The cry goes up that one is murdering history whenever, in a historical analysis... one is seen to be using in too obvious a way the categories of discontinuity and difference, the notions of threshold, rupture and transformation, the description of series and limits. One will be denounced for attacking the inalienable rights of history and the very foundations of any possible historicity. But one must not be deceived: what is being bewailed with such vehemence is not the disappearance of history, but the eclipse of that form of history that was secretly, but entirely related to the synthetic activity of the subject; . . . what is being bewailed, is that ideological use of history by which one tries to restore to man everything that has unceasingly eluded him for over a hundred years.

Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 14.

“HISTORY IS PAST POLITICS and politics present history” was the founding motto of the American Historical Association. As he busily organized our profession, Herbert Baxter Adams regularly cited the English historian Edward Freeman’s formulation. (Indeed, he cited it so often that some people began to think that Adams had written it himself.) At a time when social history has broadened the discipline’s focus, it may seem anachronistic, if not foolish, to reinvoke the old adage. But that is what I want to do. I think I am on safe ground because my definitions of “politics” and “history” have been updated to take account of contemporary usage. When that is done, the old words have new and relevant resonance.

By “politics,” I mean not only formal operations of government but contests that involve power in Michel Foucault’s sense—power not only as a relationship of repression or domination but also as a set of relationships or processes that produce positive effects: social consensus about the meanings of truth, the
hegemony of certain systems of knowledge (science in the nineteenth century),
the disciplinary regimes of academic fields such as history.\(^1\) By “history,” I mean
not what happened, not what “truth” there is “out there” to be discovered and
transmitted, but what we know about the past, what the rules and conventions are
that govern the production and acceptance of the knowledge we designate as
history. My first premise is that history is not purely referential but is rather
constructed by historians. Written history both reflects and creates relations of
power. Its standards of inclusion and exclusion, measures of importance, and
rules of evaluation are not objective criteria but politically produced conven-
tions. What we know as history is, then, the fruit of past politics; today’s contests
are about how history will be constituted for the present. “History is past politics
and politics present history.”

My rereading of Freeman accepts his equation of politics and history but in
somewhat different terms. While he meant, I think, that history was always about
politics, I mean that history is inherently political. There is no single standard by
which we can identify “true” historical knowledge, however well-trained we have
been in graduate seminars on methods and historiography. Rather, there are
contests, more and less conflictual, more and less explicit, about the substance,
uses, and meanings of the knowledge that we call history.

I am not here referring to topical debates or to differences of interpretation
about, say, the origins of the French Revolution or the causes of the American
Civil War. Rather, I am talking about the process by which a particular approach
to historical inquiry claims to embody the entire discipline by defining itself as
“History” and declaring challenges to it to be non-history, unacceptable and
irrelevant because outside the boundaries of the field. This process is about the
establishment and protection of hegemonic definitions of history.

One can follow the process in the records of the American Historical
Association since its founding in 1884, especially in presidential addresses, those
ritual occasions that encourage disquisitions on the state of the field.\(^2\) Books and
articles about the condition of the profession are also often exercises in
boundary maintenance, or, less frequently, challenges to prevailing rules. In
them, we find evidence of debate and disagreement, moments of dramatic
challenge to orthodox views about the subject matter and philosophy of history,
and, above all, repeated attempts by guardians of orthodoxy to maintain
unquestioned predominance for their point of view by insisting that only they
represent “truth,” or “science,” or “objectivity,” or “tradition,” or “history-
as-it-has-always-been-written.”\(^3\)

The rhetoric of these texts is surely inflated, and their extreme normative

\(^1\) Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in Colin Gordon, ed. Power/Knowledge: Selected

\(^2\) Presidential addresses are sometimes idiosyncratic observations and sometimes reviews of the
literature in the president’s speciality, but they are more often statements about what the reigning
definition of history is or ought to be.

\(^3\) By far the best source for these debates is Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity
Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge, 1988). I have relied heavily on Novick’s
insights and references throughout this essay.
statements conceal the range and variety of philosophies contained in most substantive history writing. That, of course, is their function and their importance; by polarizing debate, they seek to establish criteria of membership in the profession—to include some and exclude others. And they seek to enlist the support among historians and a broader public that will guarantee that their definition of history prevails.

Since this seems to be one of the moments of great contest about the meaning of history and since political conservatives have raised their banner in defense of a very particular monolithic, unitary, and universal view that they equate with “History,” it seems worthwhile to analyze their rhetoric and the historical validity of their claims. Through this analysis, I hope not only to expose the highly political nature of the conservatives’ defense of their version of “History” but also to show that it has had profoundly exclusionary and elitist effects on the discipline.

For those who think their position is or ought to be hegemonic, the appearance of critical challenges constitutes a “crisis.” By representing themselves simply as the guardians of “History,” they deny the possibility of fundamental disagreement about the boundaries of the field, instead representing those who challenge these boundaries as outsiders to history, as either ignorant or willfully destructive enemies. We have a recent example in Alan Kors’s hysterical claim (as reported in the New York Times in November 1988) that “the barbarians are in our midst.” “We need to fight them a good long time,” he said, in a display of masculine bravery. “Show them you are not afraid, they crumble.” These “barbarians” turn out to be those who advocate increased representation of women and minorities on faculties and in the curriculum. Their demands might constitute, for some, evidence of the wonders of democratic pluralism, but, for Kors and his colleagues, they are nothing less than a subversion of our national heritage and of the entire legacy of Western civilization.

In the “history” defended by the self-designated guardians of orthodoxy, boundaries are said to be permanent and rules unquestionable; challenges are not deemed legitimate, rather they are denied or repressed. A chaotic present and a disastrous future are counterposed to a nostalgic vision of an intact and uncontested intellectual world that we are losing or have already lost. This nostalgic vision presents the so-called orthodox view of history as the only “History” that has existed until the current “crisis.” It is a vision secured, moreover, not through concrete illustration or close examination of evidence but through negative contrast. In recent debates on curricular change, we have


5 My source is, as cited, the New York Times report on the conference. Alan Kors, in a personal correspondence to me (January 9, 1989), insists that the unedited tapes of the meeting show him to hold a different position from that reported in the Times. “The object of my criticism are overwhelmingly white and male,” he writes in his letter. He also claims to be against “group-identity,” “above all, in fact, racial and gender group-identity, as the basis for judgment or treatment of people.” I read that as a position to affirmative action, and that is how the Times report characterized it. The correction of the November 19 story, apparently elicited by Kors, does not change the point I make about his speech in this essay. See “Editors’ Note,” New York Times (February 6, 1898): 3.
heard again and again that the "traditional" curriculum is being discarded for new and faddish courses (on, among other things, the history of the civilizations of India or China). Lynn Cheney, the head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, has written that there are timeless truths "transcending accidents of class, race, and gender, [that] speak to us all." She implies that everyone always agreed on what these were until very recently, when for the first time knowledge has become "politicized." Similarly, Gertrude Himmelfarb's book title poses the "old" history—the "traditional" way history has presumably always been done—against the subversive and illegitimate "new."

These arguments insist that there is only one way to conceive of history, only one standpoint for the historian. Over the years, these kinds of monolithic conceptions have stressed continuity, moral values, the importance of the individual, and the example of law, government, and politics as the highest expression of "man's" reason in restraint of self-interest.7 If exclusive emphasis on Christianity ("which we may fairly say is to-day the strongest of any in its influence upon human history," as Simeon Baldwin put it in his presidential address to the AHA in 1906) has declined, the insistence on timeless moral "values" remains.8 Overt racist statements have disappeared—such as John Burgess's comment in 1902 that "a black skin means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason."9 But the racism implicit in some of today's assertions about the "nobility" and "superiority" of Western civilization persists.10

In the past, historians committed to a monolithic view also tended to focus on elites (those Goldwin Smith in his presidential address of 1904 referred to as "the leading members of the race"11), assuming that their experience embodied "man" at his best and that their power was the deserved result of higher intellect, manners, morals, and aesthetic taste. Until relatively recently, this elite position was taken to be the most compelling subject of history. I use the word subject in its grammatical sense and with double implications: to refer to those actors deemed historical agents and to historians, those who actively produce historical knowledge. At least until after World War II and in some cases until the 1960s, the prevailing description of the ideal historian bore remarkable similarity to the characterization of elites. It was as if only those who were of the elite (or who could manage to acquire their tastes and outlook) could stand high enough to command an unrestricted view of the whole past. All other views were deemed to be partial at best, interested at worst. The possibility of telling a coherent, unitary story seemed to rest on the preservation of the homogeneity of the

8 Simeon E. Baldwin, "Religion Still the Key to History," AHR, 12 (January 1907): 243.
profession. For some, this was a literal homogeneity of elite membership; for others, it was (and still is) a singular elite outlook that might be held by different kinds of people.

The description of the ideal historian has been offered at least since the 1920s in statements lamenting the degradation of the profession by the entry into it of non-elites. These laments differ in emphasis and detail, but they show a consistent preoccupation with setting the rules by which orthodoxy can be maintained. In 1926, John Spencer Bassett, then-secretary of the AHA, wrote of the loss of the “aesthetic sense” to history that accompanied the arrival of “persons who have sprung from the class that is accustomed to the plainer ways and thinking of the world.” “It would be untrue and also unkind to say that these persons do not make good teachers of their subjects . . . some of them show, despite their early lack of taste, remarkable grasp of its quality. But the majority take a long time to acquire it, and some never manage to reach it.”

In this, as in later discussions, the upper classes were synonymous with a white, Protestant establishment. Anti-Semitism, as well as anti-Catholicism, reigned in the historical profession. Peter Novick’s extensive and close reading of the papers of historians has turned up some telling documentation of the awareness of the prevalence of discrimination against “ethnics” in the 1920s and 1930s. A letter written on behalf of Oscar Handlin, for example, stated that “he has none of the offensive traits which some people associate with his race.” Another, supporting Bert Lowenberg’s application for a job said, “by temperament and spirit . . . [he] measures up to the whitest Gentiles I know.” And yet another avowed that Richard Leopold was “of course a Jew, but since he is a Princeton graduate, you may be reasonably certain he is not of the offensive type.” The point of these letters, of course, was that, despite their origins, the candidates had acquired the requisite perspective for a historian.

The discussion of the deterioration of professional standards caused by the entry of lower-class men continued into the postwar period unabated. George Pierson, chairman of Yale’s history department, wrote to President Griswold in 1957:

Apparently the subject of English still draws to a degree from the cultivated, professional, and well-to-do classes . . . By contrast, the subject of history seems to appeal on the whole to a lower social stratum . . . Far too few of our history candidates are sons of professional men; far too many list their parent’s occupation as janitor, watchman, salesman, grocer, pocketbook cutter, bookkeeper, railroad clerk, pharmacist, clothing cutter, cable tester, mechanic, general clerk, butter-and-egg jobber, and the like. One may be glad to see the sons of the lower occupations working upward . . . It may be flattering to be regarded as an elevator. But even the strongest elevator will break down if asked to lift too much weight.


Anxiety about the social origins of historians was anxiety not only about the elite status of the profession but also about the writing of history itself. This was clear in the presidential address to the AHA in 1962 by Carl Bridenbaugh. Bridenbaugh bemoaned “The Great Mutation” that had undermined the profession of history. Historians were no longer men who shared rural upbringings and the spiritual values that stemmed from the “common bond of Bible reading.” Instead, the profession was infected with the “virus of secularism,” and this was evident in the decline of manners and the end of “good taste” in the historical profession. Narrow specialists had replaced cultivated generalists, men with only book knowledge of life had replaced men of action. Worst of all, from Bridenbaugh’s point of view, was the erosion of “a common culture” that made possible true understanding of “the past.”

Today we must face the discouraging prospect that we all . . . have lost much of what . . . earlier generations possessed, the priceless asset of a shared culture . . . Furthermore, many of the younger practitioners of our craft, and those who are still apprentices, are products of lower middle class or foreign origins, and their emotions not infrequently get in the way of historical reconstructions. They find themselves in a very real sense outsiders on our past and feel themselves shut out. This is not their fault, but it is true. They have no experience to assist them, and the chasm between them and the Remote Past widens every hour.

Note Bridenbaugh’s assumption here that “our past”—that is the past designated as important by white, Protestant American men—is the only past worth considering as history. Children of lower-middle-class or foreign origins, he says, have “no experience” to help them understand this past. Bridenbaugh does not suggest that they have a different experience, or a different perspective on history; he cannot conceive that their experience constitutes history too, for that would undermine the supposed universality of his own view. Instead, he insists that there is one past (“our past”) and only one way to recount it. “What I fear is that the changes observant in the background and training of the present generation will make it impossible for them to communicate to and reconstruct the past for future generations.”

As a corrective to the situation, Bridenbaugh urged that graduate schools admit students only of “broad and ranging general culture,” those suitably educated by class as well as training. “We might as well revive the cry of the Covenanters at Tibbermore,” he said in a revealing metaphor, “Jesus, and no Quarter.”

Bridenbaugh’s attempt to disqualify members of the lower classes from the practice of history was framed as a defense of a universal, “true” story against misunderstanding by the ignorant. Yet the terms of his own discussion reveal that his notion of history was partial and particular. If it took a certain kind of experience to understand “our past,” was not that past then limited to certain kinds of people? Why was the story of those certain kinds of people, (“chaps,” Bridenbaugh calls them at one point) designated “history,” while that of others

---

was irrelevant for understanding the past? Did the lower middle classes have no experience that could count as history? Did the children of immigrants have no sense of a past? From Bridenbaugh's perspective, only elites were sufficiently educated and disinterested to understand "History," only their values and standards ought to be applied to the story of the past. Indeed, although the story was said to be universal and therefore accessible to all, Bridenbaugh believed that only elites were prepared to appreciate its full meaning. Bridenbaugh's exclusion of "outsiders" from the profession suggests that he thought his version of history could predominate only if it were protected from potential challengers, from those whose different positions might lead them to other definitions, other values, other histories. The politics of this speech, in other words, had not only to do with access to the profession but also with the enforcement of a certain view about the meaning of history itself.

The current defenders of "traditional" history have no explicit objection to the presence of people from many backgrounds in the ranks of historians; indeed, many of them come from diverse backgrounds themselves. But they do seek to enforce the orthodoxy of a single standpoint, a single vision of what counts as historical knowledge. It is in that way that I read Theodore Hamerow's critique of "specialization" in the profession. He argued that some of history's transformation since World War II has resulted from an influx of new kinds of historians: "While previously history had been a preserve of patricians who often played an important role in political or religious affairs, now it became an avenue of upward mobility for people of scholarly ability but plebian origin." These people of plebian origin are later described (from a point of view he attributed to the founders of the AHA) as professors with "swarthy complexions" and "strange-sounding Celtic, Latin, or Semitic names." Their presence itself is not corrupting, says Hamerow (in contrast to Bridenbaugh, who thought it was), but the pressure on them to publish and succeed has turned history from a leisured activity into a frenzied "pursuit of profit," from a profession of generalists to a career for specialists. For Hamerow, there is an explicit connection between an increased representation of historians of plebian origin and increased specialization in the profession. And I cannot help hearing in this and other condemnations of specialization (which, like diagnoses of crisis, echo through the records of the American Historical Association) deep anxiety about challenges to elite versions of history. In fact, I would like to suggest that discussions of specialization are often (not always, but often) objections to democratization— to the appearance of varieties of interpretation, varieties of histories, and historians of diverse philosophies, all of which threaten the uniformity, continuity, and homogeneity that orthodox historians have traditionally sought to impose.

The current conservative claim to defend "History-as-it-has-always-been-written" is belied by the history of the profession itself. For there have been

---

17 Theodore S. Hamerow, Reflections on History and Historians (Madison, Wis., 1987), 77.
18 Hamerow, Reflections, 122–23.
19 See examples in Novick: on the 1920s, That Noble Dream, 190; on Allan Nevins's attack on specialization, 195–96. See also Crane Brinton's presidential address, "Many Mansions," AHR. 49 (January 1964): 31.
recurring challenges to orthodoxy, repeated contests about the meaning of history by scholars the discipline has come to recognize as fully accredited members of the profession. One of these challenges, the one most relevant to contemporary debates, stressed discontinuity, the relativity of ideas and values, group identities and conflicts, and (what Frederick Jackson Turner referred to in his presidential address of 1910 as) "Social Forces in American History." Above all, perhaps, this outlook has stressed the historicity of historical knowledge itself. An understanding of "the United States of today," Turner told his fellow historians, "demands that we should rework our history from the new points of view afforded by the present." Two decades later, Carl Becker defined history as the meaning conferred on the past by the present, as "an artificial extension of memory," as "knowledge directed by purpose."

We are thus of that ancient and honorable company of wise men of the tribe, of bards and story-tellers and minstrels, of soothsayers and priests, to whom in successive ages has been entrusted the keeping of the useful myths. Let not the harmless, necessary word 'myth' put us out of countenance. In the history of history a myth is a once valid but now discarded version of the human story, as our now valid versions will in due course be relegated to the category of discarded myths.

From this sense of the transmutability of historical knowledge followed the observation that historians were neither omniscient nor capable of completely mastering the entire meaning of past events. Charles Beard's 1933 presidential address, a critique of the notion of history as a totalizing objective science, was called "Written History as an Act of Faith." And Becker titled his speech, given two years later, "Everyman His Own Historian." The implication of both, explicitly elaborated by Becker, was that "history" consisted of many stories, all partial, all constructed to explain something, to "derive a satisfactory meaning." "It should be a relief to us to renounce omniscience," Becker wrote, "to recognize that every generation, our own included, will, must inevitably, understand the past and anticipate the future in the light of its own restricted experience."

In the 1930s and 1940s, historians influenced by the outlooks of Turner, Becker, and Beard devoted a good deal of attention not only to generational differences in approaches to history but to differences of experience and historical understanding within generations as well. Regional histories had already begun to challenge earlier emphases on the overwhelming importance of the northeast, but labor history, black history, and women's history also began to be tentatively explored. (In fact, all were represented in a session on "The Common Man" at the American Historical Association meetings in 1940.) These topics also implicitly raised the question of the experience and standpoint

22 Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," 235.
of the historian: Could southerners write impartial history, it was asked. Could blacks overcome their "interested" position?

These questions were answered variously since historians who entertained so-called relativist ideas did not form a coherent school or group, nor were their political affiliations the same. They tended, however, to be less defensive about maintaining strict boundaries for history, more tolerant of philosophical disagreement. They might not like certain approaches to history, but they were less likely to condemn them as "not-history." In addition, they did not take the notion of guardianship of professional standards to mean enforcement of homogeneity. At the 1940 AHA meetings, a group of "democrats" managed to secure the nomination of the first woman for the presidency of the AHA, and many of these same people were responsible for urging boycotts of southern hotels as meeting sites because these hotels refused to accept black guests. Writing in 1953, Howard K. Beale condemned discrimination in the AHA against "Negroes, Jews, Catholics, women, and persons not 'gentlemen.'" 24 For him, there was a connection between democratizing the profession and loosening the hold of the guardians of orthodox history.

Although there were important differences among critics of prevailing practices, they were usually grouped together by the defenders of orthodoxy who sought to define them all as heretics, while singling out a few for particularly harsh (and exemplary) attack. 25 Beard and Becker were accused of "treason against the profession," of promoting "defeatist" views that would corrupt the young, and of "unprofessional" conduct. 26 Peter Novick cited a review of Becker's essays in 1935 that suggested that Becker was not a historian because his approach was "almost incompatible with usual historical procedure." "Even in the studies which are most distinctively historical... he fails to show the conventional regard for events narrated in sequence." Another reviewer reminded his readers that Becker was "not a 'professional' historian... He never took seriously the scholar's paraphernalia of tools, or dug so intently among the dead facts that they came alive... the best of professional historians, who do their dissecting more deeply... do not end in Mr. Becker's disillusionment." 27 Critics of Beard's opposition to American involvement in World War II linked his political views to his historical philosophy. Samuel Eliot Morrison found the same connection between Beard's anti-interventionism and "Written History as an Act of Faith" as there was between "Adolf Hitler's acts after 1933 [and] Mein Kampf." And Oscar Handlin delivered the final disciplinary excommunication after Beard's death. Handlin suggested that Beard was not really a historian:

“He had no students . . .; “His influence upon subsequent scholarship was slight.”28

There is a similar attack being launched today against all kinds of “new” history, however old some of its topics and epistemological positions. Gertrude Himmelfarb’s polemic for this forum is a good example of the strategy. She lumps together in a single category of “deconstruction” all kinds of different approaches to history—those influenced by cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, behaviorism, feminism, structuralism, and poststructuralism—even though few of these have any connection to deconstruction at all. Even if they do not know it, she warns, historians taking these approaches are all “deconstructionists.” She caricatures deconstruction as anarchy, rather than dealing with its philosophical analyses of language and metaphysics.29 And she suggests that the arrival of “deconstruction” has removed “truth” as a ground for history, implying (wrongly) that debates about objectivity and relativism have never before existed among historians. In order to protect her particular position, Himmelfarb equates it with “history-as-it-has-always-been-written,” but this requires repressing a good deal of the record of the past.

It also requires ignoring the diverse positions represented by the “new” history. Two of these positions are of particular concern these days. One has to do with the pluralization of the subject of history; the other with epistemology or philosophies of history. The multiplication of subjects and stories has necessarily raised epistemological questions, but not all historians who write women’s history or African-American history or gay history or labor history answer those questions in the same way. Indeed, within any of these areas, there is disagreement among historians about what interpretive strategies to employ, the possibility of being objective, and the nature of the relationship between the historian and the subjects he or she writes about.30 Conservatives have conflated all these differences into a single enemy because, in one way or another, they pose critical challenges to an increasingly embattled elitist, monolithic, and unitary conception.

The pluralization of the subject of history challenges the notion, dear to Himmelfarb and her associates, that “man” can be studied through a focus on elites. Instead, attention to women, blacks, and other Others demonstrates that history consists of many irreconcilable stories. Any master narrative—the single story of the rise of American democracy or Western civilization—is shown to be not only incomplete but impossible of completion in the terms it has been


30 Evidence of disagreement abounds in journal articles and book reviews especially. To follow controversies in women’s history, to take only one example, one could consult recent issues of Signs, Feminist Studies, and The Women’s Review of Books.
written. For those master narratives have been based on the forcible exclusion of Others' stories. They are justifications through teleology of the outcomes of political struggles, stories which in their telling legitimize the actions of those who have shaped laws, constitutions, and governments—"official stories."

The proliferation of Others' histories has not so much "politicized" the discipline (a charge usually leveled by the defenders of orthodoxy) as it has exposed the politics by which one particular viewpoint established its predominance. As such, it has raised questions about difference and power: how have differences among groups been constructed to organize and legitimize social and economic distinctions? How has the exclusion of some stories from the record of the past perpetuated inequalities based on attributions of difference? What is the connection between contemporary social hierarchy and measures of importance in historical writing? Answers to these questions call attention to the interested nature of history writing and undermine claims by orthodox historians that there is only one right way to tell a story, that their history is but a transcription of how things really happened in the past.

The notion that history is written by "the historian" has been pluralized as well; references to histories and historians indicate the multiple and heterogeneous nature of the profession. They also refuse the assimilation of all these different types into a singular position or point of view. This means that members of organizations like the AHA must accept the fact that professions are not homogeneous bodies but are made up of diverse constituencies contending for power and influence. ("Politics" is, then, not the antithesis of professionalism but its expression.) And it means, as well, that there is no single standpoint we can expect from historians. How then do we understand the relationship between the historian's identity and the group he or she writes about? Do women have a privileged relationship to women's history? Can whites write black history? Is "orientalism" an inevitable feature of First World accounts of the Third World? Is history a pluralist enterprise in which any assertion is acceptable, in which "anything goes?"

These questions underscore the fact that history is an interpretive practice, not an objective, neutral science. To maintain this does not signal the abandonment of all standards; acknowledging that history is an interpretive practice does not imply that "anything goes." Rather, it assumes that discursive communities (in this case, of historians) share a commitment to accuracy and to procedures of verification and documentation.  

31 These are not, however, invariant but are subject to shifts and changes. It also acknowledges that the meanings attributed to events of the past always vary, that the knowledge we produce is contextual, relative, open to revision and debate, and never absolute.  

32 Natalie Zemon Davis offers an eloquent discussion of history as an interpretive practice in ""On the Lame,"

historical inquiry is renewed and new lines of investigation opened precisely through such moments of intense debate.

Discussions of interpretation pose choices about which procedures, methods, and theories historians should rely on, and they also introduce questions about the nature and extent of the historian’s own mastery. The most radical conclusions drawn about mastery are not far from Becker’s call to “renounce omniscience,” although today they rely on poststructuralist theories of “the subject.” These theories link the writing of history to the construction of a continuous, centered “self”—the “self” of Western subjects and the “self” of the historian. They suggest that claims to mastery and objective knowledge are part of the ideological work of subject constitution. And they insist strongly on the need for historians to reflect critically on the effects of their writing and to recognize the partial and relative standing of any work they produce.

Among the historians Himmelfarb lumps together as “deconstructionists,” there is enormous debate on the question of “the subject.” Indeed, I would say that most historians of “Others” are dubious about critiques of the subject and hostile to poststructuralist theory generally. They stress instead the need to depict the “agency” of individuals and groups and refuse the kind of critical reflexivity engaged in by many more literary scholars. Their stance is perfectly consistent with the rules of the discipline; it is that of interpreters of transparent evidence, scholars reporting on material they have dispassionately contemplated. Still, they attract the animus of conservatives, who would place them outside canonical history. Why?

I think that engagement in a democratized historical practice calls into question orthodox notions of objective mastery by fragmenting historical vision into conflicting accounts of what happened in the past. There is no denying the partiality and the particularity of the stories, and, by extension, of all stories historians tell. It is finally the plurality of stories and of the subjects of those stories, as well as the lack of any single central narrative that conservatives find intolerable because it undermines the legitimacy of their quest for dominance. Their defense of their subject—elites in the past, their own hegemony in the present—is a repudiation of the possibility of contest and conflicting interpretation, a refusal of change, and a rejection of the possibility for what I would call democratic history.

My version of democratic history would accept the facts that there will always be a plurality of stories, that telling them involves contests about power and knowledge, and that the historian’s mastery is necessarily partial. These statements raise difficult, but not insoluble, questions for the discipline: If the many different stories of the past, based on different historical experiences, are indeed irreconcilable, is there nonetheless a way to think coherently and systematically about the past? What are the contemporary social and political implications of

seeking such coherence? How can we maintain a disciplinary organization, with some commitment to shared standards and at the same time tolerate diversity in membership and profound differences in method, philosophy, and interpretation? What would a genuinely democratic history look like?

These questions are answerable, but only if we accept the notion that history itself is a changing discipline—as it surely is and always has been. They are questions that have opened for some of us far-reaching and enormously creative inquiries. They engage with some of the major philosophical debates of our age; indeed, they are an integral aspect of those debates. In that sense, they are part of the inevitable renewal of history in relation to contemporary life. Those who would preserve orthodoxy against this renewal threaten the vitality of history. Those who pose critical challenges are not enemies but agents of renewal and change. Those who would write “politics” out of professional life misunderstand the processes by which all knowledge, including knowledge of history, has been produced. Those who expect moments of change to be comfortable and free of conflict have not learned their history.