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Historiographical Changes in America

American historiography is an interesting subject. It has changed over time and has taken on different interpretations in the interim. There are several schools of thought that have reflected the different interpretations. The schools that will be focused on in this essay are: Providential, Rationalist, Nationalist, Progressive, and Consensus. While there are marked differences in each school of historical study, there are also similarities. The changing methods and interpretations reinvigorate and inspire new ideas on old thoughts.

The Providential school of thought is where American historiography begins. In the Providential school, God is the driving force behind how events happen. The primary writers of early American history, the mid 1600's to the early 1700's, were religious minded individuals.

William Bradford, who wrote the history of Plymouth Colony, saw God's hand in the events leading up to and settling in New England.¹ Throughout Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation*, God was the driving force as to why things happen. If positive things happened it was God caring and providing for his flock; if horrible events happened it was the work of the devil.² One event that sticks out was the young sailor that impressed upon the Puritans his disregard for their persons and wished to cast them overboard. The way Bradford tells it, the young sailor was punished by God for his profanity against the Puritans.³ By limiting the narrative to sources relating to God the providential school does not look at scientific or rational sources to explain history. Placing it firmly in the idea that God is the determining factor in free will.

¹ Bradford, William. Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation*, 1606–1646.

² Bradford, pg. 48.

³ Bradford, pg. 93.

Bradford does inform the reader of the history of the Puritans' expulsion and travels from England to Holland and eventually the colonies. For the most part, Bradford stays true to the historical veracity, as he knows it, and list the facts in an established order. Bradford in the *History of Plymouth Plantation* is a participant that is writing what he remembers from the events leading up to the establishment of the Plantation. Bradford's work uses biblical allusions and references the Bible to reaffirm God's plan as events transpire. In many respects, there are corollaries to 'queene Marys days' to the pharaoh's treatment of the Jewish populations in Egypt.⁴ This is not surprising as a Providential writer, but shows how Bradford crafted his work. It could be simply that it the familiar writing style to most of the people at this point in time. Considering preachers, clerics, and priest would have the most formal education in the colonies at this time, one could draw the conclusion that religious writing would be the most common.⁵ It is pointed out, in *Interpretations of American History*, that the writers in the Providential school are writing a 'holy chronicle,' this is especially true in Bradford's case.⁶

It is interesting to note that even though other schools of historiography arose and improved the methods for collecting and interpreting history; the Providential school of thought remained a common school and writing format well into the nineteenth century.⁷ One other noteworthy thing, Bradford's text is more similar to Elizabethan English than modern American English. Not only will the shift from interpretations shape ideas, but so does the way we say and write them. By the eighteenth century a new method for interpreting history was coming to light.

⁴ Bradford, pg. 25.

⁵ "Introduction to U.S. Historiography." *In Interpretations of American History, Volume I: Through Reconstruction: Patterns & Perspectives*. 8th ed. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. Page, 4.

⁶ "Introduction to U.S. Historiography," pg. 4.

⁷ "Introduction to U.S. Historiography," pg. 4.

The Age of Enlightenment would not only bring new methods to science and the political stage, but it also brought a new method of cataloging historical events to America.

In the Enlightenment, rational thought was paramount to the understanding of the world around humanity. This method was built on the idea of natural law and not God's will. Instead of God influencing man, man was influencing his own environment.⁸ Thomas Jefferson led the charge for Rationalist thought in America with *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson used rational thought to investigate the Native Americans in Virginia in a scientific fashion. Jefferson performed a form of archaeology on a tribal burial site in order to understand the intricacies of the tribes burial practices.⁹ Jefferson also rationalized that the different tribes he and his predecessors encountered probably had a shared language similar to Europeans at one point in time.¹⁰ In Jefferson's writing on religion, he points out the aspects of having religious laws being prominent in the establishment of the Colonies and how, in time, a single person could twist those laws to personal gain.¹¹ This is in strict contrast to the Providential school that states God's law is supreme and incorruptible; essentially saying that self-interest is more prevalent than piety.¹² The shift to more rational thought leads to a change in the writing style; instead of relying on biblical allusions there are more observations in line with the scientific method.

Jefferson's rational thoughts are expressly evident in his writings on justice and the Virginia state constitution. Overall, Jefferson presented a well-thought-out government form.¹³ However, the Rationalist explanations of African Americans' was a sign of the time and relied

⁸ "Introduction to U.S. Historiography," pg. 4

⁹ Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Paris: 1785. Query XI, pg. 4.

¹⁰ Jefferson, Query XI, pg. 6.

¹¹ Jefferson, Query XVII, pg. 3

¹² "Introduction to U.S. Historiography," pg. 5.

¹³ Jefferson, Query XIV, pg. 1.

on pseudoscience.¹⁴ Now, this trait would be shared with Nationalist which would come into the light on the heels of the Rationalist movement.

The Nationalist school of thought believe that Teutonic peoples were superior and were meant to spread the idea of a free world to the inferior masses.¹⁵ The Nationalist school would emerge during the late eighteen century into the nineteenth century. In America, this would mean the Anglo-Saxon Europeans and Manifest Destiny. The ideas of the American wilderness and the idea that anyone can succeed and capture a part of that wilderness and tame it was a major shift in American history. It is interesting to note that this school, which began in rational thought, deviated into a racially-motivated idea. The racial aspects are similar to the themes that Jefferson inlayed; there is the idea that white Europeans are the superior race, whereas other races and even eastern Europeans were inferior. Similar approaches in science from Jefferson's day to explain the inferior aspects reappear during this time. There is surely some influence from Southern culture and justifications for slavery. In looking back at Jefferson's ideas towards Native Americans plus the expansion of European Americans into Native American lands the racial undertones, as Helen Hunt Jackson points out, in how our nation approached indigenous peoples, becomes drastically different..¹⁶ Something else worth noting is that the Nationalist style echoed both Providential and Rationalist characteristics.

Francis Parkman, who wrote about his travels west in *The Oregon Trail*, was an excellent example of the Nationalist school. Parkman made his trials and tribulations sound like Bradford—he tended to write in a more rational style akin to Jefferson. He kept his prose short and tended to write in a more observation matter. However, it is his treatment of the Pawnee and

¹⁴ Jefferson, Query XIV, pg. 6-10.

¹⁵ "Introduction to U.S. Historiography," pg. 6.

¹⁶ "Introduction to U.S. Historiography," pg. 6

even members of his own party that are not his race that make him a Nationalist.¹⁷ Parkman describes the natives as, “squalid” and “genuine savages,” throughout his narrative.¹⁸ Parkman even disparaged the mountain men, of “Canadian extraction,” that lived among the Natives supplying the east with furs believing them to be inferior for mixing with Natives.¹⁹

It is here we have another shift in how historiography is presented. At the end of the nineteenth century moving into the twentieth century, historical scholarship moved from the amateur historian into a more professional discipline.²⁰ Colleges start offering courses, usually to elite white Americans and the professionalization of historiography was broached. They also attempted to remain neutral by adopting objectivity into their methods. It is also during this time that a new school of thought would arise, the Progressives.

Like the Progressive movement led by Theodore Roosevelt, the historians started looking at other factors that drove history. Instead of Gods will or natural law, it was class conflict, urbanization, and industrialization that changed how society functioned.²¹ Like the reformers leading change in politics, the progressives were there to reform how history was perceived in order to assist political change.²² In a similar vein that politics would face, older historians would point out how objectivity was the basis of good historians. Charles Beard pointed out that historians cannot in fact truly be ‘objective’ that, that form of historian was a “noble dream,” that was unsustainable considering the biases they had.²³

¹⁷ Parkman, Francis. *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life*. 1849. Page, 2-5.

¹⁸ Parkman, pg. 5.

¹⁹ Parkman, pg. 6

²⁰ “Introduction to U.S. Historiography,” pg. 7.

²¹ “Introduction to U.S. Historiography,” pg. 7.

²² “Introduction to U.S. Historiography,” pg. 7.

²³ Beard, Charles A. “That Noble Dream.” *The American Historical Review*, 41, no. 1 (1935): 74–87.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1839356>.

There was a change in who the narrators of history were in some respect, instead of only hearing from white men, we start hearing other histories of minorities and women. While it was a limited success, the professional circles of historians ignored the works of W.E.B Dubois and others, it still added to the historiography of the time.²⁴ In that light, Becker's "Everyman His Own Historian," was a little trite. While it would in the future support the different voices in history, it was a little disheartening that the professionals dismissed researched histories simply because of race or sex.

However, Becker did have a remarkable view of how they determine the "facts of history."²⁵ He utilized an interesting format to show us that with his use of Mr. Everyman. By simply how Mr. Everyman recalls the series of events in order to pay his coal bill, the selection of facts, relevant to the need, forms a hypothesis.²⁶ This is similar to how historians interpret the facts of an event. Becker also is self-aware of how in fifty years his own work, and that of his peers, might be perceived.²⁷ Becker states, "After fifty years we can clearly see that it was not history which spoke through Fustel, but Fustel who spoke through history."²⁸ Becker opens the field for history to be inclusion rather than a field for gentlemen scholars and professionals.

It would not be fifty years before another group challenged the Progressives, in fact it would come about swiftly with the end of World War II. The Consensus school of historians distanced themselves from the class struggles of Progressives and form opinions around the unity of Americans.²⁹ This was partially to distance themselves from the similarities in the Progressive school to communism. The Consensus school, like the name, is a consensus on what made

²⁴ "Introductions to U.S. Historiography," pg. 8

²⁵ Becker, Carl. "Everyman His Own Historian." *The American Historical Review*, 37, no. 2 (1932): 221–36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1838208>.

²⁶ Becker, pg. 3-4.

²⁷ Becker, pg. 10.

²⁸ Becker, pg. 10.

²⁹ "Introduction to U.S. Historiography," pg. 11.

America exceptional. The Consensus school focused on the elements that made American values exceptional rather than its differences. In Boorstin's case, it was the similar politics in relation to the Cold War that made it exceptional. He postulated that "we have no philosophy which can be exported," which is a little odd considering that most of the ideas behind that were imported in the first place.³⁰ He would share similar views as Hartz and Hofstadter; although, in time Hofstadter would be an equal critic of Consensus history.³¹

Overall, the various schools of American historiography overlapped and had shared elements. Looking at the elements, it is easy to see how some of the schools have remained relevant to today. The Progressive and Consensus schools are still echoed in postmodernist works. Another thing that is pertinent to the discussion is the evolution of the written language in historiography. From Bradford to Jefferson and so on, American English evolved and helped shape the understanding of history—just as the interpretation of history creates an understanding based on facts. Becker points out the fluidity of facts in his piece and how people can be directed to understand an event based on an interpretation. He states, "To select and affirm even the simplest complex of facts is to give them a certain place in a certain pattern of ideas, and this alone is sufficient to give them a special meaning."³² Becker's call to "everyman" isn't simply a call to Progressive style historiography, it's a call to understand that biases, like Beard pointed out, are inherent in history—and that is still a concern, even today.

³⁰ Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Genius of American Politics*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953. Page 1.

³¹ "Introduction to U.S. Historiography," pg. 11.

³² Becker, pg. 10.