 46-69; and also Yamaguchi, "The Panoramic Point of View and Visual Training for Americans: 'Bird's-Eye View' Stories of Two Travelers," *Review of American Literature* 21 (Spring 2009): 73-97. I have been working on the influence of geological theories on Parkman's historiography, which will soon be issued under the title, "History in Depth: Palimpsest, Geology, and Memories of Landscape."
9. Adams repeatedly referred to this contradictory pronouncement of Jefferson's in *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (1889-90). The paradox drove the democratic executive power to an ideological impasse, say, on the occasion of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, and here is Adams's account of the debate on it.

> Nothing could be more interesting than to see the discomfort with which the champions of the State-rights tossed themselves one horn to the other of the Federalist dilemma. The Federalists cared little on which horn their opponents might choose to impale themselves, for both were equally fatal. Either Louisiana must be admitted as a State, or must be held as territory. In the first case the old Union was at an end; in the second case the national government was an empire, with "inherent sovereignty" derived from the war and treaty-making powers, -- in either case the Virginia theories were exploded. (Adams, a 379)

In his study of the early national American speech-act, Jay Fliegelman discusses the paradox of the urge of democratic self-cancellation. I am as much indebted to Fliegelman's argument in the present essay as I have been in the previous ones. See Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, & the Culture of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993).

10. As for narrative history, see James West Davidson, "The New Narrative History: How New? How Narrative?" *Reviews in American History* 12 (September 1984): 322-34; James Goodman, "For the Love of Stories," *Reviews in American History* 26 (March 1998): 255-74, and "Telling the Stories of Narrative History" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 44 (August 14, 1998): B4-5. The major contemporary practices of narrative history I consulted are: Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (1965; New York: Vintage Books, 1993); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties* (1991; New York: Vintage Books, 1992); D. Graham Burnett, *A Trial by Jury* (New York : A.A. Knopf, 2001).

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