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Progress in Historical Studies

Everyone with their feet on the ground admits that in the physical sciences there has been progress. One can debate the niceties. The hard rock is that our ability to predict and control natural events and processes is greater now than it has ever been. And there has been astonishing technological fallout.

What about in historical studies? Has there been progress there? Surely in one way: We're continually learning more about the past. But more knowledge does not necessarily mean more understanding. And without more understanding it is hard to see how there could have been meaningful progress.

What would it take for us now to have more understanding of the past? Not necessarily that some later interpretations are better overall than all earlier ones. Rather, just this: That on the basis of a set of interpretations that includes some later ones, we can understand the past better than on the basis of any set of interpretations that includes only earlier ones. So much for the "more" in "more understanding." What would it take for there to be more understanding? Answering this question is one of my two main objectives in the present paper. The other is determining, in the case of one interpretational controversy, whether there has been progress in historical studies. So, what would it take for there to be progress in historical studies? Just this: That there is now more understanding of the past.

Historical studies are not in the prediction and control business. There is no technological fallout. So, what many have looked for as evidence of progress is interpretational convergence. Failing to find that, and finding instead what can look like fragmentation that has spun out of control, some have despaired. Peter Novick is a case in point. He said that as of the 1980s it was "impossible" in historical studies to locate "scholarly consensus" and that "convergence on anything" was "out of the question." What one found instead, he said, was "either factional polarization or fragmented chaos which made factionalism seem, by comparison, like a kind of order." "As a broad community of discourse, as a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes," he continued, "the discipline of

history had ceased to exist." The situation, he concluded darkly, was "as described in the last verse of the Book of Judges: 'In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes'."[1]

I take a much more optimistic view. In my opinion, in virtually every major, long-standing interpretational controversy in historical studies there has been significant progress: We not only know more now, we understand better. Obviously I cannot here (perhaps, not anywhere) defend such a global claim. I turn, then, to the task of defending it in the case of just one interpretational controversy - that over the American Revolution.

I: The American Revolution

Whig interpretations came first; then Imperialist interpretations; then Progressive interpretations; then Neo-Whig interpretations; finally, the current mélange of contemporary perspectives, so mixed that the old Whig-Progressive dichotomy, so long a staple of American historiography, may now be obsolete. Since there is so much ground to cover I shall have to be ruthlessly schematic.

David Ramsay, a participant-observer, and then, later, George Bancroft are the quintessential Whig historians. For present purposes, five things about their interpretations are important: they told the story of the Revolution only from one point of view, that of the revolutionary elite; they accepted as the reasons for the Revolution the reasons this elite gave for revolting (hence, they accepted that the Revolution was fought primarily over principles); they structured their accounts to justify the colonists' break with Britain; they wrote about the past as if it were an anticipation of the present; and, finally, they embedded all of colonial history, including the break with Britain, into a grand story of human progress, thereby providing Americans with a national identity they could embrace with pride.

In Ramsay's view, the colonists revolted so that they could be free to determine their own destinies.[2] His focus was on explaining, first, how they came to want their freedom and, second, how a succession of events allowed them to get it. In his view, the colonists were disposed to want their freedom from the beginning, and primarily for two reasons: Puritanism, in particular, and Protestantism, in general, encouraged them to oppose authority and "nurtured a love for liberty"; and the prerogatives "of royalty and dependence on the Mother Country were but feebly impressed" on the colonists, who "grew up in a belief, that their local assemblies stood in the same relation to them, as the Parliament of Great Britain to the inhabitants of that island." Why "but feebly impressed"? Because prior to the 1760s England had given the colonists "full liberty to

govern themselves by such laws as the local legislatures thought necessary and left their trade open to every individual in her dominions." Nevertheless, according to Ramsay, in the pre-Revolutionary period the benefits to the colonists of imperial rule outweighed its disadvantages and problems between England and the colonies were minor. It was the Stamp Act, he said, that changed this happy state of affairs; and it was the subsequent publication of Common Sense that solidified the change.

The Stamp Act led the colonists to view England as more dependent on them "for purchasing her manufacturers" than they were on England "for protection and the administration of civil government." It also inspired the colonial ideal of no taxation without representation. This new view and ideal, he said, are what got the colonists to consider independence in the first place. Still, in his opinion, as late as the Battle of Lexington revolution was not inevitable. It became inevitable, he said, when Thomas Paine gave coherent expression to so many of "the feelings and sentiments of the people," convincing thousands "to approve and long for a separation from the Mother Country" even though just a few months before they would have viewed that prospect with horror. Subsequently one English provocation after another called forth an understandable and appropriate colonial response. The result was the Revolution.

Bancroft, undoubtably the most authoritative of the second generation of Whig historians, gave a similar account.[3] He stressed even more strongly the continuous presence and importance of the colonists' desire for freedom. This desire, he said, was evident as early as 1607, in Jamestown, and then expressed itself regularly throughout the troubled period of the 1760s and 70s. Bancroft was especially blatant about writing as if the past were an anticipation of the present. For instance, he not only said he "dwelt at considerable length" on the seventeenth century "because it contains the germ of our institutions" but even "titled the chapter describing the early English voyages to North America, including the Roanoke settlement in the 1580s, 'England Takes Possession of the United States'."[4] Moreover, in his view, it was not, fundamentally, that events, over time, gave birth to the revolutionary ideology as it was that a cosmic plan found a way to express itself in events. He claimed that God caused the colonists to desire freedom and that the "tyrannical George III," by impeding satisfaction of this desire, forced them to revolt. In his view, the whole scenario was somehow written in the stars: the Revolution was part of "the grand design of Providence" and the colonists were God’s chosen people; in framing the Constitution the founding fathers achieved an important milestone in humanity's march toward freedom and justice.

As these brief sketches indicate, Whig historians interpreted the Revolution in ways that were monolithic, partisan, and elitist. They not only explained the Revolution from a single point of view but from the very one the Revolutionary leaders themselves adopted to justify it. They ignored how unfolding events were viewed and experienced by the British; and when they did consider this they considered it only from the perspective of the rebellious colonists. They even minimized differences among the revolutionaries. Ramsay, for instance, conceded that colonists who were in different socio-economic circumstances or lived in different regions had different motives to revolt - only the merchants were driven by fear of losing markets - but he dismissed these differences as but "dust in the balance."[5] He and Bancroft ignored how loyalists viewed and experienced the Revolution and, of course, how the dispossessed (women, the lower classes, natives, slaves) viewed and experienced anything. They not only focused almost exclusively on the reasons the revolutionaries gave for revolting but took these at face value, ignoring the possibility that underlying socio-economic factors gave rise to these reasons or otherwise played an important role in bringing about the Revolution. Finally, they provided an identity-nourishing framework for narrating the Revolution, as well as subsequent American history, that masked discrimination and marginalization of various sorts. As a consequence, their interpretations were, in essence, thinly veiled attempts to justify the Revolution and, thus, glorify America, sometimes, as we have seen, even to the extreme of identifying the Revolutionaries as God's chosen people. Americans craved (and still crave) a national identity of which they could (can) be proud. For many Americans, then and now, Whig historians delivered one.

Enter the Imperialists. In the half-century since Bancroft had published, the discipline of history had become the province of professionals. Led by Charles Andrews, Herbert Osgood, and George Beer, and spurred on by improved Anglo-American relations, Imperialist interpretations of the Revolution came into vogue early in the twentieth century. As the irascible Andrews put it, self-servingly but nevertheless correctly, in the previous fifty years historians had developed "higher canons of criticism and interpretation, better balanced judgments, and more rational methods of presentation."[6] That assessment led Andrews, whose higher canons could still fire low, to characterize Bancroft's work as "nothing less than a crime against historical truth."[7]

Somewhat ironically, in view of such attitudes, one of the Imperialists' important innovations was to introduce a new ideal of objectivity-as-impartiality. In contrast to the Whigs, they told the story of the Revolution as much or more from the point of view of

British administrators as from that of the colonists. They put primary explanatory importance not on issues of principle and ideology but, rather, on acquisitiveness or on impersonal underlying sources of conflict. And they tended either to distribute blame for the Revolution evenly or to absolve everyone from blame.

Andrews, for instance, was heavily influenced by his view that revolutions in general never come about suddenly but instead were the result of underlying and "almost invisible factors and forces" which influence and often determine human action.[8] In the case of the American Revolution, he said, these underlying factors made British officials inflexibly committed to keeping the colonies dependent and the colonists unyielding in their demands for more self-government, thereby making conflict inevitable. In his view, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, British officials saw the colonies mainly as a source of raw materials; later, and increasingly, they saw them as a market for British goods. Throughout this initial period, he said, England's greatest need in relation to the colonies was to preserve a mercantilist system. But England's ability to control the colonies was undermined by developments at home, most notably, by the Glorious Revolution of 1688. These decreased the power of the crown and created instability and confusion in administrative agencies, particularly in the Board of Trade, which were responsible for overseeing the colonies.

In Andrews' view, until the mid-seventeenth century, the colonists, rather than waiting for the right time to break away from the mother country, had adapted themselves comfortably to the requirements and advantages of the British system and were relatively happy with their subordinate status. However, in 1763, things changed. In fighting the Seven Years War, England had incurred a huge debt and acquired vast new territory that would cost large sums of money to administer. England thus wanted a new relationship with the colonies, which included having them pay the war debt. So, England replaced the earlier "mercantilist" framework, which was concerned primarily with the maintenance of commerce, with an "imperialist" one, which was concerned with the control of territory. As part of this change, England moved beyond imposing commercial regulations to imposing direct taxation, initially, in the 1760s, through the Stamp and Townsend Acts, which, Andrews said, were "the first cause of the eventual rupture" between England and the colonies. The subsequent Tea Act, he claimed, was the point-of-no-return. In opposing it, colonial moderates joined with radicals in one unified grievance against the crown**.**

Did the advent of Imperialist interpretations spell progress for historical understanding? Clearly it did, though not necessarily because Imperialist

interpretations of the Revolution were better overall than Whig interpretations. It was enough to spell progress that Imperialist interpretations brought with them other advances: they were based on a more sophisticated evaluation of evidence; they counterbalanced Whig overemphasis on ideology and diplomatic developments by calling attention to underlying social and economic realities; they were less metaphysically speculative; they were more impartial; and - the clincher - they afforded students of the Revolution an opportunity to view it not only from the perspective of the Revolutionaries but also from that of British administrators. As one historian later remarked, "By the late 1920s no serious student of Early American history could doubt that the British had, or at least thought they had, good reasons for undertaking the measures they did."[9] In addition, on the matter of writing about the past as if it were an anticipation of the present, Imperialists did somewhat better than Whigs had done. Andrews, for instance, cautioned that colonial American history "should be interpreted in the light, not of the democracy that was to come years later, but of the ideas and practices regarding colonization that were in vogue in Great Britain at the time."[10] But, in Osgood's view, the colonial period was first of all "a period of origins."[11] On balance, however, Imperialist historians not only offered an illuminating alternative interpretation of the Revolution but, in effect, irreversibly changed the rules of the game. Subsequently Neo-Whig historians might still praise the original Whig view.[12] But the Imperialists had expanded irreversibly the range of causal influences and perspectives on the Revolution that henceforth historians of every persuasion (including Neo-Whigs) would have to consider. However, before historians would retrieve what was valuable in Whig interpretations they had to depart from them even further, in large part because both Whigs and Imperialists shared a common assumption that cried out to be questioned. Both assumed that there was such a thing as <u>the</u> American point of view.

Enter the Progressives. In the view of historians such as Carl Becker, Charles Beard and Arthur Schlesinger, Sr, the Revolution was a struggle not only against England but also for power within America; as Becker famously put it, it was a struggle "not only about home rule but also about who should rule at home."[13] In explaining this struggle, Progressives highlighted the importance of competition among socio-economic classes in the colonies, in the process assuming (and sometimes arguing) that ideology and appeals to principle should not be taken at face value but rather as expressive of something deeper. They tended to claim that this deeper thing was economic self-interest.

Beard's influence, even though he did not focus on the Revolution per se, was

enormous. He tried to show that the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was designed to protect the economic interests of the delegates to it, most of whom were lawyers with an economic stake in the outcome of their work in Philadelphia. He wrote that these delegates "knew through their personal experiences in economic affairs the precise results which the new government that they were setting up was destined to attain" and, thus, built it on "the only foundation which could be stable: [the] fundamental economic interests [of themselves and their classes]."[14] Beard later quipped that the essence of his view was that "economics explained the mostest."[15] Actually the essence it was that "greed explained the mostest."

In contrast to Beard, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr, did focus on the Revolution. In his account of it, he emphasized distinctions among the life-styles, attitudes, and interests of the colonists in three regions: the coastal area from New Hampshire to Pennsylvania, the tidewater region from Maryland to Georgia, and the western settlements.[16] The history of the Revolution, he said, "is the story of the reaction of these three geographical sections to the successive acts of the British government and of their interaction upon each other." For instance, he claimed that merchants in the northeastern corridor were the most economically active of any group in the three regions and that the new Imperial program seriously interfered with their customary trading operations. From 1764 to 74, he said, merchants fought the program, not to achieve independence, which they thought would hurt them economically, but to restore the old system of trade and commerce. In the Southern coastal area, on the other hand, the economy was centered on farming. Plantation owners there had a long tradition of relative self-rule but had been frustrated by their failure to overcome Royal vetoes in passing certain bankruptcy acts, and so were disposed to counter intrusive Imperial laws. Finally, the back-country settlers, who had not only been left out of the political process altogether but had experienced unjust taxation, "brought to the controversy a moral conviction and bold philosophy which gave great impetus to the agitation for independence." Thus, central to Schlesinger's interpretation was his rejection of the assumption that there was "an American point of view." "How," he asked, "could a people who for ten years were not in agreement among themselves as to their aims and aspirations, be said to possess a common political philosophy?" To understand a colonist's views, he said, one needs to know to which class and geographical area he belonged.

According to Schlesinger it was the passing of the Stamp Act that first rallied the merchants and planters against Britain, and it was the plan to station troops in the

colonies that convinced colonists in general that England was out to subdue them. He said the colonists' responses of non-importation and mostly lower class mob activity benefited only the merchants. However, by 1766, the merchants, still viewing themselves as the class whose interests were "chiefly imperiled," were beginning to see that inciting mob activity had brought "disruptive forces" to the surface. They began to channel their protests through peaceful means, such as petitions and a campaign for corrective legislation. Subsequently control of the situation got away from the merchants. After 1770 they tended to give up politics for business and, by 1773, when Britain tried to enforce the Tea Act, they were left out of the organized resistance altogether. In Schlesinger's view, "the Boston Tea Party marked a turning point in the course of events"; it was regarded by merchants and moderates in both countries as lawless destruction of private property and an act of wanton defiance which no self-respecting government could wisely ignore." He claimed that after the imposition of severe disciplinary measures against the colonists, moderates, who wanted the colonies to pay for the tea in the hopes of reuniting with the British, and radicals, who opposed compromise and demanded that England recognize the right of the colonies to home rule, vied with each other to control the colonial response. In 1774, when the First Continental Congress convened, moderates were outnumbered; radicals and farmers, after years of being left out of representative government, finally prevailed. The merchants either joined in the cause of the lower classes or became Tories.

Schlesinger claimed that, in defending their actions, the colonists tended "to retreat from one strategic principle to another." For instance, when they abandoned basing "their liberties on charter grants, they appealed to their constitutional rights as Englishmen; and when that position became untenable, they invoked the doctrine of the rights of man." Such strategically motivated vacillation, he said, justified his claim that the colonists' declarations of political principle and abstract rights were insincere. In his view, the Revolution, rather than being about principles and rights, was simply "the refusal of a self-reliant people to permit their natural and normal energies to be confined against their will, whether by an irresponsible imperial government or by the ruling minorities in their midst."

Did Progressive interpretations contribute to progress? Surely they did, for at least three reasons: first, in important respects the Progressives took a more discriminating view of colonial life than had earlier historians and thus corrected for a number of imbalances and oversights; second, they highlighted the importance of considering self-interest as a motivating force; and, third, they introduced the

illuminating idea that even apart from considerations of self-interest, reasons should not simply be taken at face value since they may express a more explanatory underlying reality. Yet, the Progressives went astray by modeling their interpretations of the American Revolution too closely on then extant interpretations of the French Revolution, thereby, overestimating both poverty in the colonies and also the existence and rigidity of class structure. And, in dismissing out of hand virtually all appeals to ideology and principle as mere rationalization, they made a big, insufficiently justified assumption.

Enter the Neo-Whigs, but not just them. Prior to the early 1960s one school of interpretation at a time was at the forefront of interpretational and methodological progress. Since the 1960s progress has occurred simultaneously on several interrelated fronts, including the development of Neo-Whig interpretations, the enormously influential rise of social history, the closely related development of Neo-Progressive interpretations, and, more recently, the rise of the history of culture (or mentalité). Nevertheless, by the mid-1950s an emerging group of Neo-Whigs, including Robert Brown, Forrest McDonald, and Daniel Boorstin, had become dissatisfied with the "deterministic interpretations" of the Progressives, claiming that the Progressives had exaggerated the rigidity of class divisions in colonial America and also the oppression and exclusion from politics of the lower classes.[17] To these historians, and eventually to most, the Progressive framework was no longer credible. Partly as a consequence, they again interpreted the Revolution primarily as a dispute over constitutional liberties, in the process returning the focus of attention onto individual actions and events and retreating from the view that colonial aristocrats were merely attempting to secure their own selfish, economic interests and thereby thwart democracy. These Neo-Whigs thus reiterated something like the original Whig view - and in the case of an historian like Oliver Dickerson, something very much like it.[18] They claimed that the founding fathers were moved to action importantly by ideology, and even more basically, as Bernard Bailyn would later put it, by "fear of a comprehensive conspiracy against liberty throughout the English-speaking world - a conspiracy believed to be nourished in corruption, and of which, it was felt, oppression in America was only the most immediately visible part."[19]

However, most Neo-Whigs also made important concessions to the Progressives, especially by looking more closely at ways in which the colonists' ideology and behavior was an expression of evolving social conditions. As Joyce Appleby recently put it, "Freed from the Progressives' preoccupation with conflict,"

these historians "probed for the footings of social stability in general and asked how American conditions had promoted cooperation, coherence, and consensus." By investigating agricultural practices, inheritance patterns, and the like, they, in the first instance, "took advantage of the wealth of records in New England towns" and thereby "drew a picture of the social dynamics of consensus," documenting "as never before the efforts of settlers to knit themselves into tight little communitarian worlds" and the "pivotal importance of the family." More importantly, they "demonstrated the appeal of the colonial era in its own right, disconnected from the story of the American nation that was to come."[20]

But the core of the old story line persisted, often in a remarkably traditional form, even as it was modified to accommodate the emerging new concern with society and culture. For instance, according to Edmund Morgan's Neo-Whig interpretation, until 1764 the colonists were content with their role in the British empire and tended even to admire and identify with the British.[21] The trouble, he said, began in 1764. The war against the French in North America, which had just been successfully concluded, cost Britain huge sums and left it with vast new territories to administer. To produce revenue, Parliament passed various taxes which provoked the oft-noted colonial responses. Such protests, Morgan said, "inaugurated the Americans' search for principles." In his view, colonial leaders then "found it easy to state the one thing they were certain Parliament could not do: tax people who were not represented in it." The colonists denied that they were "virtually represented" and rejected the prospect of actual representation in Parliament on the grounds that their distance from it made that impractical. The authority to tax them, they said, "was reserved exclusively to assemblies of their own elected representatives."

In Morgan's view, in 1766, when the Stamp Act was repealed, it looked as though things would return to normal. However, a series of new Parliamentary acts and colonial responses led, in 1768, to the arrival of British troops in the colonies, followed, two years later, by the Boston Massacre and subsequently, in spite of Parliamentary concessions, by the Boston Tea Party. Parliament then quickly passed the Coercive Acts, in response to which, in 1774, the First Continental Congress met at Philadelphia. In Morgan's view, in such a step-by-step progression, the demand for complete independence was continually strengthened, nourished by the changing circumstances of life in the colonies, by the provocation of events, and by the continual and relatively consistent development of Constitutional ideals.

In making this case, Morgan cast his evidential nets more widely than had the

traditional Whigs. He also read at least the ideological evidence more carefully than either Whigs or Progressives had read it, in the process helping to create a new and higher standard for assessing ideological evidence. For instance, he pointed out that Beard, in support of his view that Roger Sherman "believed in reducing the popular influence in the new government to the minimum," had cited as evidence various remarks Sherman had made, such as that he was "opposed to the election [of members of the national legislature] by the people," insisting that it ought to be by the state legislatures, and that the people "immediately should have as little to do as may be about the government." But Morgan then faulted Beard for ignoring other things Sherman said and did. For instance, "on June 4, four days after the speech Beard quoted, Sherman was against giving the President a veto power, thus thwarting "the will of the whole," since "no one man could be found so far above all the rest in wisdom." And, on June 21, Sherman "argued again for election of the House of Representatives by the state legislatures, but after election by the people had been decided upon, spoke for annual elections as against triennial, because he thought 'the representatives ought to return home and mix with the people'."[22]

Bernard Bailyn also emphasized the colonists' devotion to constitutional principles, claiming that their ideology was formulated in pamphlets a decade before independence.[23] In these Bailyn detected the influence on colonial thought of a group of eighteenth century "radical publicists and opposition politicians in England," who carried forward into the eighteenth century "the peculiar strain of anti-authoritarianism bred in the upheaval of the English Civil War." These radicals, he said, spoke of excessive corruption in English government, which showed itself "in the adroit manipulation of Parliament by a power-hungry ministry, and more generally in the self-indulgence, effemenizing luxury, and gluttonous pursuit of gain of a generation sunk in new and unaccustomed wealth."

In Bailyn's view, colonial writers identified with these radicals and, after 1763, drew heavily upon their ready made arguments to formulate their own indictment of British rule. He said, for instance, that because of their commitment to the ideology of these radicals "it was not so much the physical threat of the [arrival in October, 1768, of British] troops [in Boston] that affected the attitudes of the Bostonians" but, rather, what they took to be "the bearing their arrival had on the likely tendency of events." He said that the colonists interpreted these actual events from "the perspective of Trenchard’s famous tracts on standing armies" and "the vast derivative literature on the subject that flowed from the English debates of the 1690’s." From this perspective, he said, the

British troops "were not simply soldiers assembled for police duties; they were precisely what history had proved over and over again to be prime movers of the process by which unwary nations lose 'that precious jewel, liberty'." Bailyn, thus, argued that more important for the Revolution than social change in the colonies were changes in the colonists' perception of government and its function. The Revolution, he claimed, was primarily the result of the colonists' "thinking through" certain fundamental concepts and, then, of their acting on their reflections.

However, in later writings, Bailyn would downplay the suggested implication of his earlier work that there was a causal progression from "formal discourse" to "articulated belief," to political action. Now he claimed that formal discourse, such as is found in the phamplets, was merely implicit "in the responses of the colonists" and could neither "form the immediate instrumental grasp of their minds" nor "explain the triggering of the insurrection."[24] Thus, rather than a direct link between the formal discourse of the pamphleteers and the political action of the colonists, the link was now said to be primarily between the previously unarticulated attitudes and values to which the British pamphleteers had given expression and the "shifting patterns of values, attitudes, hopes, fears, and opinions" of the colonial Americans. "It is in these terms," Bailyn concluded, "that ideas - not disembodied abstractions . . . but the integrated set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and responses that had evolved through a century and a half of Anglo-American history - may be understood to have lain at the heart of the Revolutionary outbreak and to have shaped its outcome and consequences."

A second major arena of development has been the spectacular rise of social history, which since the 1960s has been the major growth area in historical studies of early America. Not a school of interpretation but a social science oriented approach to previously ignored data, social history has dislocated much of what historians of all persuasions had earlier thought about the Revolution, due in large part to the sheer quantity of new knowledge social historians have produced, much of it about people - the poor, women, slaves, and natives - that historians previously had neglected. For decades this new information was simply more than historians could integrate into their larger interpretive schemes.[25] In addition, by comparison with other approaches to early American history, social historians often addressed the past less as an anticipation of the present and more on its own terms. And they developed and exploited far more than most other historians had done social science oriented methodologies. For instance, by examining public records, say, of births, marriages, deaths, wills, taxes, and land transfers they reconstructed the immediate personal

frameworks within which ordinary people lived. Similarly, by using ethnological methods, historians of culture, who followed quickly on the heals of social historians, attempted to reveal the inner perspectives of North American natives as well as of those Africans who exported their traditions to North America with the slaves.[26] Moreover, in the view of some historians, in its totality the new information collected by social and cultural historians is virtually "inassimilable into any account written to celebrate the nation's accomplishments," perhaps even into any sort of "narrative governed by optimism and progress."[27]

The work of social historians has been corrosive of earlier interpretations in other ways as well. By attending to culture as a source of meaning, by substituting for the older focus on exceptional events, ideas, and men a new one on social mechanisms for distributing such things as power, authority and respect, and by freeing historians of early America from interpretations that took the project of nation-building as their focus and, thus, allowing them to reconfigure the colonies as part of western Europe, social historians tended to see colonial America as composed of "early modern communities." Colonial America, thus, became a testing ground "for a battery of intriguing hypotheses about social change." Previously, when "ordinary people had been studied" it had been "without social scientific models that linked their lives to the emergence of capitalism and the transformation of society"; now the new techniques offered historians "a way to move beyond anecdote to the structural features of society."[28] But not <u>just</u> beyond anecdote. By using modern statistical and quantitative techniques social historians have been able to address previously neglected developments "that took place, so to speak, over the heads of the historical participants" and were "unknown to contemporaries" and, thereby, to develop "the social viewpoint," that is, "a conception of society itself as the organizing theme of their history."[29]

It is hard to say how much of the new social history deserves to be called "Neo-Progressive." E.P. Thompson's Marxist-oriented <u>The Making of the English Working Class</u>, with its focus on the "lived experience" and agency of those at the bottom of society, has been a potent source of inspiration; in Novick's view, "no work in European history ever so profoundly and so rapidly influenced so many American historians."[30] In any case, in the United States, several historians who might, perhaps misleadingly, be labeled Neo-Progressives have emerged. Rather than trying to replace Neo-Whig interpretations with spruced-up Progressive ones, these historians, for the most part, have simply highlighted the importance of lower-class perspectives and patterns of

living. For instance, whereas Bailyn and Morgan had suggested that among free whites, poverty was unknown in colonial America and hence that "social strains" generated by poverty were not among the causes of the Revolution, Gary Nash claimed to have found, in tax records, poor relief, and probate, abundant evidence of poverty in colonial times.[31] According to Nash, the Neo-Whigs need to explain this evidence. In addition, he said, the Neo-Whigs have to attend to a "popular ideology" of the artisans, which "resonated most strongly within the middle and lower strata of society and went far beyond constitutional rights to a discussion of the proper distribution of wealth and power in the social system." Nash claimed that "it was this popular ideology that undergirded the politicization of the artisan and laboring classes in the cities and justified the dynamic role they assumed in the urban political process in the closing decades of the colonial period." Jesse Lemisch has argued similarly.[32] According to him, when Bailyn said that the views of the English opposition influenced American views, we're entitled to know which Americans he had in mind. The answer, Lemisch said, is that Bailyn had in mind "informed Americans," especially certain pamphleteers whose work he collected and analyzed. But what, Lemisch asked, about the rest?

Others have voiced similar concerns, while at the same time calling for a more discriminating view even of elite ideology. Marc Egnal, for instance, conceded that the traditional Progressive view "takes a narrow, deterministic view of human behavior" and that a lower class struggle against Britain and a conspiratorial role on the part of the merchants and planters is "doubtful."[33] He also conceded that the colonists' ideas are important in explaining their behavior. However, like other Neo-Progressives, Egnal claimed that Neo-Whigs, by fashioning "a model in which motivating ideas are divorced from day-to-day concerns," have overreacted to "the economic determinism that often underlay the work" of Progressive historians. In the case of elite ideology, Egnal said, motivating ideas cannot be linked to any distinct groups, and, so, "cannot explain the deep, sustained divisions within the ruling class of each colony," particularly since many future loyalists expressed the same ideology as some of the most radical revolutionaries. Also, he claimed, because the Neo-Whigs were blinded by what they took to be "the resolute stand" the colonists took against British taxation, they have neglected the sharp contradiction between the colonists' rhetoric of protest and their actual deeds; for instance, even though the Sugar Act "was unmistakably designed to raise revenue" the colonists "accepted it with little protest, contributing over twenty thousand pounds sterling to the royal coffers every year between 1766 and 1774." Finally, Egnal accused the Neo-Whigs of focusing their attention too narrowly on the

political writings of pamphleteers while neglecting the colonists' views about "trade, defense, mercantile regulation, and more broadly, the political economy of the New World." In sum, in his view, Neo-Whigs have failed to account for the "specifics" of colonial resistance.

II: Understanding

As my survey illustrates, there is an impressive array of reasons for thinking that there has been progress in our understanding of the Revolution. For one thing, as time has gone by more - a lot more - has become known about early American history. For another, as more has become known, interpretations of the main competing kinds have tended to become more accurate, more comprehensive, better balanced, and better justified. More accurate because many factual and explanatory mistakes in previous interpretations have been corrected and the corrections have tended to be cumulative. More comprehensive and better balanced because more sorts of causal influences have been taken into account, more sorts of subjective perspectives of the people whose history is being interpreted have been portrayed, interpretive structures have become more accommodating and inclusive, and interpretations have tended to become less partisan. Better justified because the sheer quantity of evidence on which interpretations are based has grown enormously and more careful and sophisticated methods for assessing evidence have been introduced.

I claim that, all else being equal, it is reasonable to believe that the introduction of interpretations that are more accurate, more comprehensive, better balanced, and so on, has enhanced historical understanding. I also claim, in stark contrast to the views of someone like Novick, that it has encouraged convergence and consensus - if not overall, then at least within what I shall call interpretive polarities. By interpretive polarities I mean traditions of interpretation in which, at any given time, the main competition is between two schools, or traditions, of interpretation that share the same basic interpretive focus yet conflict importantly about why the common phenomenon they are interpreting occurred and/or what it means that it occurred (or what it means that it occurred for the reasons it did). By interpretive focus I mean a leading idea which acts as a kind of lens through which a school or tradition contextualizes the episode under investigation. Each of these ideas needs to be clarified and is clarified elsewhere.[34] There is not space to do this here. A result of clarifying them will be that in the debate over the Revolution there has, in my view, been just one interpretive polarity: the tradition of opposition between Whig- and Progressive-oriented interpretations, both of which share the focus that the Revolution is best understood as

a phenomenon of nation-building.

Recently, interpretations of the Revolution have begun to move away from this traditional interpretive focus toward a new one in which the Revolution is viewed not primarily through the lens of nation-building but, rather, through that of participation in a trans-Atlantic social and cultural transformation. Gordon Wood, in The Radicalism of the American Revolution, takes this newer focus seriously enough that he is able to devote very few pages to the actual fighting between Britain and the colonies and to dismiss the actual achievement of political independence by the colonists as a mere "clarifying incident."[35] In contrast, the story of this achievement is a centerpiece of virtually every more traditional interpretation of the Revolution.

Another example of a change in interpretive focus can be found in Edward Countryman's recent reconceptualization of interactions among colonists, transplanted Africans, and native populations in colonial America, in terms, among others, of the notion of a center of influence. Rather than conceptualizing the various transformations in what is now the eastern half of the United States in terms of the traditional Eurocentric notion of a frontier that moved continually westward, Countryman advocates thinking of these transformations in terms of multiple and multi-dimensional "frontiers" emanating from different centers of cultural and political influence: "Only very recently have historians shown us that other lines were drawn and maintained by other people and that both people and lines were part of the unstable, volatile, colonial social order, not separated from it by some meta-line we call 'the' frontier."[36] Other examples of changes in interpretive focus include recent attempts to conceptualize aspects of the struggle for power both in early America and also in modern Europe in terms of changing gender relationships rather than in terms of more traditional categories.[37]

Much more needs to be said about the notion of interpretive focus. My hope is that without saying it here, the notion, though admittedly vague, is nevertheless clear enough that one can understand the competition between Whig-oriented and Progressive-oriented interpretations of the Revolution as an interpretive polarity. Assuming that one can do this, then my survey reveals, I think, that within this interpretive polarity there has been more or less continuous movement toward theoretical convergence. That is, Neo-Whigs have tended in important ways (and also overall) to be closer to Progressives than were the Whigs; Neo-Progressives have tended in important ways (and also overall) to be closer to Neo-Whigs than were the Progressives to the Whigs. Allowing for poetic license, one could almost say that a kind of Hegelian dialectic has been at work: Whig interpretations called forth their

"opposite," Progressive interpretations, which then called forth their "opposite," Neo-Whig interpretations, which then called forth their "quasi-opposite," Neo-Progressive ones, and so on. In this zig-zag progression, at least by the time one gets to the Neo-Whigs, each new school of interpretation seems to have taken what it could from the interpretations it superseded, both from those in its own and in the opposition tradition. By the time we get to the "Neo-Progressives" the two schools are so intertwined that it is questionable whether there still are two schools. Yet, Novick might protest, even if we allow that within a Whig-Progressive interpretational polarity there has been movement toward convergence of more or less the same kind as often occurs in the physical sciences, it seems clear that there has not been convergence to anything like the same degree. Why, then, in historical studies has there not been that same degree of convergence?

The issue is a complicated one. To simplify, consider, first, just historians of the Revolution who have focused on nation-building and offered fully developed interpretations, rather than monographs or so-called micro-histories. Then, in my view, ignorance coupled with our desire for interpretations that are maximally coherent and meaningful is mostly responsible for there not being more convergence within interpretive polarities. The ignorance that has mattered most has been ignorance of the degree to which self-interest motivates human behavior. And the reason this ignorance has mattered so much is that in order to arrive at interpretations that are maximally coherent and meaningful, which is required if one is to give a fully developed interpretation, historians of the Revolution have had to take a stand, one way or another, but without being able to rule out as equally defensible conflicting stands, on the question of how sincere the colonists were in their declarations of principle. So, historians have had to take leaps of faith. Some historians, to their credit, have taken such leaps seemingly in full awareness of what they were doing. Edmund Morgan, for instance, in introducing his interpretation of the Revolution, admitted that "many historians are inclined to doubt the strength of the [colonists'] attachment" to principle and that "it is of course impossible to tell why men act as they do." Even so, he continued, he "has proceeded on the conviction that [the colonists' attachment to principle] was genuine."[38] He did not then try to defend his proceeding on this conviction. However, had he wanted to defend it, could he have done so successfully? I think so. He could have appealed to the fact that when it comes to such questions about human motivation, anyone who seriously aims to provide a maximally coherent and meaningful interpretation of the Revolution has to take a stand, one way or

another, on this question of motivation and, hence, has to make some such leap of faith, either the one he took or some other. Of course, that such a defense could be developed adequately is debatable. I am suggesting that it could be. Some of what I say below will be relevant to explaining why.

Even so, it is not only, and perhaps not even primarily, the need to take such leaps of faith that inhibits interpretational convergence in historical studies. Other aspects of the quest for richer and more relevant meaning are also potent inhibitors. Chief among these is that in historical studies the meaning of events that is conveyed by an interpretation is not separate from but intimately intertwined with how the events are contextualized within the interpretation. Even within the same interpretive polarity there are different ways to contextualize the same events. For instance, historians may portray the same events from different subjective perspectives; consider, for instance, Bailyn's attempt to view Revolutionary hostilities from the perspective of the loyalist, Thomas Hutchinson.[39] And a change in which subjective perspectives are favored may entail a change in the shape of the historians narration, say, from one of progress and hope to one of failure and disappointment. Or historians may highlight one sort of development, say, economic, at the expense of others, say, politcal. And, of course, more dramatic recontextualizing occurs when historians choose different interpretive foci, say, by interpreting the Revolution not as an episode in nation-building but, rather, as an aspect of larger social and cultural transformations. In the physical sciences it is not an objective to convey meaning beyond explaining what and why, and by comparison with historical studies the recontextualizing that occurs in science, during periods of so-called "normal" science, generally takes place withing relatively narrow bounds.

Such differences between historical studies and the physical sciences explain why interpretational convergence, even within interpretational polarities, does not occur in long-standing major interpretational controversies in historical studies to anything like the degree theoretical convergence often occurs in the physical sciences. Such differences are partly why Novick was right - absolutely right - to say that in historical studies interpretational convergence is "out of the question." However, they are also partly why he was wrong - dead wrong - to suggest that in historical studies interpretational divergence is symptomatic of lack of progress. To know whether interpretational divergence contributes to progress, inhibits progress, or is neutral with respect to progress, one has to know its effect on historical understanding. And there is no reason why interpretational divergence may not enhance historical understanding.

After all, within the context of controversy among interpretations with the same interpretational focus, there can be progress in historical understanding when we achieve greater representation and more balance in our understanding of different, yet relevant, subjective perspectives and agencies, even when this fosters interpretational divergence. So, why, in the larger scheme of things, might there not also be progress in historical understanding when we achieve greater representation and more balance in our understanding of different, yet illuminating, interpretational perspectives?

I do not say that the introduction of new subjective or interpretational perspectives necessarily enhances historical understanding, but only that it is plausible to suppose that it sometimes does. When does it? Why, of course, when it is genuinely illuminating. And how do you tell, in general, whether the introduction of a new subjective or interpretational perspective has been genuinely illuminating? By surveying the evolutions of several major interpretational controversies that involve the introduction of such new perspectives and, then, noting how those that promote historical understanding differ from those that do not. The task is not in principle any different from the one untaken in the survey part of the present paper. The main difference is that in the controversy over the Revolution the introduction of new interpretive foci, unlike the introduction of new competing interpretations within the same interpretive polarity, has been too recent to track its consequences. But it is, I think, prima facie obvious that the introduction of new interpretational foci can be genuinely illuminating, and that is all we need to know for present purposes. On the plausible assumption that when the introduction of new interpretational foci are genuinely illuminating, their introduction contributes both to interpretational progress and to interpretational divergence, it follows that it wrong to suggest, as Novick did, that interpretational divergence necessarily means lack of progress.

I have argued elsewhere that the use of interpretational convergence as a criterion of progress in historical studies rests on a profound and widespread misunderstanding of the differences between historical studies - at least humanistic historical studies - and the physical sciences.[40] Suffice it to say here that while theoretical convergence in the physical sciences may be a noble dream - witness, for instance, the benign enthusiasm generated by the quest for a unified field theory - the analogous dream of interpretational convergence in historical studies is - or, at least should be - a nightmare. One can get a feel for the problem that would be posed by interpretational convergence in historical studies on one grand, synthetic account, by reflecting on the fact that such a convergence would be analogous to there being all

but universal agreement on just one philosophical view. Some have dreamed of that as well, most notably the Catholic Church and the Communist Party. Fortunately, they have not been able to translate their dreams into reality. Fortunately also, historians who have dreamed of establishing the hegemony either of their own interpretational perspectives or, more neutrally, just of some interpretational perspective or other, have not, at least in any open society, been able to translate their dreams into reality either. We need to be more careful about what we want.

The moral is that if our goal in historical studies is, as presumably it should be, growth in historical understanding, then there may well be limits to how much interpretational convergence we want in our accounts of the past. In my view, in the case of the interpretational controversy over the Revolution, we should want at least as much interpretational divergence as we have gotten so far. In fact, we should want even more, provided it is of the right kind. The seeming-descensus that results, far from being an embarrassment to historical studies, should be regarded as one of its best features. However, typically it has not been so regarded, at least not by American historians. Throughout That Noble Dream, Novick has documented impressively that to a remarkable degree the founding members of the American historical profession, and many of their professional descendants, have thought they were fashioning bricks of incontrovertible historical fact that would one day be used to build a mighty edifice of historical knowledge - a single mansion, however many rooms it might contain. It did not work out that way. In my view, the reason it did not work out that way is not that historians failed to do their work well enough; and it is not that the time is not yet ripe for that sort of interpretational convergence; and it is certainly not, as Novick ultimately suggests, that historical studies are somehow inherently deficient. Rather, the reason it did not work out that way is that historical studies do not lend themselves to interpretational convergence on just one grand synthetic account. And the primary reason for that is that main-line, fully developed historical interpretations tend to be humanistic, which means that the historians who propose them and the core communities for whom they write have among their objectives not only to make the human world comprehensible but also to make it meaningful, and not all legitimate meanings reduce to just one meaning.

In sum, what I have been suggesting is that to understand the relationship between interpretational convergence and growth in historical understanding, we need to distinguish between how things have gone within interpretational polarities and how they have gone overall. Within interpretational polarities, it is reasonable to expect that

over time there will be significant movement toward convergence and consensus. In the case of the controversy over the Revolution that is what we find. However, even within interpretational polarities, ignorance coupled with our entirely reasonable desire to arrive at interpretations that are maximally coherent and meaningful virtually ensures that there will not be nearly as much convergence as often occurs in the physical sciences. In addition, in humanistic historical studies the desire for enriched meaning creates added pressure for representing previously neglected yet relevant subjective perspectives and for introducing new and illuminating basic interpretational foci. These then become an additional source of divergence. However, if the introduction of such new perspectives and foci are genuinely illuminating, the divergence and seeming-descensus they generate, rather than thwarting growth in historical understanding, actually contribute mightily to it. But to understand why these contribute to growth in historical understanding one has to free oneself from the assumption that growth in historical understanding, if it occurs, is just like growth in understanding in the physical sciences. It is not. Humanistic historical studies and the physical sciences have different objectives. Because physical scientists qua scientists are concerned only with making the world comprehensible, and not otherwise concerned with making it meaningful, in the physical sciences, at least during periods of so-called normal science, understanding tends best to be achieved from a perspective that is situated squarely within the framework of the best extant theory. However, in humanistic historical studies - for the reasons explained, which include that they are concerned not only with making the world comprehensible but also with making it meaningful - understanding tends best to be achieved not from a perspective that is situated squarely within the framework of whatever one regards as the best extant interpretation but, rather, from that of sympathetic appreciation of the tensions among competing interpretations.

III: Relativism and Skepticism

I have been arguing that there has been progress in historical studies, at least in the case of the interpretational controversy over the American Revolution. I want now to consider two objections to my argument that are sure to occur to many readers.

What I shall call the objection based on relativism might be put by a critic as follows: In arguing that progress has occurred, you have privileged certain criteria of interpretational adequacy on the basis of which, you have assumed, historians currently assess the relative merits of competing interpretations. Even if that assumption is correct, there are other criteria of interpretational adequacy. For

instance, at various times in the past a majority of historians may have assessed the relative merits of competing interpretations on the basis of different criteria. Or, in the past and also currently, there might be criteria on the basis of which various minorities of historians have tended, or do now tend, to assess interpretations. Finally, there are possible criteria of interpretational adequacy, which though they have never actually been adopted, might be adopted. You've assumed without argument that you have a right to privilege certain criteria over others. But you have not shown, and cannot show, that objectively you have any such right. And if your choice of criteria of interpretational adequacy is merely subjective, then it is arbitrary, in which case your argument that there has been progress in historical studies fails.

In response, I would only point out that if we are going to investigate whether there has been progress in historical studies (and not just have a meta-investigation of what, if anything, we should mean by progress), then we are going to have to assume some criterion of progress or other. Of course, as suggested in the objection, we should have good reasons for assuming the criterion of progress we employ. However, contrary to what is suggested, we can have good reasons for employing some particular criterion of progress other than the reason that that criterion is objectively right, whatever exactly that might mean. For instance, all else being equal, a good reason for employing a particular criterion of progress is that among the sorts of progress that are feasible as objectives in historical studies, we care maximally about promoting progress of that sort (that is, there is no other kind of feasible progress we care more about promoting). Prima facie, a notion of progress that embodies those criteria, on the basis of which historians currently assess the relative merits of competing interpretations, is progress of a sort that historians care maximally about promoting. If it were not, then historians would modify the criteria on the basis of which they assess interpretations. Assuming that the rest of us share the interpretational concerns of most historians, then a notion of progess that embodies those criteria on the basis of which historians currently assess the relative merits of competing interpretations is progress of a sort that we also care maximally about promoting.

A good argument to the effect that historians - or we - ought to be assessing the relative merits of competing interpretations on some basis other than those on which historians currently assess them would require an extended reply. But the objection under discussion contains no such argument, and it is not easy to imagine a good reason for deleting any of the criteria of interpretational adequacy we have been employing. Should we, say, prefer to interpretations that are more accurate, more

comprehensive, better balanced, better justified, and so on, interpretations that are less so? Or is the suggestion that we should prefer interpretations that have not only the characteristics we have been looking for but also some additional characteristic? But, if this is the suggestion, then we need to be told which additional characteristic, which will then be added to the criterion we were already employing. And since to be relevant to the current discussion this additional characteristic must be something that it is feasible for historians to adopt as an objective, then it seems likely that over time there would also have been movement toward satisfaction of the fuller criterion of progress that results from taking this additional characteristic into account. But without being told what the additional characteristic is, it is idle to speculate how our being told what it is would affect my argument for progress. In any case, we are now discussing a different objection that the one I have called the objection based on relativism. For instead of proposing a plausible competing criterion of interpretational assessment, what the objection based on relativism actually does is merely point out that because no criteria of assessment are objectively right, then the criterion we, or historians, employ must be arbitrary. But, as we have seen, this conclusion does not follow; and, prima facie at least, it is unfounded.

Second, what I shall call the objection based on skepticism might be put by a critic as follows: Your notion of progress is underdeveloped. Were it properly developed it would commit you to progress of a sort that you could never have good reason to believe has actually occurred. In particular, while you have said that progress is growth in historical understanding of the past, you've neglected to say whether that understanding is of the past as it really was, and, if it is, how one gets access to that past. In short, if the past you had in mind is the past as it really was, then you've made a big objectivist assumption that is going to be difficult, if not impossible, to support without begging the question against a certain sort of (perhaps, postmodernist) skeptic. To support this assumption you are going to need to show, among other things, that assessing historical interpretations on the basis of the criteria you've claimed most historians currently assess them implicates some sort of external (interpretation-independent) constraint on interpretations. And it is going to be hard to show that. On the other hand, if you are not claiming that the growth in understanding that you say has occurred is of the past as it really was, then you not only need to explain which past it is of, but also why a kind of progress that might result from growth in understanding of that past is progress worth caring about.

In response, I want to claim that there are in historical studies, if not external

checks on the adequacy of interpretations, then something that is close enough to them to promote a kind of growth in historical understanding that is progress worth caring about. The external checks are "facts," or, more precisely, they are what are mutually accepted as facts by all historians who are engaged, at a given time, in an interpretational debate - so, call them agreed-upon-facts. I claim that, at any given time, historians who are engaged in an interpretational debate always accept a large body of agreed-upon-facts and that, at that particular time, in that particular context of debate, such agreed-upon facts serve as if they were external checks on interpretations. Over time the status of many of these putative facts may change from agreed-upon to highly questionable. However, in a relatively advanced stage of any major, long-standing interpretational controversy, changes in the status of agreed-upon-facts is slow and piecemeal. It is never the case that most such "facts" change from agreed-upon to highly questionable at the same time.

If I am right about this, then there are two possibilities worth discussing. First, assume that at any given time we have good reason to believe that the vast majority of agreed-upon-facts are actual objective facts (leaving it open, for now, exactly what it might mean for facts to be objective). In that case, then insofar as our interpretations adequately account for these facts, they are tracking "the real world" and growth in historical understanding is growth in understanding of "the past as it really was." Since truth is widely acknowledged to be a worthwhile objective, if growth in historical understanding is growth in understanding of the past as it really was, then it would be fairly non-controversial that the progress I've argued has occurred in historical studies is progress worth caring about.

Second, assume that at any given time we do not have good reason to believe that the vast majority of agreed-upon-facts are actual objective facts. But, generally speaking, facts become agreed-upon by historians because they are backed by the kind and degree of evidential support that we commonly assume provides us with good reasons to believe that a putative fact is an actual fact. So, if at any given time we do not have good reason to believe that the vast majority of the agreed-upon-facts are actual objective facts, then it has to be either because we have good reason to believe that some competing facts are actual facts or else because we do not have good reason to believe that any facts are actual objective facts. The first of these two options is unrealistic. As already noted, in mature historical controversies changes in the status of putative facts from agreed-upon to highly-questionable tends to be gradual and piecemeal. So, if we do not have good reason to believe that the vast majority of

agreed-upon-facts are actual objective facts, then it has to be because we do not have good reason to believe that any facts are actual objective facts. In other words, it has to be on the basis of an argument for universal skepticism.

This might seem to be the place for me to argue for objectivism and against such skepticism. But if one knows anything at all about philosophy, one knows that any such argument that is going to have any semblance whatsoever of success is going to be long and involved; and one also knows that probably it will end up by begging the question. The skeptic is wily. He has been around for a long, long time. And he is not easily refuted.[41] The main reason he is not easily refuted is that he calls into question the very rules on the basis of which ordinarily we determine what is factual and what not. And if, in arguing with the skeptic, somehow we manage to give a plausible, second-order justification for the rules we employed in our first-order determinations of what is factual, then the skeptic will call into question the rules we employed in our second-order justification of our first-order rules, and so on, ad infinitum (or at the very least, ad nauseum). It is not difficult to see that while the skeptic may not win this game, he is not likely to lose it either. I want to sidestep this whole debate.

In my view, for the purpose of determining whether there has been progress in historical studies, we can bracket the question of whether over time interpretations have more closely approximated "objective" truth and, thus, bracket perhaps the main issue that divides objectivists and skeptics. Yet we can still determine that the evolution of interpretations in long-standing major historical controversies has been progressive, where the progress in question is a kind worth caring about. We can do this, without getting sidetracked into abstract epistemological and metaphysical investigations, so long as we remember that the progress in question can be a kind worth caring about if, over time, as our understanding of some historical phenomenon grows, the truth that we more closely approximate, whether or not it is also objective truth, is at least what I shall call methodological truth. And this can happen provided that over time our continually evolving understandings more adequately account for agreed-upon facts, even though there are continual (but relatively slow and piecemeal) changes in which facts are accepted as agreed-upon. In other words, in my view, progress worth caring about takes place provided that, at any given time, at least one collection of interpretations that includes a later one better accounts for whatever facts are agreed-upon at that time than does any collection of interpretations that includes only earlier ones.

What does it mean for an interpretation to better account for some collection of

agreed-upon-facts? That should be a central question in philosophy of history. Sadly, it has been neglected. In my view, part of what it means is this: that all else being equal, over time, as more has become known, our interpretations of the past have tended to become more accurate, more comprehensive and better balanced. To find out what else it may mean, or in more detail what each of the characteristics mentioned - accuracy, balance, and so on - involves, there is no better approach then one which begins by descriptively characterizing actual interpretational controversy in historical studies. That is the approach I have tried to follow. Yet, in the philosophy of history literature, there are very few such descriptive characterizations.

Is the continual development of interpretations that, together perhaps with some earlier ones, better account for the continually evolving collection of agreed-upon-facts progress enough to sustain our faith in the value of historical studies? In my view it is. Judging from the energy historians devote to doing history, in the views of many of them also it is. For without the objectivists among them begging the question against the skeptic, it may be the only kind of progress they can show they have made. And even skeptics and relativists can afford to concede that the on-going development of interpretations that, together perhaps with some earlier ones, better account for the continually evolving collection of agreed-upon-facts is progress enough to sustain our faith in the value of historical studies. For in their practical work as historians, not to mention in their daily lives, even they tend to ignore their skepticism and relativism and, hence, to acknowledge the legitimacy of a perspective from which at least this much progress can be shown to occur.

An anecdote nicely illustrates the point. Novick relates that in the late 1920s Harry Barnes was embroiled in an increasingly personal and acrimonious public debate with Bernadotte Schmitt over the question of German responsibility for the World War.[42] Carl Becker, he says, was sympathetic to Barnes' revisionist views but was put off by the personal tone of Barnes' arguments. Becker wrote to Barnes that "if we indulge in personalities it will not only create an unpleasant atmosphere but will damage cool and scientific research." Becker continued, "Prove the truth of your assertions objectively without going into the problem of what warps Schmitt's judgment of the facts." Becker, then, cautioned Barnes that the "truth or falsity of a historical thesis can be and should be settled by appeal to evidence alone." Surely Becker was right. And in his own historical work he practiced what he preached to Barnes. But then, in the last analysis, old-fashioned appeals to evidence are still the way to settle historical disputes, even according to an arch-relativist like Becker.

Yet, historians' having made progress in the limited sense that they develop interpretations that more closely approximate methocological truth does not preclude their having also made progress in some stronger, objectivist sense of progress. In particular, it does not preclude their having developed interpretations that (together with some earlier ones) better account for the past as it really was. If it is the case, as such historians (and, most of the time, most of the rest of us as well) assume, that the evolution of interpretations is also progressive in this stronger, objectivist way, then that, so to speak, is just metaphysical icing on what is already a nourishing and tasty interpretational cake. To most of the historians who founded the American historical profession and to many of their objectivist descendants, right down to the present day, it would have been unthinkable to serve up the cake without that metaphysical, objectivist icing. But times have changed. Today, thanks to postmodernists, it is no longer so unthinkable. What I have been suggesting is that by practicing thinking it, and then proceeding accordingly, we can all arrive at a more refined understanding of progress in historical studies.

NOTES

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3. G. Bancroft, The History of the United States of America from the Discovery of the American Continent 10 vols. (Boston, 1842-54).
4. I owe this observation to Gordon Wood, "A Century of Writing Early American History: Then and Now Compared; Or How Henry Adams Got It Wrong," The American Historical Review, 100 (1995) 680.
5. Ramsay, History of the American Revolution, 310.
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9. J. Greene, The Reinterpretation of the American Revolution (New York, 1968), 6-7.

10. C. Andrews, The Colonial Background of the American Revolution, 121.
11. Quoted by G. Wood, "A Century of Writing Early American History," 682.
12. See, e.g., E. Morgan, The Birth of the Republic: 1763-89 , 3rd ed., (Chicago, 1992; 1st ed., 1956), 185.
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15. P. Novick, That Nobel Dream, 167.
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20. J. Appleby, "A Different Kind of Independence: The Postwar Restructuring of the Historical Study of Early America," The William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd Series, 50 (1993) 2252-3.
21. E. Morgan, The Birth of the Republic, 13.
22. E. Morgan, The Birth of the Republic, 24-9.
23. B. Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).
24. B. Bailyn, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in S.G. Kurtz and J. H. Hutson, eds., Essays on the American Revolution (Chapel Hill, 1973); reprinted in B. Bailyn, Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence, (New York, 1990), 205-7.

25. J. Appleby, L. Hunt, and M. Jacob called this new information "more history than the nation can digest," Telling the Truth About History (New York, 1994), 158; G. Wood called it "an embarrassment of riches," "A Century of Writing Early American History," 687 .
26. J. Appleby, "A Different Kind of Independence," 250, 260.
27. J. Appleby, L. Hunt & M. Jacob, Telling the Truth, 189, 217.
28. J. Appleby, "A Different Kind of Independence," 247-9, 250-2.
29. G. Wood, "A Century of Writing Early American History," 690.
30. E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, (London, 1963); P. Novick, That Noble Dream, 440-1.
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33. M. Egnal, A Mighty Empire: The Origins of the American Revolution, (Ithaca, 1988).
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